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Eyan Birt

Arthurian kinship: examining the kinship legacies of Morgan le Fay and Nimue, the Lady of the Lake in Seanan McGuire's *October Daye* series

Abstract: Using Seanan McGuire's *October "Toby" Daye* urban fantasy series as a case study, this essay examines the kinship legacies crafted by the supernatural women of the medieval Arthurian romance tradition as they are perpetuated and reclaimed by female characters in contemporary fantasy romance genres. Invariably helped or hindered by two powerful and ancient fae women known as the Luidaeg and Eira Rosynhwyr, but who are really The Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay of Arthurian lore respectively, Toby's narrative journey reflects a reclamation of Arthurian women. McGuire expands on the use of these powerful women in the medieval lexicon as family makers and court breakers, giving voice, agency, and depth to the often dualed roles of Morgan le Fay and the Lady of the Lake. The Luidaeg, Eira Rosynhwyr, and their niece Toby, may therefore be analyzed together as representations of the subversive power present in Arthurian women, an extension of motherhood's expectations to move beyond that of passive progenitors and into active participants in the creation of family and legacy.

Keywords: Literary collections, medieval; Fiction, Urban fantasy; Fiction, fantasy/Arthurian; Medievalism.

> Parentage is showing up and being present, is love and learning and compassion and care. I was a parent to my siblings when my mother wouldn't – or couldn't – be. October is a parent to her squire. That there's no blood shared there is no measure of a family.
>
> – the Luidaeg, the Lady of the Lake (*Sleep No More* 298)

Despite clarifying work done in recent years by such theorists as Elizabeth Freeman and José Esteban Muñoz, critical definitions of kinship have often been stymied by an overreliance on assumptions of "relatedness [...] reliant on sexual reproduction", to the extent that "efforts to delink kinship from that obdurate frame seem forever related to it, if only in a negative or critical mode" (Butler 2022: 41). As Judith Butler argues, we might instead extract kinship from this set of assumptions and approach it as "a

*corresponding author
exb312@student.bham.ac.uk
University of Birmingham

site of queer coinage", recognizing binding ties made and remade through alternative kinships (2022: 41). Such queer models and experiences of kinship – as sites of remaking and, to use Butler's terminology, "performative reiterations", are not, as I show in this paper, unique to modernity, and the phenomena with which Butler is engaged find precedents in both medieval cultural formations and their modern, medievalist, receptions. In this essay, I explore the kinship offered by the supernatural women of medieval Arthurian legends, namely Morgan le Fay and Nimue, whose fairy natures provide them with the license to evade, and disrupt, normative or sanguinary family structures, as they appear in contexts both medieval and modern. Applying Carolyn Dinshaw's concept of "queer touch through time" to excavate the relationship between medieval and modern queer Arthurianisms, I explore entanglements reaching forwards and backwards in time which create a generational legacy of powerful women seeking independent ties of kinship. I use here as a case study Seanan McGuire's urban fantasy series titularly named after its main protagonist, October "Toby" Daye. The Nebula award winning series engages with medievalism through the lens of contemporary fantasy, illuminating a "reciprocal relationship between medieval and medievalist texts" which reflects an "inherent queerness in medievalism" via its "category disruption" and the "queering potential of medievalist adaptation – taking something remote and making it accessible" (Batis 2021: 23). Batis reads this queer force as "embodied by the wizard", naming Morgan le Fay an "ancestor to the diverse and queer witches" found in young-adult medievalist literature (60). While the *Toby Daye* series is crafted and marketed to adult readers, Batis's approach to queer wizards as a site of accessibility and belonging resonates strongly with McGuire's manipulation of wizardly source materials. Further, if "wizards belong to everyone. They show readers who don't fit in that fitting in doesn't have to be the only choice", and Morgan le Fay is already a piece of this heritage, then extending such a reading to a best-selling, critical award-winning series continues the examination of these characters on kinship relations (Batis 2021: 202). Engaging with McGuire's *Toby Daye* series in this way further utilizes the potentials of queer medieval studies recognized by Donald Hoffman, where the "urgent" need for a "history of love, friendship and intimacy" (Hoffman 2019: 12) can be recognized in these kinds of ongoing medievalist texts. In other words, we need the ability to trace more dynamic histories of kinship centered

around affect and emotion. Toby Daye inherits such kinship legacies from Morgan le Fay and Nimue, the Lady of the Lake through her maternal relationship to these Arthurian women, and through the authorial engagement of medievalist texts.

While the family "has a mythic, ideological, social and rhetorical heft that will not disappear" (Svonkin *et al.* 2018: 145) from American culture, the way we might understand family in the modern sense, encompassing relatives sharing space under one roof – or more specifically, a mother, father and children (the family of the 'nuclear age') – is not a medieval point of reference. In a western medieval context, the word 'family' referred variously to a potentially large group of relatives not necessarily inhabiting the same space (what we might call agnatic structures of kinship), or members of a household. As Jerome Mandel phrases it, "a community of co-residents who were not necessarily linked by ties of blood or marriage" (Mandel 2002: 91). As Elizabeth Archibald observes, late medieval Arthurian authors such as Thomas Malory enthusiastically exploited the narrative possibilities of this extended, and potentially competing, set of familial obligations, drawing "ties of fellowship" into dialogue and conflict with "blood ties", expanding "the family relationships of key characters [which] creates more opportunities for conflicts of loyalties" (Archibald 2023: 84). This finds a distinct, gendered, form in the bonds created and fostered by Morgan le Fay and Nimue, two supernatural characters often regarded as the same woman split into two aspects in the Malorian tradition[1].

Morgan le Fay first appears in Arthurian tradition as a, presumably supernatural, inhabitant of the enchanted island of Avalon, to where Arthur is paradoxically taken to heal from his "mortal" wounds after the Battle of Camlann. While the literary tradition associated with King Arthur begins in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the King's of Britain* (c. 1136), Morgan only joins Arthur in Geoffrey's subsequent text *The Life of Merlin* (c. 1150) as an unaffiliated woman of immense power who appears only at the end of Arthur's life. Subsequently, she appears in later medieval Arthurian works as Arthur's sister, shifting from "a connector of life with healing" through her connection to Avalon to "a connector of death with illicit sex and wrongful imprisonment", which Maureen Fries contends "indicates the

[1] For a deeper discussion centering the conceptual relationship between Morgan le Fay and Nimue/the Lady of the Lake as well as their association with "fairy" see: Harf-Lancner 2023 and Larrington 2015.

increasing inability of male Arthurian authors to cope with the image of a woman in power in positive terms" (Fries 1994: 2). As Morgan is brought into Arthur's "family" (in the biological sense) she is simultaneously operating as a point of misogynistic anxiety, which continues in contemporary texts as a "product of a late twentieth-century misogyny that […] is quintessentially medieval in that it attributes the ultimate downfall of Arthur and his Round Table to the wiles of a woman" (Noble 2002: 42). It is this "reduction of the powerful figure" (Fries 1994: 8) Morgan experiences through subsequent adaptations which seemingly influence later developments of Lady of the Lake figures extant in sources such as Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (Fries 1994: 10). The multiple women under the mantle "Lady of the Lake" in various texts may have different names and backgrounds, but Anne Berthelot links them together via a consistently appearing relationship to Merlin. This relationship, mirrored first by an association between early Morgan renditions with Merlin, deepens Roger Serman Loomis's "almost certain[ty] that Morgan le Fay and the Lady of the Lake were originally the same person" (Loomis 1997: 193). Berthelot concedes the associations between the two women are strong and may even have led to a "*good* fairy, and the bad, or the devilish, magician" (Berthelot 2000: 60) dichotomy which remains prescient in contemporary conceptions of magical women. Morgan the antagonist is often described as "over-sexed, selfish, inevitably scheming, and out to destroy Arthur", while her counterpart(s) under the Lady of the Lake mantle is "often described as 'boyish' […] is unconcerned with her own appearance […] is independent, unconventional […] and loyal towards the community of women. […] the mirror image […] of the 'bad' woman" (Davidson 2012: 13). These women are situated at the interstices of medieval (and later, I suggest, modern) concerns of family, kinship and community, feminine agency and education, as well as questions of linear vs. lateral inheritance structures.

Queer kinship "rewrites kinship as a bodily practice rather than a cultural substrate, composed through ephemeral encounters such as sex, friendship, and activism, pointing beyond heteronormative organizations of intimacy, care, desire, and even reproduction" (Bradway *et al.* 2022: 2). Extending this model of kinship organization to depictions of Arthurian women illuminates striking connections to modern adaptations of the characters oriented around agency and choice. Medieval authors carried their own influences and intentions into subsequent versions of Arthuriana,

they *chose* important elements to incorporate in their rendition. This process continued into contemporary fiction, expanding a "feminist-revisionist tradition" begun by Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) which emphasized "retellings of the Arthurian legend that displace the male-centered and overtly Christian worldview palpable in medieval texts" (Tolhurst 2012: 69). Both women appear in medieval texts with fluctuating levels of importance to or impact on Arthur and his court and are consistently reworked to fill necessary feminine roles. Arthur, the "Once and Future King", and the women who surround him can be reduced to no singular linear narrative.

This indistinct genealogy makes King Arthur a "perfect epicenter for inclusive reimaginings, reinterpretations, and remixes – and a confusing [...] site for retellings" (Deonn 2021). Reconstructing "*discriminatory* narrative[s]" in particular operates as "an important discursive tactic", a means to "change popular understandings, but also an act of *self*-empowerment" (Chander 2007: 619-20). As contemporary authors find resonances with both reclamatory modes of storytelling and reflections of their medieval antecedents, the Lady of the Lake and Morgan herself split further, one for each side of a good/evil binary represented by Arthurian women. The 'good' Arthurian patriarchy and 'evil' female power persists in continued engagements with the characters or source material (Howey 2015: 51). This dichotomy itself reflects Middle English romances which spoke "in two voices about women, thus producing heroines who are at once aggressive and oppressed, active and acted upon", though they still must "act within power structures oriented towards the systemic disenfranchisement of women" (Tolmie 2006: 146). These Arthurian women, trapped within a system which privileges masculine identity over the feminine, have few choices offered to them; they may take the 'good' side of the binary, fitting in to established family models offered by Arthur and Camelot, or they may rebel. However, the

> emphasis remains on the individual woman rising above a system that keeps her down [...] rather than in cultural revolution or innovation, and oppressive structures continue to provide the basis for representation. The expectations must still be there in order to be reversed. (Tolmie 2006: 147)

Medievalist fantasy narratives incorporating these women, therefore, can only rise so far beyond their literary antecedents. They are always already

defined by prior textual examples, touching each contemporary engagement in turn until it becomes nearly impossible to trace straight line genealogies to original Arthurian source materials. Arthuriana is instead a constellation of interconnected narratives, a kinship network sharing commonality across the system, allowing for contemporary authors to make use of established character models for their own revisions to the established canon. When Toby Daye is revealed to be maternally related to the Morgan le Fay and Lady of the Lake of medieval Arthurian tradition, her character forms a bridge between medieval and modern. She touches, and is touched by, the lives of these Arthurian women through their shared heritage; but she also absorbs them into a growing circle of kinship begun and operated by their medieval counterparts.

October "Toby" Daye first appears in Seanan McGuire's *Rosemary and Rue* (2009) and subsequently serves as protagonist for the currently 18-book series (hereafter *Toby Daye* series). She is a changeling, described in the world of the series as having part-human, part-fae heritage. Note the *fae* of McGuire's creation is itself a medievalist engagement with the *fay* aspect of Morgan's medieval counterpart. The Old French or Middle English medieval romances might have written about *fai* or *fay*, as Morgan the *Fay*, using the terms "more often as a verb than a noun, to denote the making of something magical and strange", (Hutton 2014: 1141) rather than describing a specific supernatural entity or class of being[2]. The spelling of McGuire's Faerie further calls to its Tudor era ancestor – Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (1596). The naming kinship further deepens associations between McGuire and Shakespeare, a contemporary of Spenser's, from whom all the titles in the *Toby Daye* series are lifted. Both authors are thought to have taken inspiration from the medieval romance *Huon of Bordeaux*, a text which associates Oberon as King of the Fae with Morgan le Fay (Cooper 2004: 176). Thus, in utilizing the spelling *fae* popularized in Tudor England McGuire aligns with an etymological spelling that "sometimes (esp. in recent use) […] is deliberately chosen to describe beings which differ from the conventional representation [of fairies] […] esp. in being more dangerous or sinister" (*OED*). Further, in adhering to descriptive spellings and cultural engagements with fairies as a concept,

[2] For a deeper engagement with the etymology and various spellings associated with fae, as well as the ways in which Tolkien, creator of contemporary medievalist fantasy, renegotiated fairy and fay qualities into his distinct race of being, the elves, see Martinez 2010.

McGuire's utilization of *fae* in the heritage of her characters marks Morgan as *fae* in heritage and in name, reflecting the kinship between Morgan and her niece Toby in both the *fae* of their people and the *fay* of the medieval Morgan's supernatural qualities shared between the women. Rather than the latest in a strictly linear genealogy, Toby, Morgan, and the Lady of the Lake here reflect a system of inheritances and alternative kinship models which touch and are touched by historical sources and inspirations in a tangled mess incapable of separation into a distinct linear model. Narratively these entanglements deepen as Toby learns Faerie's history; her life becomes increasingly entangled with a past left unfinished.

While the past is *always* reaching to the future in the structure of the series, the historic events of Toby's aunts consistently reach out to touch Toby's own life. Toby's character development is crafted of back-and-forth movements between historical flashbacks focusing on Morgan or the Lady of the Lake and a future prophecy yet to be fulfilled. As Arthur is often called the once and future king for the timelessness and question of his death/healing, Toby's life exists as pieces of the past married to the future, the healing of Faerie and the healing of family. This causes prior narrative events to take on new significance through repeated engagement; it is a series which can be returned to and approached from various entry points, rather than read solely in chronological order. As the series moves forward in time, through supplemental literature and continued publication, the content simultaneously reaches back through time to engage with interpretative reimaginations, including Zimmer Bradley. These interpretations often granted narrative power and agency to le Fay and other Arthurian women whose medieval and modern treatments are myriad. One possible reason for conflicting interpretations of these women could be the emphasis placed on the familial expectations within each text. I am suggesting in this essay contemporary uses of these female Arthurian characters reflect a textual engagement with the characters' medieval pasts.

Toby attempts once to leave her fae heritage behind and operate under the commonly understood family model of mother/father/child. She finds a human suitor and bears a changeling child of her own. However, a transformation spell results in Toby's disappearance from her human family for 14 years – far too many years for the transient lifespans of humans. Her partner has found another woman, her child has a new mother, and Toby finds herself cut off from the first family she tries to make as an adult. With

nothing left to bind her to her humanity, Toby is increasingly drawn into the politics and dangers of the fae realms, returning to her role as Knight of Lost Words, and earning the epithet Hero of the Realms not long after. As the series unfolds, her relationships to and the development of her allies, enemies, and kinship entanglements illuminate long-buried secrets and blood-ties: namely, the revelation that the terrifying sea-witch known as the Luidaeg and the intense Evening Winterrose are not only her biological aunts through her mother, but also the Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay of Arthurian tradition, respectively. Toby inherits little from her human father save a dwindling sense of mortality slowly leaking from her blood, and a legacy of rejection and discomfiture within both human and fae realms; she is both, but she is neither entirely. Her knighting, awarded in response to the completion of a quest as in medieval traditions, is also heavily contested by fae nobility. Not, as contemporary readers might assume, because of her female gender, but because her changeling half-blood status marks her as lesser, as unworthy of knighthood despite her mother's Firstborn status.

The longer Toby remains entangled in the fae world, the more she builds a structure of kinship around herself emulative of the found-family model recognized by proponents of queer theory; a squire becomes her foster son, a death omen transforms into her sister, and an ever-expanding network of friends and lovers take up residence within the walls of the home she constructs. This second family formation expands and separates itself not only from Faerie's expectations for family structure, but also resonates with the queered family alternative modeled by her aunts' literary antecedents. For Toby, biology plays a remarkably small role in the formation of family units, especially compared to the emphasis her fae culture places on bloodlines and the lineages that can be traced by all fae back to one of Faerie's founders: Oberon, Titania, and Maeve. Because of her inherited magic, a gift from her maternal grandfather Oberon, Toby can manipulate the blood of any mixed blood fae, changing the balance of that person's biological components up to and including the complete removal of any aspect(s) no longer desired by that person. The children of the three, called Firstborn, each form a unique magical identity which "fulfill[s] a function in Faerie" because their children will be born with that new magic "amplified […] intensified and made more pronounced" (McGuire 2022: 72). Toby's mother Amandine rejects her role in Faerie, leaving the burden to fall on

her daughters. Toby's fulfillment of her mother's purpose is only made possible through her aunt the Luidaeg, who had once been the Lady of the Lake. The Luidaeg admits to Toby she'd been "grooming [her] for decades" to prepare her to unravel a complex and long-standing spell (McGuire 2022: 291). As Toby's aunt, the Luidaeg's connection to Toby's abilities stem both from the personal and political; Toby's bloodline fills a needed gap in Faerie. The shifting aunt/mother/kin relationship between Toby and the Luidaeg may also be examined through Toby's own daughter Gillian.

Toby's daughter is conceived, carried and birthed by Toby in the human realm. However, Gillian's heritage is adjusted by Toby twice; first Toby adjusts Gillian's blood to become entirely human, losing the connection to her maternal line. While the choice to become wholly fae or wholly human rests with Gillian, it is her connection to Toby that renders the choice relevant. Gillian was only in position to have to choose only one aspect of her heritage to survive because of her connection to Toby. As a human with a fae, even diluted, mother, Gillian becomes vulnerable to various forms of magical harmperpetuated by Faerie, and by Morgan le Fay. Gillian is struck by "elf-shot", a blood-based chemical agent created by Morgan to "prevent Faerie from ever being anything like equal" (McGuire 2022: 164) making the elf-shot, created from Morgan's own blood, fatal to any save pureblood fae. This was an intentional side effect, "her [Morgan's] way to make sure that when there was a war, only the 'right' people would come off the battlefield" (268). Gillian, never pure fae even before Toby shifted her blood the first time, will die if the Luidaeg cannot save her. Even the Luidaeg, with all her prodigious healing arts and alchemical skills cannot save Gillain "without fae blood to latch onto" (340), and Gillian's blood has only become less fae after Toby "pulled every drop of her family line out of" her, noting "even the prophecies can't claim you now" (*ibid.*). What the Luidaeg does *not* say, however, is that Gillian has therefore lost her familial connection to the Luidaeg herself. Instead, she has offered reassurance, safety from a looming prophecy which had nearly killed her aunt, mother, and step-grandfather already, and extended the kinship she felt for Toby to Toby's estranged daughter. As the elf-shot takes its toll, Gillian is rendered unconscious and unable to make the choice to live or die. The Luidaeg, who was the Lady of the Lake, who cannot offer the choices that her heir Toby can, must change Gillian's blood regardless. When she admits Gillian's "wishes are none of [her] concern" (342) she is behaving as her literary

antecedents have always done. The medieval Lady of the Lake's role as progenitor of this kinship network is such that she illuminates where choices are possible (via comparison between the traditionally "good" sorceress Lady of the Lake and the "evil" Morgan) but actions must be undertaken for the greater good of Camelot; so, too, does the Luidaeg make choices on the basis of "debts too old to be paid;" (342) the overarching picture. The Luidaeg aids Gillian, because she "was a mother, […] and know[s] what it costs to bury your own", (340) as well as because she needs Toby's "good regard" (340). She shows that, while Gillian has choices available to her (to live or to die, to die or let the Luidaeg transform her), she cannot grant Gillian the agency to choose for herself, as Toby had done the first time Gillian's blood needed adjusting. Ultimately, the Luidaeg extends her kinship to Gillian through Toby, rejecting the impossibility of saving Gillian from a fatal injury in favor of tapping into the supernatural elements which bind these women together as kin. "She's family. You're only my niece – not much, compared to all the siblings and children I've buried – but it's been a long time since I've had even that much" (270).

The second time Gillian's heritage becomes reconstructed, she is simultaneously displaced further from her biological mother's bloodline and drawn into her mother's extended kinship network via an enhanced connection to the Luidaeg. The Luidaeg uses the preserved Selkie skin of her slain daughter Firtha to transform Gillian yet again, from human to Selkie. Further, the Luidaeg has maintained Firtha's skin for generations; Firtha had been slain before choosing an heir, her preserved skin maintained through a mother's anguish and love. This love and preservation allows a remnant of Firtha to remain, able to commune with Gillian in a shared dreamspace. They are bonded through choices, agency, and the lack thereof, and Firtha becomes 'another mother' for Gillian through the shared connection of a Selkie skin (324). While neither she nor Gillian had a voice in the transformation, their continued survival is made possible through the kinship network of Arthurian women which binds them together. The Luidaeg has held many names in her near-immortal life – Antigone of Albany, Lady of the Lake, Nimue, First of the Firstborn, Viviane, Annie, and simply the sea-witch. She is a person of near impossible power, older than recorded time, and the eldest descendent of the King of Fairy. She is *also* a woman whose existence weaves in and out of mythology and literature, utilizing medieval Arthurian characters and histories to deepen and expand upon

the Luidaeg's connection to the series protagonist as the progenitor of an alternative familial structure which connects women through choice and agency. Her form is protean and changing, an inheritance from her deep association with the sea, her mother the Winter Queen, and her father. Her eyes, however, are the most likely aspect of her appearance to reveal questions of lineage and inheritance she would otherwise seek to obscure. Normally black to camouflage, her true appearance, the Luidaeg's eyes are naturally sea-glass green, a visual cue held in common with her descendent line: "because there's nothing else in all of Faerie with eyes like theirs" (McGuire 2018: 334). Her descendent line,the Roane, a form of seal shifter often born with the gift for prophecy, had been "slaughtered" (*ibid.*) by her sister Morgan and her children. Using complicated magic, the Luidaeg binds her children's essence into their seal skins, transforming grief and death into rebirth via the formation of the Selkies. Each new Selkie skin grants immortality to the owner for as long as they possess it, and the magic held in their skins has enabled generations of Selkies to survive, as Gillian now must do. There are a limited number of skins, however, necessitating a system of inheritance which sees a Selkie hand their skin to their descendent, voluntarily forsaking eternity for their children; "Selkie culture is centered on the idea that eventually, most fae parents will choose to become mortal in order to give the magic to their children. When there's only one skin, only one person can wear it" (McGuire 2019b: 47). Subsequent generations of children, therefore, must choose either to "take the skin and the guilt […] or they go to the sea, and they don't come back" (300). The Selkie clans are thus the Luidaeg's extended family, recognized by Faerie as kin as evidenced by the compulsions and curses placed upon her; "No lies for me, unless they're told to the blood of my blood" (345). She gains the ability to lie to Gillian after the girl's transformation to Selkie, however, noting "that skin you wear belonged to my daughter, and that makes you, magically speaking, my child, and a parent has to be able to lie to her children, for the sake of keeping the family from falling apart" (345). As Gillian's connection to the Luidaeg increases through her Selkie status, her physical body adjusts to reflect the inheritance gained, her eyes become "so green", (300) in a way distinctly separate from the rest of her maternal line. It is fitting that the Luidaeg becomes kin to Gillian through the transformation from one form to another, made possible through her descendant Toby.

Over time the Luidaeg becomes one of Toby's closest allies and can be relied upon to treat fairly and within the boundaries of expectation and magic that entangle the familial lines of the Fae. More present in Toby's life than Toby's own mother Amandine, the youngest child of Oberan, the Luidaeg helps Toby rebuild a life and family when Toby's first is taken from her. Much of Toby and the Luidaeg's early relationship moves back and forth between debts owed and favors rendered, and it is Toby who can see clearly the ways in which the Luidaeg is holding on to a memory of family rather than accepting what has formed around her. "Are you going to stand there and tell me the sins of our parents are things we can never, ever put down, no matter how hard we try? […] I'm Amandine's daughter, which is awful, […] People keep attacking Gillian because she's my child […]. Where does it end, Luidaeg?" (286). Her argument pushes the Luidaeg to seek an alternative solution to a prophecy she had spoken and is bound to complete: the rebirth of the Roane through the surviving Selkie skins. Rather than accepting the dwindled numbers and subsequent dissolution of family units as one member achieves immortality and must leave behind his now mortal kin, they devise between them the means to extend each skin to cover 3 or more new Roane. This is possible because of the bond formed between the two women, because the Luidaeg was "lonely" (*ibid.*) since her "family died or left [her] or turned out to be assholes" (*ibid.*), it just takes Toby to illuminate the "different ways to make a family" (*ibid.*). Toby views the familial love between the Luidaeg, Toby, and the rest of the "weird, dysfunctional, foundling family" (*ibid.*) as a saving grace, as the fount of strength which allows her lateral thinking and grants the space to offer agency through decision making. As the Luidaeg feels trapped by the entanglements of prophecy and curses, Toby reminds her "We're *fae*. We're not trapped. I refuse to be trapped. We're just not sure yet where the exit is" (287). Utilizing aspects of her created kinship network: the lived experiences of her paramount Tybalt whose youth friendship with Shakespeare inspired a continuous fascination with language as a living construct, the creativity of Toby, the vast store of lore that is the Luidaeg, and the incredible power of another of Oberan's daughters Amphitrite, they find a way to extend the Selkie skins and rebirth the Roane in greater numbers than ever before. Toby helps the Luidaeg see that, even when faced with an impossible choice, there is often a false dichotomy being offered, if only you can think around the edges of language. The Luidaeg had sworn to destroy the

Selkies for their role in her children's deaths, but it takes Toby and her kin to question the boundaries of that language: "did you swear to destroy the Selkies, or to bring back the Roane? […] Because maybe those don't have to be the same thing" (289).

Of the strictures placed on the Luidaeg, perhaps the cruelest is her inability to deny a request. Fae may approach her for favors or assistance, for access to her vast knowledge of magic; she can set a price for the bargain, and the magic of her sister's curse keeps the price to match the query, "people came to her and asked for clever trinkets, and she had to say them yea. She never had a choice. Not since she chose once, and all her choices were taken away" (McGuire 2016: 405) and "She is the answer to all our problems, if we're willing to force them upon her" (408). Choice and agency are key aspects of the Luidaeg's continued development, the more readers are granted to understand this centrality, the more Toby's role as Hero underscores her similar predicament: the choice between doing the right thing, even if it kills you, and abstaining, is no choice at all.

Two short stories within the *Toby Daye* series place narrative focus on the Luidaeg's history, defying expectations to prioritize the thoughts and motivations of the Lady of the Lake and her involvement with Camelot. In providing these flashback sequences within the greater chronology of the series, McGuire underscores the importance the Arthurian connection maintains to Toby and her kinship network. The Luidaeg, as the Lady of the Lake, makes a choice which sets off the series of events culminating with her binding and the destruction of the Roane. First, in the naming conventions offered by McGuire in these texts, the underlying connectivity to specific rendition of medieval Arthurian characters is revealed. McGuire names one of the fae seats of power in the human realm Brocéliande, a direct reference to the mystical forest Brocéliande heavily associated with King Arthur through his wizard Merlin. The medieval Merlin, whose historic names include Emrys, has significant history with the Lady of the Lake (Berthelot 2000), and with Thomas Malory's creation Nimue, the chief Lady of the Lake in his 15th century compilation of extant source material *Le Morte d'Arthur* in particular. McGuire's Luidaeg was once called Nimue, situating this version of the Lady of the Lake with the Malorian tradition. We learn Nimue had once known a man named Emrys, marked as her descendent by his "Roane-bright eyes" (McGuire 2014) who is in service to King Arthur. This man is also a merlin: a human with only a small amount

of fae heritage remaining, but the disproportional inherent magic of a pureblood fae. The Firstborn and their closest descendants view merlins as tainted irrevocably by their connection to the human realm, raised to believe "nothing outside of Faerie had value, and merlins were outside of Faerie from the moment of their births" (*ibid.*). Brocéliande, once the seat of fae power in the human realms, has become a symbol of the fae/human conflict, the site of impending battle, and the location of the Luidaeg's perceived betrayal. As war between Firstborn and mixed blood followers of Emrys and Arthur looms, Nimue makes the choice to defend the Fae, siding with the merlins, changelings, humans, and her descendent Emrys because "the changelings were our responsibility. We failed them. Their children were our responsibility. We failed them as well. Now we're on the verge of failing you" (*ibid.*). Her betrayal allows Emrys and his forces to take the castle, a symbol of belonging; "fly your flag above it and assert that you have a place in this world, even if you are not allowed a place in Faerie" (*ibid.*), recontextualizing the idea of betrayal. Who was betrayed first, the children who had no say in their making, or her siblings when their sister sided with their too-human offspring? In justifying the support of Emrys over her siblings through the failure of the sanguine inheritance model she refocuses the kinship network around her personal choices rather than genetic connection not Faerie. Her choice to defend Emrys allows for his survival and subsequent renaming; he takes the title Merlin for his proper name, a play on the weakness of his fae lineage that becomes ubiquitous with Merlin's enduring legacy "liv[ing] forever in the hearts and minds of Arthur's people" (McGuire 2019a: 12). Rather than gratefulness to Nimue for her aid, however, Merlin becomes resentful of Faerie, deciding "he was better suited for the company of his own kind» (11) and calling "himself a king-maker", (*ibid.*) after his role in putting Arthur on Brocéliande's throne; the throne which had once been Faerie's and now bears the name Camelot. Having been transformed by his choices, Nimue now has none, and she must intercede. Confronting her descendent, the two clash in a scene heavily redolent of Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), which serves as an important cultural inspiration for contemporary Arthurian adaptations. In referencing such a culturally well-known sequence, McGuire simultaneously recontextualizes the impact by adjusting the characters involved. Audiences expect a wizard's duel, a dragon and transformation, which McGuire grants through the Luidaeg, "I clawed my way into the night sky,

my dragon's wings pulling me upward, my claws raking the air" (10). She had supported him the first time, for the legacy owed to her kin, evidenced in the underscored importance of Emrys's green eyes. However, when Emrys becomes Merlin, he rejects the connection to the kinship network operating around the Luidaeg, choosing humanity instead. Nimue defeats Merlin eventually, seeking to give reason to her request that he withdraw from the world of men; Camelot will always fall, with his presence or without, but if Merlin were to remain, the hundred years of Arthur's children would destroy themselves in time, and take the Fae courts with them (15). His retort reflects the medieval fascination with legacy, with creating a lineage that carries on beyond the grave: "I want to protect my legacy. […] I refuse to let Camelot fall simply so Faerie can endure" (16). Left with no other recourse, Nimue uses her own powers of transformation to grab hold of Emrys, "together, we faded from the view of Camelot, two figures becoming one, one figure becoming the sturdy trunk of a hawthorn tree. Good green leaves spread to cover us, and we were gone" (18), fulfilling the medieval history of the Lady of the Lake as Merlin's ultimate downfall.

Many of the strictures placed upon the Luidaeg are the result of an intense rivalry with her sister, known to Toby as Evening Winterrose, the Luidaeg as Eira Rosynhwyr, and Arthurian scholars as Morgan le Fay. She is a major antagonist in the early novels of *Toby Daye*, and a recurrent villain thereafter, whose powers as eldest daughter of fae King Oberon and Queen Titania mirror those of the medieval Morgan (Cooper 2004: 185-186) while her personality and behavior reflect the stereotypical view of powerful independent woman endemic to the medieval period. Eira is villainous, but her motivations stem from filial love and duty – to obey her mother Titania and become the "best" of her father Oberon's children. The Luidaeg believese the binding placed upon her by her sister forces her to only tell the truth was similarly done as a favor-seeking behavior, this time directed towards Eira's mother. That the Luidaeg learns to live within and beyond the boundaries of her curse speaks to her ability to laterally think, "it was intended as a punishment, and it has been, in its way. But it also allowed me to betray my people without hesitation. How could I be blamed for telling the truth when Eira saw fit to steal away my choice in the matter?" (McGuire 2014: 3). As Eira's actions remove her sister's choices, the impact of the sisters' rivalry resonates through to their inheritor Toby; first, in the Shakespearean connection to a particular spelling, and thus conceptual understanding, of Faerie.

In her clear lineage from Fae royalty, McGuire clarifies what it means for Morgan to be "Fay", a long-standing concern for students of medieval literature. Second, Eira's decisions and actions are always illustrated to be born of an intense desire to please her mother, become her father's favorite, and spawn a legacy of her own, a "perfect Faerie" which keeps fae descent lines from mingling with each other (McGuire 2020b: 310). While Eira's vision of a perfect Faerie involves a linear system of inheritances passed from her mother, to her, and to her acceptable offspring in a sanguine descent pattern (308), her opposition to her sister the Luidaeg maintains the paired impact of these two Arthurian women. While Eira appears as a core series antagonist from the series' inception, the two most recent entries to the series as of this writing focus on Eira's mother, illuminating much of Eira's historic motivations. Eira and her mother hate Toby (McGuire 2023: 204); Titania's powerful illusory magic allows her to create a false realty, a "Faerie in her own image" (66). Titania's "complicated illusion" (191) ensnares kingdoms within "a revised version of reality, […] a perfect pureblood paradise" (191). This binding targets Toby more specifically, revising her kinship connections by "taking everyone she knew [Toby] loved" (204) and replacing Toby's memories of love and choice with "a head full of memories that told [her] it was [her] job to be obedient and dutiful" (204-205), born to be subservient to her elder pureblooded sister. Titania operates under her own boundaries and limitations placed by Oberon himself, the wording of which keeps her from causing harm to Toby's family. However, the *meaning* of this stricture "can't be based on blood, not when half of Faerie is her [Toby's] distant cousin", (231). Therefore, the Luidaeg clarifies "if Toby doesn't *think* of them as family, they're fair game" (231, emphasis mine). Toby's conception of family as one based on binding ties of kinship and agency is thus legitimized by Faerie, the overarching power structure behind her and her ancestor's lives.

The powerful, magical women of Arthurian legend often engage with similar moments of self-empowerment. Indeed, as contemporary fantasy and medievalist fiction continues to engage with Arthurian traditions, these moments of narrative agency become increasingly vital to queer kinship network creations. I read these continuations, of which *Toby Daye* is a key text, through the lens of author Tracy Deonn, who names Arthuriana *fanfic* – fan fiction, written by and for fans – which reframes the "stories as shared, flexible narratives" (Deonn 2021). She describes the myriad stories spanning Arthuriana as "branching pathways", rather than linear descent,

"loosen[ing] the grip of ownership that the myth of a single story perpetuates" and recalling the "hundreds of years of Arthurian storytelling tradition – a tradition that has always included remixes and reinventions" (Deonn 2021). I suggest the kinship works such as *Toby Daye* hold in common with medieval Arthuriana forms a constellation of connections rather than a straight genealogy, where the past and present are always already impacting each other, working together to build the whole. Resulting contemporary narratives featuring Morgan le Fay or other powerful Arthurian women often fall in two camps – one for each side of the good/evil binary – where 'good' Arthurian patriarchy and 'evil' female power persists[2] into other engagements with the character or source material. Negative depictions of Morgan historically emphasize sexuality and other culturally inappropriate female behaviors. She has often been a vehicle for "masculinist and antifeminist metanarratives" (Howey 2015: 40) as social commentary on the behavior of women. On the other side appears the 'good' woman, a reclamation of agency and choice. While Morgan and the Lady of the Lake have been renegotiated in modern Arthuriana, their personal motivations and desires often remain obfuscated or satisfying, the whims of a sister, the natural deviousness of women, etc. However, "by shifting our focus from what characters *are* to what they *want*", (Eastwood 2014: 602) as suggested by Alexander Eastwood, we can then "develop transhistorical relationships […] that are not figurative or territorial but grounded in shared experience" (602). This act of "resonant reading enables strange kinships between readers and texts" (2014: 602) echoes Dinshaw's "queer touch through time" in forging relationships between disparate texts. If, as Lewis C. Seifert asserts "queer readings reframe the question of intentionality by privileging the ways that texts and films speak to queer desires" (Seifert 2015: 16), then when taken to the realm of the queered family, "queer erotic and affective relationships also contest the privilege granted to the nuclear heterosexual family unit and seek to expand the spectrum of relational arrangements" (Seifert 2015: 16). That is, I am suggesting, a space wherein queer desire reflects, not necessarily sexuality, but the desire for the privilege afforded to family units, an alternative structure utilized by Morgan and the Lady of the Lake in the medieval tradition and extended to contemporary texts. This question of choice, and, as noted by Roberta Davidson, agency, continues its association with ongoing reimaginations of these powerful female characters. Focusing on the use of narrative violence towards women in

medievalist reworkings of medieval stories, Davidson nevertheless recognizes these choosing situations as authorial; authors place their characters in medievalist settings that carry social expectations of violence towards women because of readerly perceptions of the medieval past. Perceptions of historic women's lives often center around violence; the choice for contemporary authors to thus include scenes of rape or other sexual violence towards women becomes, for Davidson, a way to illustrate "what's at stake in the act of authorial recreation. Both options illustrate the desire to participate in, reshape, and constructively appropriate the Arthurian tradition" (Davidson 2012: 15). Irina Ruppo Malone summarizes more succinctly: "medievalist fantasy is [...] born in a fight over the proper control of the past" (2016: 212), especially what we *perceive* to have been the past. The women characters used to illustrate these choices, then, reflect authorial intention, rather than their own characterization or reworked level of agency.

As McGuire adds her own intentions to the fanfic of Arthuriana, the *Toby Daye* series raises questions of genealogy and inheritance as connected to Arthurian women. The series uses the three women characters discussed throughout this essay to examine choice dichotomies; both in terms of expected sexual violence which has been reworked to remove the sexual, as well as in the examinations of false choice dichotomies offered to Arthurian women in the medieval tradition. Regardless of their individual desires, the choices offered to Morgan and Nimue in particular, repealed piecemeal as glimpses of a past already endured throughout the course of the series, can be reduced to a simple binary: support Camelot, and the patriarchy represented by, if not espoused by, Arthur, or reject it and become villainous, monstrous. Medieval justifications for Morgan's hatred towards Camelot are unsatisfying; McGuire's, however, consistently emphasize the role of familial creation and legacy in relation to women. Through Toby's relationship with her aunts, and through the flashbacks awarded to readers in the form of novellas included with each full-length novel, McGuire illustrates that the most important choice, and indeed the *only* choice, is the option which grants the power to protect her *family* whether or not those choices will be understood by external forces. Whether as antagonists, as Morgan's character is utilized by McGuire, or protagonists like Toby herself and Nimue as ally, the actions undertaken by these women are consistently shown to be attempts to honor and protect their own families, by

any means necessary. Thus, McGuire's reworking of Arthurian legend in the tangential connections to Toby's life and legacy is not of reclamation or remediation, though the forgiveness of Morgan's vile behavior in the medieval tradition has often been recontextualized as the result of poor options in post-Bradley narratives of the character, but in the exploration of these characters' roles as one of familiar restructuring, queering the family model in the long tradition of Arthurian women.

A decade ago, theorist Ika Willis outlined the ways in which queer readers of the cultural powerhouse series *Harry Potter* reclaimed their narrative inclusion inside socially exclusive canonical readings of the series. This act of reclamation, while understood by early fanfiction scholars as evidence of a "resistance-incorporation" (2006: 153) model, nevertheless fails to fully account for the nuances of context surrounding questions of readership and creation. Willis suggests instead the debate turns itself to addressing the "interrelationship between fan/reader/writer, canon, and world, which structures fan fiction as a written reading of a text-in-the-world" (2006: 154) She describes fan fiction as an active process that:

> Is generated first of all by a practice of reading which, rather than expressing its latent meanings, *reorients* a canonical text, opening its fictional world onto a set of demands determined by the individual reader and her knowledge of the (fictional and nonfictional) world(s). (2006: 3)

Similarly, in regards to the supernatural women of the Arthurian tradition, we might think of the ways in which medieval authors (in works now considered canonical) constructed and reconstructed these figures, as well as the ways in which modern authors "reorient", to borrow a term from Willis, established characters with long literary histories. Further, as Willis uses the *Harry Potter* series as the focal point for this particular conversation, her reasons for choice mirror my own in the selection of the *October Daye* series for further examination. Namely, Willis outlines "a specific pattern of readerly engagement [that] is provoked by each individual book's being structured as a mystery" (2006: 3) that is likewise mirrored in the structure of the series as a whole. This mystery structure:

> organizes the pattern of readerly activity and passivity around the term *suspense*: readers are to *actively* search out the books' ambiguous signs and *passively* await the resolution which will retroactively determine how they will have had to be read. (2006: 65)

As one narrative thread is pulled by McGuire, so, too, does another become illuminated. Much of the mystery/revelation process undertaken by McGuire relies on referential clues to fill in areas of narrative suspense. For example, the relationships between three significant female characters – Toby and her aunts Evening and the Luidaeg – reflects a continued interest and fascination with the reclamatory power which can often be found within fanfiction, while naming conventions adhere to the Tudor-era roots of Oberon, Titania, and Morgan le Fay in conversation with each other.

While the series, and Toby herself, are not fan fiction, *per se*, the world(s) created by Seanan McGuire for these women to inhabit are incredibly referential to literary traditions of the past, indicating some level of obligation to literary models such as fan fiction. Willis's helpful model for understanding fan fiction as a reading practice, offers exciting possibilities for other medievalist Arthurian-inspired fantasy fiction. McGuire's restructuring of Arthurian women through their familial relationship to a newly created, for the Arthuriad, character in Toby Daye can be read through such a lens. While a discussion of fan-fiction's influences on contemporary Arthurian literature would be, and has been, an article entirely on its own (Deonn 2021; Davidson 2012), the intersections of fan fiction theory as described by Willis is fairly inseparable from the influence of the queer. For queer readers of medievalist fantasy, the disruptive potential of characters like Morgan le Fay is an "inherent queerness" (Battis 2021: 26) which can be used to remind readers of medievalism's "refusal to settle upon a binary" (26) showing "readers who don't fit in that fitting in doesn't have to be the only choice" (26). Thus, queer readers seek examples of both inclusivity, writing themselves into the narratives they find themselves reaching backwards in time to access, as well as idealized examples of queered family structures on which they can graft their own modern identity. These "queer figures of the past do not 'resemble' us (as metaphors)" (Kruger 2009: 419) suggests Steven F. Kruger, but "they might *touch* us (metonymically)" (419, author's emphasis). This touch "disrupts stabilized notions of identity and normality that present themselves as unchanging and unchangeable *causes* in the world, showing these instead to be *effects*" (*ibid.*), a similar conclusion to Dinshaw's own assertions that the "slippery" characteristics of communal definition-making are "the condition, not the failure, of historical analyses and the formation of selves and communities" (Dinshaw 1999: 1). When questions of identity arise in literary or other media studies,

this impossibility of chronological separation becomes charged with accusations of presentism, as inaccurate to "proper" historical understandings (Deonn 2021), especially as they relate to perceived modern identities and definitions, like those under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. Theories of queer/trans temporality can account for some of the ways in which authors navigate the push and pull between historical "accuracy" and contemporary identity through "visions of time as asynchronous and non-normative [...] often through "touches" or "binds" that connect marginalized people across time" (Devun *et al.* 2018: 520). It is through imagination that contemporary people may begin to "rethink the past and our relationship to it: speculation about what might have happened, strategic anachronisms, and even defiance against the "tyranny of historicism'" (*ibid.*). Further, it has similarly been suggested that medieval-inspired films go through an inherent queering process in their own creation owing to the transition between temporal moments. Any new recreation of the medieval into the modern "strips away fundamental arguments of gender and sexuality embodied in time" (Pugh *et al.* 2009: 3) through the creation process. Additionally, because "the present uses the past to confront itself" (*ibid.*) it is impossible to truly separate past from present in medievalism. When it comes to contemporary engagements with the medieval, this touch through time remains vitally important. Jes Batis, while examining Young Adult literature in particular, makes the connection between medieval witches and wizards (naming Morgan le Fay and Merlin among them) and contemporary magical narratives such as *Harry Potter* and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* as one of hopeful space which makes use of medievalism's inherent queer disruptions, concluding "wizards belong to everyone. They show readers who don't fit in that fitting in doesn't have to be the only choice" (Battis 2021: 26). For an author like Seanan McGuire, whose works not only resonate with queer and LGBT readers, but is herself of the community (2020a), that belonging offers a powerful incentive to write her characters into established canons. As the Luidaeg, Eira, and Toby herself find themselves increasingly entangled in a vision of Faerie redolent of McGuire's Shakespearean influences, so, too, do McGuire's readers become engaged in the reclamatory act of belonging.

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The author

Eyan Birt is a PhD researcher at the University of Birmingham, where his dissertation-in-progress focuses on queer readings of contemporary medievalisms – particularly those indebted to the Arthurian enchantresses of the Middle English tradition – and holds an MA in Arthurian literature from Bangor University. As an adjunct professor at Dominican University, he utilizes contemporary Arthurian adaptations to teach students how to read and approach texts "queerly" – from alternative lenses and expectations both medieval and modern.