

## **Dangerous Minds: Adapting the Medieval Wizard in Young Adult Fiction**

Witches, wizards, and warlocks have always been popular in children's literature, but less critical attention has been paid to teen wizards across the YA genre, whose magical adolescence offers a unique counter-point to the popularity of the dystopian hero. I'm going to talk about Morgan le Fay as a medieval template for witches and warlocks on the recently rebooted *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. The show contains playful echoes of medieval material, and updates the medieval enchantress while showing that readers and viewers can learn from these fragmentary characters, who still haunt our imaginations, just as they obsessed medieval writers like Geoffrey of Monmouth and the anonymous *Gawain* poet. I'll argue in general that magical characters like Morgan offer possibilities for queer teens who many not identify with more traditional roles in medievalist fantasy texts.

The phrase "dangerous minds" is both playful and critical. The wizard Merlin is often portrayed as mentally unstable, a wild man. In *Gawain*, the character of Morgan seems to have cryptic motivation—if any at all—for engineering Gawain's test of manners. Geraldine Heng argues that the poem is really about the relationship between Morgan and Guinevere, but Morgan herself is a difficult knot, visible only as a kind of lace-work throughout the poem's action. Heng describes this as the "imperfect knot...[that] situates identity as more tenuous and incomplete—a fragile, uncertain prospect that is always on the verge of unraveling" (504). I'm interested in how this medieval focus on mental complexity might resonate for contemporary teens—especially those identifying as neurodivergent. Melanie Yergeau uses the term "neuro-queer" to describe the non-traditional rhetoric of people on the spectrum, and I think this applies to wizards as well. Teen witches and warlocks live in both the past and the future, and embody

what Carolyn Dinshaw has called the “asynchronous time” within medievalism—not quite now or then, not quite “authentic” or “amateur,” but productively queer in its own way.

Morgan is known for her non-conformity. Carolyne Larrington notes that she “anticipates the collapse of the Arthurian world,” and that her plotting “offers the most complex challenge to chivalric ideals.” Her search for knowledge and power lays the foundations for future witches, like Willow Rosenberg from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Sabrina Spellman. Morgan also had an interesting afterlife in Victorian and Edwardian children’s fiction. Authors like Doris Ashley and Mary McLeod struggled to reconcile her status as a villain with her empowering qualities as a sorceress. She peers defiantly at the chapter title, and steals the scabbard of Excalibur with a look of steely focus. She feels “joy” at snatching up the vulnerable scabbard, and Dixon’s illustration shows her in a position of undisguised power. Yet, at the moment of Arthur’s death, Morgan is included among the great queens who take Arthur to Avalon (121). This unique combination of sly joy and thirst for knowledge creates other iconoclast witches, like Willow and Sabrina.

*The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is a show that revels in its own queer excess. From her origins in the 1960s *Archie* comics, Sabrina was always an unsettling character. In her first appearance, in the 1962 issue of *Archie’s Madhouse*, Sabrina says: “We *modern* witches believe life should be a ball.” The comic adapts late-medieval stereotypes about witches, and repurposes the material to create a character that’s both ironic and powerful. Like Morgan, Sabrina doesn’t apologize. The most recent TV adaptation by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa makes Sabrina both individual and simultaneously a member of a queer family. Her fierce aunts, Zelda and Hilda, are perhaps an echo of Morgan and the queens who carried Arthur to Avalon. But this queer kinship also plays with late-medieval fears of witches *organizing* along the lines of a heretical

family, or an unholy sabbath. It's precisely this image that *Sabrina* holds subverts, by celebrating the main character's loving, odd, and often dangerous family.

The first episode asks us to envision "the town of Greendale, where it always feels like Halloween." Not only is Greendale a bit like a Renaissance fair, it also echoes the work of Carolyn Dinshaw on medievalism and its queer temporalities—not quite then, not quite now. Much of the show is focused on ensuring safe spaces for characters who don't fit in, with the most pressing case being that of Theo, a trans boy who insists upon being acknowledged with dignity. Sabrina is in a unique position as an insider-outsider, since the witch community doesn't accept her, while her human friends don't quite understand her. Aunt Zelda wants her to be more of a proper witch, and she channels Morgan's wicked joy as she celebrates Satan and "the extraordinary delicious gifts he bestows upon us."

Hilda is more subtly supportive of Sabrina's attempts to mainstream, though in a particularly searing moment in the second episode, she reveals her daily anger as both a witch and a feminist. While tucking Sabrina in, she says, with a faraway look: "[Sometimes] I dream I'm walking through the forest at the peak of dry season with a torch in each hand, and I watch the whole forest burn like so much dry kindling." The show bounces between irony and melodrama, offering up medievalist symbols of witchcraft as something deeply camp and unexpectedly moving. There are many scenes of the Spellmans eating food at a kitchen table, sharing stories, having lives—it suggests a horizon of happiness for anyone who is different or outcast. This aligns with Jose Esteban Muñoz's argument about how queerness is always on the horizon. If we look forward to queerness—whether at the dinner table, or in a classroom—then we get to have a future and we need to stay alive for that ever-transforming moment. We can

place *Sabrina* with medieval utopias like Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies*, as well as more recent queer/trans utopias like Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*.

*Sabrina* also shows us witches and warlocks of various ages—a reminder that you don't need a particular type of body to be part of this community. Audiences are meant to underestimate Aunt Hildie, who seems neither young nor powerful and lives with her more vibrant sister, Zelda. In *SGGK*, when Gawain first meets Morgan la Fey, he also sees her as a background character—old and uninteresting, compared to the lovely lady sitting beside her at mass. Morgan has “rugh ronkled chekez” and a “blake chyn.” But Larrington notes that this is part of the point: “Her age and ugliness encourage both Gawain and the poem's audience to underestimate her central role in the plot” (26). As Morgan shifts in the late medieval period from a healer to a mistress of demons, she gains a devilish family. In his German adaptation of *Erec and Enide*, Hartmann von Aue describes Morgan as always changing, “indifferent as to whether she lived in the fire or...[in] the dew...[She] had kin deep in Hell” (11). *Sabrina* explores similar witches with “kin deep in Hell.” Zelda and Hilda create a continuum of magical role models for Sabrina that we can trace back to enchantresses like Morgan.

Sabrina invites her mortal friends and her witch colleagues to the same party, in an effort to integrate her two worlds. Sabrina observes to her cousin, Ambrose: “Witches and mortals together tapping the same beer keg...why can't this be the future?” The show adapts a medievalist framework here that's forward-looking. Elements like prophecy, even eschatology, combine to create a queer time-frame where binaries like mortal/witch break down. At the same time, Sabrina belongs to an actual medieval university—the Unseen Academy—where she receives instruction in what the head of the school calls “[the] Corpus Arcanum—a shared body of infernal knowledge.” This includes late-medieval magic systems, like the Arts Notoria—a

supernatural notary process of using diagrams and invocations to access divine knowledge. Catherine Rider notes that “magical texts...[seem] to have been common among scholars and students at medieval universities. In 1277 they were among the books banned from the University of Paris by the city’s bishop” (111).

Sabrina has to balance high school with the lessons of the Unseen Academy. The school is a demonic inversion of high school, where students casually gather around a statue of Baphomet, the devil in goat form, to discuss homework and who’s dating whom. The show plays with a concept like Hogwarts by reimagining it as a devilish school where *all* of the classes are the Dark Arts. But it’s also a community of witches and warlocks who have fashioned this culture to escape oppression. Sabrina ultimately rejects both curricula, and turns instead to the magical knowledge passed down by her aunts. This places her alongside other witch characters in YA literature who learn through matrilineal knowledge rather than university, including Tiffany Aching in Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels, and Roddy Hyde in Diana Wynne Jones’s *Merlin Conspiracy*. In this way, the show presents us with a medieval liberal arts tradition, but tempers it with family wisdom, passed down by those “kin deep in Hell.” This makes it an interesting critique of the medievalist magic school narrative.

Sabrina’s cousin Ambrose is a distillation of the varied medieval magic tradition that empowered outsiders. He’s both a pansexual warlock and a person of color who gets nearly as much screen time as Sabrina herself. Perhaps more importantly, he isn’t the *sole* person of color on the show. As we know, medieval studies has a crisis of white supremacy, and a long-standing problem of hiring primarily white scholars to teach a European canon that doesn’t actually reflect the racial diversity of the middle ages. This was especially poignant at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo this year, where Medievalists of Color had *five* panels on anti-

racist pedagogy rejected, while white scholars had similar panels approved. Since many of our students learn about the middle ages *through* medievalist fantasy programs like *Game of Thrones* or *Sabrina*, a character like Ambrose matters.

The show's constant negotiation of past/future and rebellion/tradition provides a framework for talking about medievalism, which is fundamentally about using the past to interpret the present (and seeing how the present appropriates the past). Like the witches who have come before her, Sabrina has to consider the weight of history, but also the *future*—and the magical apocalypse that will collapse boundaries between mortal and human. In his work on queer theology, Patrick Cheng notes that “numerous boundaries...[are] dissolved and erased by radical love as we approach the eschatological horizon” (18). Cheng reads queer potential within medieval Catholicism, as the show reads queer potential in the medievalist symbols of witchcraft. As Sabrina gains knowledge, she becomes a magical historian who's also critical of politics, just as Geoffrey of Monmouth initially presented Morgan as a wise clerk.

To conclude: Morgan le Fay is invoked on *Sabrina* as part of a long line of witches, from Hecate to the Witch of Endor. Because the idea of the witch transforms so drastically between the medieval and early modern eras, *Sabrina* draws upon many variations—not just Morgan and her sisters, but many Morgans, all the various and wild adaptations of her that make the character so enduring. The witch lives in adaptation, and Morgan's indeterminacy as a character, her many knotted afterlives, knits a medievalist myth that allows Sabrina to carve her own path in the world of witchcraft. The show's camp sensibility, and its attention to queer, trans, and nonbinary characters, also works in tandem with the diversity of the middle ages. The end result is a medievalist text about magic, horror, and adolescence that can also work as an unexpected teaching tool for showing the figure of the witch through time.