

Keeping the Past Alive The Dialogue with Medieval Literature in A.S. Byatt's Fiction¹

Carmen LARA RALLO

Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana. Universidad de Málaga
carmenlara@uma.es

“We cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past”
(A.S. BYATT, *On Histories and Stories*)

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ABSTRACT

With the publication of *A Whistling Woman* in 2002, A.S. Byatt completed the sequence of her quartet, a complex and intellectually demanding project that figures prominently in the trend of new historical fiction characteristic of contemporary British literature. In its dialogue with the past, the *roman fleuve* develops an intricate web of intertextual connections with the literature of all times that signals the crucial role played by intertextuality in the process of keeping the past alive. Among the diverse allusions and references woven in the course of the tetralogy, some of the most significant echoes are those of the medieval literary tradition, which emerges as a centripetal force in the imaginative universe of Byatt's fiction.

KEY WORDS: history and the past, intertextuality, medieval literature, contemporary British fiction, A.S. Byatt.

Manteniendo vivo el pasado: El diálogo con la literatura medieval en la ficción de A.S. Byatt

RESUMEN

Con la publicación de *A Whistling Woman* en 2002, A.S. Byatt ha culminado su cuarteto, un proyecto de gran complejidad intelectual que ocupa un lugar esencial en la corriente de nueva ficción histórica característica de la literatura británica contemporánea. En su diálogo con el pasado, la secuencia desarrolla un intrincado tejido de conexiones intertextuales con la literatura de todos los tiempos que apunta hacia la relevancia de la intertextualidad en el proceso de mantener vivo el pasado. Entre las múlti-

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ples alusiones y referencias insertadas a lo largo de la tetralogía, algunos de los ecos más significativos son los de la tradición literaria medieval, que ejerce una poderosa influencia en el universo imaginativo de la ficción de Byatt.

PALABRAS CLAVE: historia y pasado, intertextualidad, literatura medieval, ficción británica contemporánea, A.S. Byatt.

SUMARIO: 1. Introduction. 2. Retelling Chaucer. 3. The Shadows of the World in *The Game*. 4. The Arthurian Myth Re-Possessed. 5. *Unus Passerum*. 6. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the last decades of the 20th century, British fiction has displayed a growing interest in the past and memory which has resulted in the composition of a great number of narratives that enter into an active dialogue with history. As Frederick Holmes has argued in *The Historical Imagination: Postmodernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction*, nowadays there is a “return to history” (Holmes 1997: 12) that this critic associates with novels such as Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*, Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion*, Graham Swift’s *Ever After*, or A.S Byatt’s *Possession*, among others. Significantly, Byatt herself has analysed the new flowering of the historical novel in Britain in her latest essay collection, *On Histories and Stories* (2000):

The renaissance of the historical novel has coincided with a complex self-consciousness about the writing of history itself. [...]

[...] It may be argued that we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past [...] But there are other, less solid reasons, amongst them the aesthetic need [...] to keep past literatures alive and singing, connecting the pleasure of writing to the pleasure of reading (Byatt 2000 / 2001: 9-11).

This allusion to the process of “keep[ing] past literatures alive” is very relevant because it can be connected with one of the most fruitful strategies for the treatment of the past in contemporary literature: intertextuality. Indeed, my contention here is that history does not emerge solely as subject or theme of recent British fiction, but that writers also deal with memory under the form of literary history. That is, the dialogue with the past is articulated as well in an intertextual dimension that gives new life to the literature of all times.

In this context, Byatt’s quartet occupies an outstanding position because it interacts with history on two levels: it portrays the historical, social, and cultural changes of the years 1953-1970, and it establishes links with all kinds of texts of the English literary tradition. In terms of this intertextual richness, the last volume of the tetralogy, *A Whistling Woman* (2002), includes the description of one of the characters’ reading of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, an episode that acquires special relevance for two main reasons.

First, the section from Bede’s History that the character finds “touching” is the same one that plays a crucial role in the second novel of Byatt’s series, *Still Life*

(1985), where that intertext emerges in connection with the death of one of the central figures of the quartet. Secondly, the link with the *Historia Ecclesiastica* points to the recurrent presence of echoes from English medieval literature not only throughout the tetralogy, but also at different points of Byatt's production both as a novelist and as a storyteller.

Indeed, one of her earliest novels, *The Game* (1967), is pervaded by references and allusions to the Arthurian myth, and in particular to Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur*, whose intertextual embedding can be traced as well in Byatt's Booker-prize winning *Possession* (1990). Similarly, her novella "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" (1995) takes the story of Patient Griselda, from Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale", as one of its main intertexts.

In light of this, the goal of the present article is to examine how Byatt revisits medieval literature in her fiction by means of intertextuality, focusing on the web of connections woven in the course of her writing career. That examination will be carried out by taking as a point of reference one of the most influential studies on textual relationships since Julia Kristeva coined the term "intertextuality" in 1967, Gérard Genette's *Palimpsestes* (1982). This seminal work, which describes any text as a palimpsest or manuscript that reveals the traces of earlier writings, offers the most systematic categorisation of the intertextual phenomenon up to date, in a classification that proves particularly useful for the analysis of Byatt's dialogue with the literature of the past.

2. RETELLING CHAUCER

The diversity of the intertexts underlying Byatt's tetralogy, which has been commonly associated with the complexity of *Possession*, is characteristic as well of the palimpsestic nature of her short fiction. In this sense, from her first collection, *Sugar & Other Stories* (1985), and up to her latest publication —*Little Black Book of Stories* (2003)—, Byatt's tales and novellas are engaged in a consciously intertextual enterprise that reveals an inquiring interest in such wide-ranging topics as entomology, Matisse's artistry, or geology, and above all, a deep knowledge of literary works of all times. As a result, a novella like "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" displays an intricate interweaving of literary intertexts that include, but are not limited to, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Winter's Tale*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Among them, and together with other non-English referents like *The Thousand and One Nights* or some poems by the Turkish writer Faruk Nafiz Çamlıbel, one intertext that figures prominently in the web of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" is the story of Patient Griselda, from *The Canterbury Tales*. This narrative becomes the focal point of the lecture delivered at a conference in Ankara by the protagonist of Byatt's novella, Gillian Perholt, a middle-aged scholar engaged in the analysis of tales and in the act of telling them. According to Annegret Maack (2001, 125), this activity of retelling places Gillian as a link in the long chain mediating the legend of Griselda, from Chaucer's tale to

Petrarch's Latin adaptation of Boccaccio's Italian. Significantly, the renewal and revival of the narrative of Patient Griselda in its multiple appropriations, adaptations, and retellings can be connected with the process whereby, in the course of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", Gillian realises that the possibility of immortality and rebirth for human beings lies in the perennial existence of stories and the art of storytelling.

As a narratologist, Gillian shares "The Clerk's Tale" with her Turkish audience in a critical exercise that operates on two of the levels of intertextuality - transtextuality identified by Genette in *Palimpsestes*. On the one hand, and closely corresponding to Genette's most concrete category of "intertextuality", the core of Gillian's lecture is a retelling or paraphrasing of the story of Patient Griselda, with occasional quotations from Chaucer's text. On the other hand, the lecture concludes with an interpretational assessment of the meaning of the tale which falls into Genette's category of metatextuality, or textual interaction in the form of a commentary:

The moral is that of Job, says the Clerk, according to Petrarch, that human beings must patiently bear what comes to them. And yet our own response is surely outrage – at what was done to Griselda – at what was taken from her, the best part of her life, what could not be restored – at the energy stopped off. For the stories of women's lives in fiction are the stories of stopped energies – the stories of Fanny Price, Lucy Snowe, even Gwendolen Harleth, are the stories of Griselda, and all come to that moment of strangling, willed oblivion. (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 121)

Here, Gillian's view of "The Clerk's Tale" as a story of women's stopped energies is very significant in terms of the parallel drawn by the narratologist between Chaucer's story and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Both works, according to Gillian, share a lull in the narrative that allows for the development of the climactic scene where the woman —Griselda and Queen Hermione, respectively— is reunited with her children after being estranged by her husband. Like these two characters, Gillian is left by her husband in middle-age, though in her case this abandonment is felt as a liberation (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 103-104).

In that scene, the two female characters experience the unleashing of all the energy which has been restrained during the lull of inactive and submissive acceptance of their husbands' will: on the one hand, Griselda violently embraces her lost children in what Gillian describes as a failed attempt to strangle them in order to assert her power to change her husband's planned finale (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 119). On the other, Hermione comes back to life after being kept hidden away in the form of a statue for several years, in an episode that reveals the illusory power of art while playing at the same time with the myth of rebirth and renewal.

Interestingly, some elements of the climactic scene of Shakespeare's work acquire special relevance in connection with Gillian's feelings and thoughts in the course of her lecture on "The Clerk's Tale". Thus, the outcome of the stopping off of Hermione's energies —her petrification— has an echo in the narratologist's experiences during her concluding remarks, as the ghostly vision of her own ageing

and decaying self makes her feel momentarily paralysed, like “a pillar of salt” (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 117)². Once her petrification is over, Gillian goes on with her retelling and interpretation of Chaucer’s story, which she examines in the light of the myth of rebirth underlying *The Winter’s Tale*:

In the *Winter’s Tale* [...] the lovely daughter is the renewal of the mother, as the restoration of Persephone was the renewal of the fields in Spring, laid waste by the rage of Demeter, the mother-goddess. [...]

[...] [T]he tale that precedes the *Winter’s Tale* [is] the tale of a man seeking the return of spring and youth and fertility in ways inappropriate for human beings as opposed to grass and the flowers of the field. This pattern is painful but natural, this human error which tales hasten to punish and correct (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 113, 120).

In this passage, Gillian’s remark on the inappropriateness of the myth of renewal for human life clearly points to one of her characteristic features at the beginning of the novella: her concern over ageing and physical decay. As the narrative progresses, nevertheless, she manages to come to terms with the unavoidability of death through her glimpse into the possibilities of rebirth, which lie in the activity of storytelling (Hidalgo 2005: 259). Indeed, Gillian understands that the workings of the myth of renewal in human life is to be found in the telling of tales, whose perennial existence keeps alive the collective memory that challenges the devastating effects of time. This understanding is the result of Gillian’s successive encounters with a wide array of stories in the course of “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”, where after her own retelling of “The Clerk’s Tale” she becomes the audience of what Jane Campbell (2004: 185) has described as “narratives of women’s lives”.

Those miscellaneous narratives, which are framed by Gillian’s academic activities in the same way as the diverse stories making up Chaucer’s work are framed by the pilgrimage to Canterbury, share a fruitful dialogue with the tale of Patient Griselda on several levels. As Maack has pointed out (2001: 126), the topics of the stories echo many of the themes introduced in “The Clerk’s Tale”, such as the workings of fate, the power structures that inform the relations of men and women, or the fulfilment of our inmost wishes. Furthermore, the narratives portray parallel and reverse characters to the central figures of the tale of Patient Griselda.

Thus, following Gillian’s assessment of Walter as a character excessively assuming the roles of “hero, villain, destiny, God and narrator” (Byatt 1994 / 1995:

² This feeling recurs later on, when in her visit to the theatre of Ephesus, Gillian thinks about the immortality of a Turkish goddess as opposed to her own mortality (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 166-67). Significantly, the image of the woman turned to stone is one that haunts Byatt’s imagination, appearing in two of her short stories, “Medusa’s Ankles” —the opening tale of *The Matisse Stories*—, and especially “A Stone Woman”, from *Little Black Book of Stories*. Moreover, it also focuses the writer’s attention in a passage of *On Histories and Stories* which reflects Byatt’s fascination for the figure of Hermione as a stone woman: “I always see this statue as white marble, although it cannot be, and is described as painted. It is a dead woman preserved as a work of art, who then turns to be a living woman. [...] Hermione is a riddle, a woman who has preserved herself by keeping herself apart from her life and its threats” (159-60).

120), her Turkish colleague and friend draws a correspondence between one of the protagonists of *The Thousand and One Nights* and Griselda's husband in the following terms: "King Shahriyar [Scheherazade's husband], like Count Walter, has taken upon himself to be husband and destiny, leaving only the storytelling element, the plotting, to his wife" (125). Similarly, Walter's rejection of the married state on the premise that "[liberte] seelde tyme is founde in mariage" (Chaucer 1988: 139) is replicated in different stories inserted in Byatt's novella.

First, the tale Gillian is told during her visit to the Ankara museum depicts women as a threat to men's lives and freedom (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 144-45). Secondly, the djinn or genie that Gillian liberates from a glass bottle bought in the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul describes to her his various love relationships in the course of his eternal existence³, one of them being an affair with the Queen of Sheba, whose view on marriage as a form of imprisonment is very similar to that of Walter's: "How can I, a great Queen, submit to the prison house of marriage, to the invisible chains which bind me to the bed of a man?" (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 209).

In her attempt to avoid marriage, the Queen sets her suitor a series of seemingly impossible tasks, among which there is one with a powerful resonance in terms of the intertextual dialogue with *The Canterbury Tales*. As a matter of fact, the Queen's question about "what women most desire" (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 211) emerges as an echo of the task given to the knight by Queen Guenevere in "The Wife of Bath's Tale", where he has to answer the question "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" in order to save his life (Chaucer 1988: 117).

The presence of this story in the multi-layered framework of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" —where the question of women's utmost desire recurs at different points of the narrative (213, 244)— is very significant from several points of view. On the one hand, in the context of the interaction between Byatt's work and "The Wife of Bath's Tale", it should be noted that the image of physical decay embodied by the Loathly Lady in Chaucer's story can be connected with the centrality of the topic of women's ageing in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye". On the other, dealing with the relationship of "The Wife of Bath's Tale" with the major Chaucerian intertext in Byatt's novella, there is a strong link between the story of Patient Griselda and the Wife's narrative, as her lesson on women's need of "mastery in marriage" is the origin of the Clerk's twisting interpretation of Petrarch's moral:

For which heere, for the Wyves love of Bathe
[...]
I wol with lusty herte, fressh and grene,
Seyn yow a song to glade yow, I wene;
[...]

³ One of the most remarkable aspects of the presentation of this character in the context of Byatt's embedding of medieval intertexts is that he encapsulates his knowledge of the English culture in an allusion to Bede's account of the meeting of Bishop Gregory with the Angles: "the tale of the pale slaves from the island in the north of whom a Roman bishop said "*Non Angli sed angeli*" (Byatt 1994 / 1995: 205).

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,
Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence
To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille
As of Grisildis pacient and kynde,
[...]

If thou be fair, ther folk been in presence
Shewe thou thy visage and thyn apparaille;
If thou be foul, be free of thy dispence;
To gete thee freedes ay do thy travaille;
Be ay of chiere as light as leef on lynde,
And lat hym care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille!
(Chaucer 1988: 152-53)

3. THE SHADOWS OF THE WORLD IN *THE GAME*

Like “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, another Chaucerian narrative that enters into a rich dialogue with the story of Patient Griselda is “The Merchant’s Tale”, which in its portrayal of an unfaithful and deceitful wife provides a sharp contrast to “The Clerk’s Tale”. There, the account of May’s deceit of her blind husband January reaches a climactic point in the so-called “pear tree episode”, which takes place in January’s walled garden, a paradisaal space reminiscent of both Eden and the Garden of Love typical of courtly romance. Interestingly, the image of the walled garden plays a crucial role in the reflections of one of the main characters of *The Game*, Cassandra Corbett, as she traces the origins of her interest in medieval literature:

She had come to Oxford hungry for the absolutely worked drama of Lancelot and Guenevere, Tristan and Iseult; she had slowly transmuted this into a passion for the symbolic possibilities of the Grail Legend. She combined the mediaevalist’s love of the strange with the mediaevalist’s passion for precision. The complexities of existence were the interrelations of roots and roses, strange beasts and fruits, in a walled garden, outside which a sea rose in formally dangerous peaks. [...]

But now and then, in certain moods, Cassandra remembered the root of this passion in the wash of romantic feeling with which she had first seen Oxford, [...]. She had not had then an interest in the conventions of the courtly love of the *Roman de la Rose*; she had cared about the feelings of Lancelot and Guenevere, disturbed in their blood-stained sheets. She had come, not from Ritual to Romance, but in the other direction, from romance to ritual. Her feeling for completeness had betrayed her to a way of life she had not quite chosen; the academic life had become almost accidentally a branch of the contemplative life. She had cultivated her walled-garden skills at the expense of any other she might have had (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 18).

Cassandra, a medievalist teaching at Oxford, displays here a fascination for the Arthurian myth that becomes the basis for the intertextual dialogue with this tradition in the course of Byatt’s novel, as it can be discovered already in the

opening description of the character. Indeed, the first image of Cassandra introduces her work on a critical edition of *Le Morte D'arthur*, in a passage that, like Gillian's lecture in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", establishes a link that operates on the level of Genette's metatextuality: "'We shall do better,' [...] 'to think of chastity as purity, a scrupulous purity and to associate it with innocence, if we are to apprehend at all the moral force either of Lancelot's sin or of Galahad's virtue in the *Morte D'arthur*'" (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 15). Significantly, Cassandra's critical commentary on Malory's work concentrates on Lancelot and Galahad, the two knights that, according to Cassandra's sister Julia, focused their attention during their childhood and adolescence (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 120).

This is so because the Corbett sisters' lives until young adulthood were ruled by the Game, a fantasy world of chivalry and romance originally devised by Cassandra. With its universe of medieval battles and courtly love, the Game offered Cassandra the possibility of giving free rein to her passion for Arthurian legends and to her imagination, whose power is still felt in later years in her reveries and dreams. As a matter of fact, the Game consisted of a series of cards and clay figures representing the characters of the Arthurian myth, about which Cassandra created a fantastic sequence of Malory-like stories dominated by Sir Lancelot and Morgan le Fay:

'For hit behovyth the now to chose one of us four, for I am quene Morgan le Fay, quene of the londe of Gore, and here is the quene of North Galys, and the quene of Estlonde, and the quene of the Oute Iles. Now chose one of us, whyche that thou wolte have to thy peramour, other ellys to dye in this preson.' 'This is a harde case,' seyde Sir Lancelot, 'that other I muste dye, other to chose one of you... Yea, on my lyff,' seyde Sir Lancelot, 'refused ye bene of me' (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 70).

In parallel to Cassandra's chronicles of intrigue and misguided love—which usually take the form of long poems in ballad metre—, Julia also contributes to the Game by composing narratives about "the hopeless passion of Elaine of Astolat" (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 46). Significantly, this character plays an important role at different points of Byatt's fiction, especially in her more popular version as Tennyson's Lady of Shalott. Elaine le Blank, called the Fair Maiden of Astolat, appears in *Le Morte D'arthur* as one of the two women with the name of Elaine that interact with Lancelot in the course of his life: the daughter of King Pellès—who becomes the mother of Lancelot's son Galahad—, and this "full fair maiden, good and gentle" that loves Lancelot "out of measure" and is rejected by him (Malory 1969: II.412).

Elaine's unrequited passion for Lancelot, who wears the maid's sleeve in a tournament as a disguise and not as the token of love she thought it to be, became the source for Tennyson's "Elaine", published in the 1859 volume of his *Idylls of the King*. Here, as in Malory's account, Elaine dies for the knight's love and lies on a barge that arrives at Camelot, where the King and his courtiers feel awed at the pitiful sight of "that clear-featured face / [...] lovely, for she did not seem as dead, / But fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled" (Tennyson 1899: 414). This episode had already been recreated by Tennyson in his 1832 poem "The Lady of Shalott", which though not directly inspired by *Le Morte D'arthur*, concludes with the image of an

Elaine-like figure floating dead into Camelot after the sight of Lancelot has disrupted her monotonous existence.

Like Tennyson's Elaine in the *Idylls*, the Lady of Shalott lives at the top of a tower, where she watches the reflections of the outside reality in a mirror, and weaves the "shadows of the world" in her "magic web" until Lancelot's image of dazzling light impels her to look down to Camelot. Breaking thus the laws of her confined existence, the Lady sets in motion the effects of a curse that leads her to prepare a death barge which eventually carries her corpse down the river towards King Arthur's court. There, the knights take pity of the fair maid—whose portrayal as an enclosed weaving woman has been identified by Byatt as her childhood symbol for her own reading and brooding self (Byatt 1992: 128)—, in a tragic ending that closely follows Malory's story, and that resonates in the conclusion of *The Game*.

Indeed, Cassandra's careful arrangement of her suicide after ending her journal with the entry "I want no more reflections" (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 230) echoes the Lady's ceremonious preparation of her death ritual after feeling "half sick of shadows". This correspondence points to the existence of a parallel between both characters that mediates the intertextual presence of all the major elements of the Arthurian narrative in the course of Byatt's novel. In this context, the explicit identification of Cassandra with the Lady appears in two passages of *The Game* where Tennyson's version of the medieval myth is embedded in the Corbett sisters' meditations on Cassandra. Whereas the eldest sibling sees herself as the Lady in a metatextual comment on Tennyson's poem, at the very end of the novel Julia's thoughts enter into a direct intertextual dialogue with "The Lady of Shalott" while she examines her sister's room after Cassandra has committed suicide:

An image for myself? [...]

The Lady of Shalott, also. The web, the mirror, the knight with the sun on him, reflected in the mirror and woven into the web. I am half sick of shadows. A poem a great deal more intelligent than we commonly give it credit for. Tennyson has here both indulged, and provided a commentary on, his own mediaevalist romanticism. Cf. *The Palace of Art*. Solitude concerned with reflections (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 141-42)

Julia understood that her sister had spent time in front of this mirror, encouraging herself. She felt hot, cold, slightly breathless. Very slowly, she approached her own face to the mirror and studied it [...]

She said, softly, what she had intermittently been thinking since she arrived.

'Out flew the web, and floated wide

The mirror crack'd from side to side,

The curse is come upon me...' (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 235)

The fact that Julia quotes the poem as she looks at herself in Cassandra's mirror—and that those quoted lines correspond to the moment signalling the end of the Lady's life—reinforces once more the link connecting Cassandra and the Lady throughout *The Game*. Like the protagonist of Tennyson's work, Cassandra leads a lonely and secluded existence that makes her feel trapped (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 203),

and where her only escape is creativity, as happened to the Lady. In this sense, if the Lady found a respite from the oppression of her shadowy world in the incessant labour of weaving, Cassandra relieves the stifling feeling of isolation by writing and painting.

Moreover, as in the case of the Lady, this isolation is abruptly interrupted by the unexpected appearance of a Lancelot-like figure, Simon Moffitt, a herpetologist with whom Cassandra had a brief relationship in the past. Simon, who like Lancelot embodies the unattainable lover, reappears in Cassandra's life as a television personality, in such a way that his image, like Lancelot's, is initially mediated by a glassy object similar to the Lady's mirror: "The television screen was like the Looking Glass [...]. Beyond Simon were the remote knights, in their thickets, and the lover, in the knee-high, delicate, grass-green forest, [...] reaching out at last, with his serious, anxious expression, to pluck the rose" (Byatt 1967 / 1992: 97).

Thus, as Campbell has pointed out in her influential article "The Hunger of the Imagination in A.S. Byatt's *The Game*"—which argues that the story of the Lady of Shalott is the dominant myth in the novel (1988: 155-58)—, the mirror and glass operate on multiple levels of Byatt's work, where the central symbols of the myth, including also the web, are extended and opened to a wide variety of interpretations. All of them, suggests Campbell, converge on the seemingly mutually exclusive meanings of imprisonment and creative freedom—which coexist in the Lady's and Cassandra's artistic achievements during their secluded existences—, two connotations that acquire special relevance in the light of Byatt's own discussion of "The Lady of Shalott" in *On Histories and Stories*.

There, the writer analyses Tennyson's poem in a chapter significantly devoted to the recurrence of glass in fairy tales and literature, where Byatt traces the associations of glass imagery with confinement and creativity in tales such as the Grimm Brothers' *The Glass Coffin*. While examining the enriching influence of this story—and of glass in general—on her own imagination⁴, Byatt focuses on the presence of glass in "The Lady of Shalott", whose protagonist is described as "solitary and alive" in her simultaneous suffering and enjoyment of imprisonment and creative freedom:

A tale I always associated with the ice and glass was Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott'; I must have known it by heart as a small girl, since we had a colouring book with the poem and the pages of pre-Raphaelite images to colour in. The Lady has things in common with the frozen death-in-life states of Snow White and of the lady and her castle in the glass coffins. She is enclosed in her tower, and sees the world not even through a window, but in a mirror, which reflects the outside life which she, the artist, then weaves into 'a magic web with colours gay' [...]

⁴ Apart from figuring prominently in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye"—where glass appears under the form of the paperweights collected by Gillian—, this element plays an outstanding role in two of Byatt's short stories: her version of "The Glass Coffin", which was embedded in the narrative matrix of *Possession* and later reprinted in the volume *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, and "Cold", from *Elementals. Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998). Moreover, it should be noted that the title of Byatt's lecture at the 2003 conference of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies (AEDEAN) was "Windows, Mirrors and Spheres. Constructing and Iconography of Glass".

The Lady was solitary and alive, even if the magic colours bright were only shadows and reflections [...]

Preserving solitude and distance, staying cold and frozen, may, for women as well as artists, be a way of preserving life. (Byatt 2000 / 2001: 157-58)

This passage reveals Byatt's lifelong familiarity with Tennyson's poem, which the author has acknowledged as one of the greatest inspirations in the course of her writing career. In fact, as she has pointed out in several interviews (Wachtell 1993: 82; Tredell 1994: 66), Byatt's childhood fascination for "The Lady of Shalott" resulted in the pervasive emergence of both the rhythms and the imagery of the poem in many of her narratives, to the point that the writer has even suggested that the origins of her literary vocation can be found in her early reading of the story of the Lady: "I don't think I really ever wanted to be anything else but a writer, and that went back to my childhood [...], and reading "The Lady of Shalott", and hearing the rhythms" (Tonkin 1999: 15).

In this context, it is not surprising that critics such as Christine Franken have tried to discover the existence of links with the Arthurian poem already in Byatt's first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), where this scholar identifies an analogy between the female protagonist and the Lady of Shalott in terms of their parallel artistic pursuits. However, despite Franken's efforts to prove how her interpretation of the figure of the Lady provides an enlightening approach to the depiction of the protagonist's creative self in *The Shadow of the Sun* (Franken 2001: 51-57), the influence of Tennyson's poem on Byatt's fiction is nowhere clearer than in her acclaimed novel *Possession*.

4. THE ARTHURIAN MYTH RE-POSSESSED

Together with *The Game*, *Possession* is the narrative that displays Byatt's richest dialogue with the Arthurian tradition, as she weaves multiple references to legends and tales about Camelot in the intricately intertextual web of the novel. As in *The Game*, the medieval accounts that lie behind *Possession*'s Arthurian echoes—and especially those of *Le Morte D'arthur*—are filtered to a great extent through Tennyson, which is particularly interesting in a neo-Victorian novel like Byatt's considering that the Laureate played a crucial role in the 19th century rediscovery of the Arthurian myth. Such a process of revival was decisively invigorated by the publication of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, whose story of "Elaine"—and its earlier variant of "The Lady of Shalott"—captured the Victorian imagination and became a major source of inspiration for writers and painters alike.

In *Possession*, the pre-eminence of this Arthurian myth as adapted by Tennyson in 19th century England is reflected in the character of Christabel LaMotte, a fictitious Victorian poetess who explicitly identifies herself with the figure of the Lady of Shalott. Like Cassandra in *The Game*, Christabel embraces a self-imposed seclusion where she gives free rein to her artistic vocation, leading a Lady-like

existence of confinement and artistry that is only upset by the appearance of the Lancelot-figure of Randolph Henry Ash.

In the course of her adulterous affair with this fictitious poet, Christabel feels bound by the curse of Victorian social decorum, which leads her to a failed attempt at distancing herself from Ash. That attempt becomes the driving force of two letters addressed to the poet where Christabel resorts to imagery from Tennyson's composition to portray their own relationship. If the setting of the lovers' furtive walks is imagined as "girdled with an unspoken spell of prohibition [...] as Shalott was to the knights" (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 181), the poetess becomes an embodiment of the figure of the Lady in a self-portrait that recalls Cassandra's view of Tennyson's character as "an image for [herself]":

'I have chosen a Way – dear Friend – I must hold to it. Think of me if you will as the Lady of Shalott – with a Narrower Wisdom – who chooses not the Gulp of outside Air and the chilly river-journey deathwards – but who chooses to watch diligently the bright colours of her Web – to ply an industrious shuttle – to make – something – to close the Shutters and the Peephole too –'

(Byatt 1990 / 1991: 187).

This passage deserves to be analysed from several points of view. On the one hand, the attention paid to the artistic object of the web can be connected with Christabel's —and Byatt's— sympathy for the mythological character of Arachne, another lonely craftswoman with whom Christabel identifies herself in a fragment that revealingly focuses on isolation and weaving as the defining traits of the poetess' existence: "I live circumscribed and self-cummuning [...] more like a very fat and self-satisfied Spider in the centre of her shining Web" (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 87).

On the other hand, Christabel's self-portrait as a Lady of Shalott that does not look down to the outside world, but continues working steadily on her loom, provides an alternative to the Lady's fate that foreshadows the effects of the curse on Christabel. In this sense, although the poetess manages to escape the Lady's and Cassandra's tragic endings of physical death, she nevertheless suffers the consequences of her social transgression under the form of ostracism. Thus, Christabel's alternative image of the Lady proves to be no optimistic depiction of her present self, as the poetess intended when writing the letter, because she is unable to resist Ash-Lancelot's dazzling light despite closing "the Shutters and the Peephole too" and trying to find solace and refuge in her artistic activity. Instead, the alternative Lady gloomily anticipates Christabel's future, when her relationship with Ash leads her to a social death as she withdraws from the world and spends the rest of her life "[living] in a Turret like an old Witch, and [making] verses nobody wants" (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 450).

This outcome signals, according to Kathleen Kelly (2001, 291), that Christabel fails to write herself out of the Lady's predicament, and that therefore *Possession* does not provide a revision —but a revisitation— of the story of the Lady of Shalott. Such a process of revisiting, which is closer to Byatt's admiration for Tennyson's poem than any kind of new-fashioning of the tale

could be, has been explored by Kelly in connection with other characters of Byatt's novel. In this context, Kelly contends that Christabel's 20th century counterpart—the feminist scholar and teacher Maud Bailey—is also a Lady-like figure who lives entowered within herself (Kelly 2001: 289). In her parallel with the Lady of Shalott, Maud works at the top of the glassy “Tennyson Tower”, and spends her life weaving and unweaving the narratives that become the target of her literary criticism; moreover, following Kelly's argument (2001: 292), Maud fails to transcend the Lady's destiny because she loses her self in passion and sexual possession.

As a matter of fact, like Christabel and the Lady, Maud is dazzled by the light of a contemporary Lancelot: the research assistant Roland Michell, who disrupts Maud's tidy world when he embarks her on the quest for the retrieval of the 19th century plot. The image of the quest is particularly interesting when applied to Roland since this character displays several traits connected with the medieval universe of chivalry. Apart from being linked by name to the eponymous hero of *La Chanson de Roland*, Byatt's character is overtly described as a “knight” by Maud's distant relative Lady Bailey, when Roland helps her as she is about to fall off her wheelchair (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 74). Roland's rescue of this old lady in distress takes place during his first visit to Lincolnshire—the location of Maud's university, and significantly, the place where Tennyson grew up—, whose landscape triggers Roland's metatextual reflection on the accuracy of Tennyson's language as he imagined the setting of “The Lady of Shalott”:

The wolds of Lincolnshire are a small surprise. Tennyson grew up in one of their tight twisting valleys. From them he made the cornfields of immortal Camelot.
On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and rye
That clothe the wold and meet the sky.
Roland saw immediately that the word ‘meet’ was precise and surprising, not vague (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 68).

Here, the quotation of the opening lines of the poem reveals how Tennyson's composition focuses from its very beginning on the river, that boundary between the cornfields inspired by the valleys of Lincolnshire which eventually becomes the hearse of the Lady's coffin-barge. The link of the image of the dead Lady with that of the river acquires special relevance in the characterisation of another of the Victorian figures of *Possession*, Blanche Glover. Blanche, Christabel's companion and close friend, has been associated by Kelly with both Ophelia and Malory's Elaine (Kelly 2001: 287), an association that has its basis on the episode of Blanche's suicide.

Like these characters and Elaine's Tennysonian equivalents—the Lady of Shalott and the *Idylls'* Elaine—, Blanche lets herself die in a river, though hers is a less peaceful death than that of the Arthurian ladies. Indeed, far from waiting patiently for the effects of a lethal curse, Blanche precipitates her death by carrying out a successful emulation of Mary Wollstonecraft's failed suicide attempt: she hurls herself from Putney Bridge into the Thames with stones sewn into her pockets.

In this way, Blanche becomes a more passionate variant of Malory's Elaine, also dying for unrequited love—that of Christabel's—and sharing the defining traits of the Lady of Shalott, confinement and artistry.

Significantly, Blanche's artistic activity can be taken as a starting point to discover the presence of another link with Arthurian literature in the palimpsest of *Possession*. As a painter in the tradition of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Blanche feels deeply interested in the legends of Camelot, which became the major subject matter for Victorian art by the mid-19th century. Following the real-life Pre-Raphaelites in their choice of inspirational sources—Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur*, Tennyson's poetry, and William Dyce's frescoes—, Byatt's character decides on a story included in both Malory's and Tennyson's Arthuriads as the topic of her last picture of Christabel: the tale of the beguiling of Merlin by the chief Lady of the Lake, Nymue-Vivien.

Malory devotes the opening chapter of Book IV of *Le Morte D'arthur* to Merlin's love relationship with Nymue, a lady rescued by King Pellinor as one of the tasks set by King Arthur at his wedding feast. When Pellinore brings Nymue to Camelot, Merlin falls “in a dotage on the damsel”, and begins pursuing her with such tenacity that he “would let have her no rest, but always he would be with her” (Malory 1969: I.117). The wise man teaches Nymue his magic crafts, and after foretelling that “he should not dure long”, he travels to Cornwall with the young lady. There, Nymue makes Merlin go under a great stone “to let her wit of the marvels there” (Malory 1969: I.118), and seals him in that place for the rest of his life, refusing to help him with her sorcery. Despite depriving Arthur of Merlin's advice, however, Nymue proves to be a resourceful ally of Camelot in her later actions, as she aids the king several times—rescuing Sir Pelleas, protecting Lancelot and Guenevere, or retrieving Excalibur—, and she even accompanies Arthur in the ship that leads him away from his last battle.

In Tennyson's version, which was published together with “Elaine” in the 1859 volume of the *Idylls*, there is no room for any benevolent gesture on the part of Merlin's lover. From the very beginning of the poem, Nymue—for whom Tennyson chooses the alternative name “Vivien”— is depicted as a deceptive temptress who yearns for acquiring a charm from Merlin's book of magic, “the which if any wrought on anyone / With woven paces and with waving arms, / The man so wrought on ever seem'd to lie / Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower” (Tennyson 1899: 383). In order to do so, Vivien tries to seduce a reluctant Merlin, following him everywhere and resorting to all kinds of flattery and tricks. Eventually, during a storm in the forest of Broceliande, the magician succumbs to Vivien's advances and tells her the charm, which is immediately used against Merlin to imprison him forever in an oak tree, “lost to life and use and name and fame” (Tennyson 1899: 395).

Tennyson's “Vivien” concludes thus with the scene of Merlin's incarceration, a climactic episode in *Le Morte D'arthur* which is the focal point of Blanche's picture in *Possession*, as Christabel remarks in her description of the work: “a large painting of Merlin and Vivien – at the moment of the latter's triumph when she sings the Charm which puts him in her power, to sleep through time” (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 172). The centrality of this moment of female “triumph” in Blanche's

painting is very significant for several reasons. First, the fact that Christabel sits for the character of Nymue-Vivien —and that therefore Vivien's face is that of Christabel— opens the way to read Blanche's depiction of a scene of female control over a man as a veiled message to Christabel in her relationship with Ash. In this sense, the painting would be aimed at persuading Christabel to exert her power over Ash, and to put an end to the affair that is ruining the friendship of the poetess and the painter.

Secondly, the figure of the supernatural seductress that dominates Blanche's picture recurs at different points of *Possession*, particularly in Christabel's writings. So her poem *The City of Is* offers a version of the Breton myth of the drowned city that focuses on the character of Dahud, a sorceress who bewitches her lover in a tower until they are engulfed by a furious ocean (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 330-31). In this same line, the opening book of Christabel's *The Fairy Melusine* —whose source is the medieval *Roman de Melusine ou l'Histoire des Lusignan*, by Jean d'Arras— describes the encounter between a knight and a fairy that entices him with her gaze, making him drink from a fountain which puts the knight in the fairy's power:

And she held out the cup, and he came down
And took it from her and drank deep therein.
All dazed with glamour was he, in her gaze.
[...]
Now was he hers, if she should ask of him
Body or soul, he would have offered all.
And seeing this, at last, the Fairy smiled (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 298).

Finally, the Arthurian episode chosen by Blanche as the topic of her picture became the subject of several real-life Pre-Raphaelite works, among which the most popular one is Sir Edward Burne-Jones's *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1875-77). This painting occupies an outstanding position in the intertextual structure of *Possession*, since the first British edition of the novel depicted a reproduction of Burne-Jones's picture on its dust-jacket. Considering Genette's category of paratextuality —which comprises the interaction of the text with all kinds of accessory components such as covers, illustrations, inscriptions, or epigraphs—, the reproduction of *The Beguiling of Merlin* would be then an essential part of the paratext of *Possession*.

In this context, the novel enters into an active dialogue with that paratextual element whose import can be grasped in the light of several aspects of the illustration: the nature of the painting, and its arrangement in Byatt's cover-design. On the one hand, the reproduction of *The Beguiling of Merlin* appears on both sides of the dust-jacket, so that the back cover mirrors the front cover in a composition that has two couples looking forwards and backwards. This can be connected not only with how *Possession* features a couple in the present whose actions echo and disclose those of the couple in the past, as Byatt herself has pointed out (Todd 1996: 33), but also with the novel's portrayal of possession as a two-way process, which is exerted reciprocally by the possessor and by the possessed person or object.

On the other hand, leaving aside the configuration of the cover-design, Burne-Jones's picture itself is characterised by a palimpsestic nature that fits the persistent ventriloquy in *Possession*. Indeed, the fact that Merlin's face is based on Giotto's Dante—in the same way as Blanche modelled her Vivien on Christabel—reflects the mirror-like quality of the characters and writings of the novel, or in Byatt's words, “[the] recession [...] of people being people being people” (Todd 1996: 33).

Furthermore, another relevant trait of *The Beguiling of Merlin* for its relationship with *Possession* lies in its merging of the Tennysonian subject with details drawn from the medieval French versions of the story of Merlin and Vivien. When composing the painting, Burne-Jones resorted to the *Idylls* as his major source of inspiration, though he also took into account the narratives of the early 13th century *Estoire de Merlin*—from the Vulgate (or Lancelot-Grail) Cycle—, and the post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*. This conflation of variants of the Arthurian episode is replicated in Byatt's novel in the insertion of a changing tale about Merlin and Vivien. The tale is described by Christabel's cousin Sabine as one of the stories told to the poetess by her uncle Raoul, who also offers an alternative interpretation to Christabel's reading of the Arthurian legend as “a tale of female emulation of male power” (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 354):

My father told the tale of Merlin and Vivien. The two characters are never the same in successive years. Merlin is always old and wise, and clear-sighted about his doom. Vivien is always beautiful, and various and dangerous. The end is always the same. So is the essence of the tale – the coming of the magician to the old Fairy Fountain, the invocation of the fay, their love beneath the hawthorns, the charming of the old man into telling her the spell which can erect round him a solid tower visible and tangible only to himself. But my father, within this framework, has many stories. Sometimes the fairy and the magician are true lovers, whose reality is only this dreamed chamber, which she, with his complicity, makes eternal stone of air. Sometimes he is old and tired and ready to lay down his burden and she is a tormenting daemon. Sometimes it is a battle of wits, in which she is all passionate emulation, a daemonic will to overcome him, and he wise beyond belief, and impotent with it. Tonight he was not so decrepit, nor yet so clever – he was ruefully courteous, knowing that her time had come, and ready to take pleasure in his eternal swoon, or dream or contemplation. [...]

[...]

‘It is one of many tales that speak of fear of Woman, I believe. Of a male terror of the subjection of passion, maybe – of the sleep of reason under the rule of – what shall I call it – desire, intuition, imagination. But it is older than that – in its reconciling aspect, it is homage to the old female deities of the earth, who were displaced by the coming of Christianity. Just as Dahut was the Good Sorceress before she became a destroyer, so Vivien was one of the local divinities of streams and fountains – whom we still acknowledge, with our little shrines to who knows what Lady –’ (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 353-54).

In its multiple alternatives, the narrative told by Raoul blends different accounts of Merlin's infatuation with the lady-sorceress, from the *Estoire de Merlin* to

Tennyson's "Vivien". Thus, the depiction of Merlin and Vivien as real lovers that enjoy their relationship in the tower of air erected by the fairy closely follows the story in the Vulgate Cycle, where Vivien truly loves Merlin and visits him every night in the invisible tower that the fairy makes with the magician's spell. Similarly, Merlin's readiness to accept his fate and be imprisoned by Vivien in the version told to Christabel stands in clear parallel to the wise man's resigned attitude in both the *Suite du Merlin* and Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur*. Likewise, the portrayal of Vivien as a "tormenting daemon" corresponds to the negative characterisation of the sorceress in Tennyson's poem, which associates Vivien with the image of a menacing serpent: "[s]tiff as a viper frozen; loathsome sight, / How from the rosy lips of life and love, / Flash'd the bare-grinning skeleton of death!" (Tennyson 1899: 393).

Together with these parallels, another significant element in Raoul's changing account of the tale of Merlin and Vivien is the fountain. This landscape feature, which is present in all the variants of Raoul's story, emerges already in Chrétien de Troyes's romances as a defining trait of the forest of Broceliande, precisely the setting of the beguiling of Merlin in Tennyson's "Vivien". Moreover, the fountain recurs as well in Christabel's writings⁵, and becomes the basis for Raoul's interpretation of the Arthurian legend.

That interpretation compares Vivien with Dahud, the enchantress of the City of Is—which is interestingly described elsewhere in *Possession* as "the Paradise of Avallon" (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 349)—, and links both powerful women with pre-Christian female deities. Such a connection is particularly relevant in the light of Byatt's preference for pagan mythology to Christianity, an attitude that rules the iconographic connotations of two main characters of her quartet: the sisters Frederica and Stephanie Potter. In her interview with Nicolas Tredell, Byatt has analysed those connotations in the following terms:

Stephanie also goes with the idea of female goddesses, [...] Frederica goes with a very early desire I had as a child to substitute female myths for Christianity, which I dislike. Frederica is the Virgin Queen and she goes with Athene, and she goes with [...] Cybele and Astarte, and with Diane of Ephesus who is fecund yet virginal. Whereas Stephanie is the opposite: she must be like Demeter or Persephone. She is the earth-myth of the goddess who is maternal and therefore of course she goes to the Underworld. (Tredell 1994: 71)

⁵ In *The Fairy Melusine*, the fountain is the instrument of the knight's enchantment, since the fairy takes possession of him as soon as he drinks the water offered by her. This gesture echoes the moment in Tennyson's "Vivien" when the sorceress gives Merlin water from a spring: "In mine own lady palms I cull'd the spring / That gather'd trickling dropwise from the cleft, / And made a pretty cup of both my hands / And off'd you it kneeling: then you drank" (Tennyson 1899: 384). In both cases, there is a connection between the supernatural lady and water which appears again in *The City of Is*, and that acquires special relevance in the light of Sue Holbrook's investigation of the recurrent presence of woods, water and stones in the depictions of the Lady of the Lake (2001, 72 *passim*). Significantly, that presence can be linked with the episode of Blanche's suicide in *Possession*, where the two instruments used by this character to kill herself are water and stones.

5. UNUS PASSERUM

The mythological implications surrounding the Potter sisters operate on several levels of Byatt's tetralogy. While Stephanie's association with the myth of Persephone is inextricably linked to the imagery of renewal developed in the series, the correspondences between Frederica and certain goddesses play a crucial role in the portrayal of the character. In this sense, the deities' assertiveness and virginity permeate the identification of Frederica and Queen Elizabeth I that lies at the heart of the first novel of the quartet, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), where the relevance of the Virgin Queen's mythical iconography for the characterisation of Frederica is only matched by the centrality of her rich literary life.

As a matter of fact, one of Frederica's most significant traits is her constant tendency to assess her vital experiences in terms of the literature she admires. Like Cassandra in *The Game*, the younger Potter sister has a powerful imagination derived from her extensive reading, which has worked as a ruling force in her life since she was a child. Thus, in the second volume of the tetralogy, Frederica remembers her childhood infatuation with an imagined lover that she associates with several literary figures, including Sir Lancelot:

[W]hen she was eight or nine, the male figure appeared in the forest, with [...] fine, dark good looks and an incompatible set of character traits, derived from Mr Rochester, the sad and sinful Lancelot du Lac, Athos the mournful Musketeer and other fictive innocent rakes. The Knight was beautiful but fallible and often in need of rescue. When rescued (as Lancelot was rescued by the Lily Maid of Astolat, as Artegall was rescued by Britomart) he would become strong again, a little cruel, intent only on his own purposes. The Lady would grieve: the Knight would be ambushed, by Morgan Le Fay, by Irish peasantry, by wizards, and would again helplessly need rescue. The composite Knight of Frederica's early myths [...] had Satanic and Byronic overtones (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 251).

This passage is very interesting from the point of view of the palimpsestic quality of Byatt's fiction. Indeed, it alludes again to Lancelot's relationship with Elaine of Astolat, and in particular to an episode that figures prominently both in *Le Morte D'arthur* and in Tennyson's *Idylls*: Elaine's rescue of Lancelot after he is wounded in the tournament. As Malory and Tennyson point out in their narratives, Elaine saves the knight's life with her careful nursing, since "this maiden [...] never went from Sir Launcelot, but watched him day and night" (Malory 1969: II.405), and "sweetly forbore him ever, being to him / [...] Milder than any mother to a sick child / And never woman yet, since man's first fall, / Did kindlier unto man" (Tennyson 1899: 409).

Despite Elaine's efforts, however, and as Frederica highlights in her imagined scene, Lancelot does not express his gratitude in the form of love, but in a selfish gesture he goes back to Camelot as soon as he recovers, indifferent to the lady's feelings. This action results in the sad conclusion that resonates in *The Game* and *Possession*, where Elaine's gloomy fate is evoked by Christabel's cousin Sabine when, like Frederica, she remembers her childhood fantasy world: "I played at

being Sir Lancelot, before I learned I was only a woman and must content myself with being Elaine aux Mains Blanches, who did nothing but suffer and complain and die" (Byatt 1990 / 1991: 339).

Moreover, the relevance of Frederica's recollection in terms of intertextuality derives from the fact that it reflects the intricate network of links characteristic of Byatt's quartet. Indeed, the allusions to *Jane Eyre*, *The Three Musketeers*, or *The Faerie Queene*, among others, are just a sample of the ambitious scope of the intertextual universe of the tetralogy, whose referents range from works of the Middle Ages to the writings of 20th century authors like Tolkien, and in which the production of canonical writers such as Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantic and Victorian poets, D.H. Lawrence, or T.S. Eliot occupy a predominant position.

In this context, whereas Shakespearean intertexts—and particularly those from *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*—play a crucial role in the exploration of the iconography of rebirth incorporated by Byatt throughout the quartet, the insertion of echoes of *Paradise Lost* in the opening and closing scenes of the first and last novels of the series, respectively, fulfils the structural function of providing a circular configuration to the sequence as a whole. Significantly, the two volumes structurally linked through the connection with Milton's masterpiece are very remarkable in the context of the presence of medieval intertexts in Byatt's tetralogy.

First, the opening novel of the series, *The Virgin in the Garden*, enters into a dialogue with Langland's *Piers Plowman*, on the one hand, and with the legend of Caedmon, on the other, through the experiences and reflections of Frederica's siblings. In this sense, as Frederica's sister Stephanie reflects on the rites associated to Easter, her mind becomes filled with images derived from Passus 18 of *Piers Plowman*: "Langland's Christ harrowed Hell like any hero visiting the underworld and returning scatheless" (Byatt 1978 / 1994: 201). Likewise, the setting for the pseudo-scientific experiments carried out by Frederica's brother Marcus is Whitby Abbey, a place whose choice is determined by the fact that it was where "Caedmon the illiterate cowheard had been visited by an Angel who had enabled him to sing an English *Song of Creation*" (Byatt 1978 / 1994: 396).

Secondly, the description of one of the characters' theological studies in the last volume of the quartet, *A Whistling Woman*, includes a reference to the writings of Bede in a passage that, in close connection with the one about Caedmon in *The Virgin in the Garden*, reveals the mystic appeal exerted on characters by places linked to medieval figures. While Marcus feels curious about the possibility of discovering the location of Caedmon's cow-byre, the student of theology in *A Whistling Woman* shows a special interest in Bede's tomb: "He read the Venerable Bede, in those days [...] Bede's tomb, black and plain, stood in the Galilee Chapel. *Haec sunt in fossa, Beda venerabilis ossa*. He read Bede's image of the sparrow, flying from the dark into the lighted room, and out again into the night. He found it touching" (Byatt 2002: 118).

At first sight, this intertextual interaction with Bede's work is restricted to a marginal allusion to the image of a sparrow that centres the reflection on the fugacity of life in Book II, chapter 13, of the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis*

Anglorum. However, the presence of this particular intertext —and above all, its characterisation as “touching”— acquires deep connotations for the readers of the quartet as a whole, who in *Still Life* found that fragment from Bede’s History, in the original Latin, as one of the quotations preceding the novel:

Talis, inquiens, mihi videtur, rex, vita hominum praesens in terris, ad comparisonem eius, quod nobis incertum est, temporis, quale cum te residente ad caenam cum ducibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali... adveniens unus passerum domum citissime pervolaverit; qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens, mox per aliud exierit... Mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens, tuis oculis elabitur.

‘Such,’ he said, ‘O King, seems to me the present life of men on earth, in comparison with that time which to us is uncertain, as if when on a winter’s night you sit feasting with your ealdormen and thegns – a single sparrow should fly swiftly into the hall, and coming in one door, fly out through another. Soon, from winter going back into winter, it is lost to your eyes’ (Byatt’s translation).

There, this element of Genette’s category of the paratext does not seem to have any connection with the theme or plot of the second novel of the quartet. In contrast, the other opening quotations —two fragments from Proust’s *Du côté de chez Swann* and *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, and a passage by G. Cuvier quoted by Foucault in *Les mots et les choses*— are soon discovered to be closely linked to the centrality of painting and the still life genre in the novel, as well as to the exploration of the mimetic possibilities of language that Byatt carries out throughout the narrative. In consequence, the epigraph from Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* comparing the fleetingness of human life to the flight of a sparrow through a hall produces an effect of puzzlement, similar to the one resulting from the encounter of the melancholy attitude displayed by Stephanie’s husband, Daniel, in the Prologue to the novel.

That section is set more than twenty years after the events in the main body of *Still Life*, and it emerges as the last glimpse we get of the characters of the tetralogy. In this glimpse, Daniel is a sad-looking and exhausted middle-aged man who differs strongly from the lively and active youth of *The Virgin in the Garden*. His thoughts, furthermore, revolve around the blurred image of a fair-haired woman that resembles Stephanie, while at the same time his feelings are dominated by a bitter view of himself as “a battered and grizzled survivor” (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 5). This unexpected description is deeply connected to two remarks by the narrative voice whose meaning passes unnoticed by those who read the novel for the first time: “People had been shocked, by numbers as well as by gratuitous death itself, as people will be. [...] Daniel [...] had become a specialist in wild blows of chance” (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 10).

That is so because the import of such comments, like Daniel’s attitude in the Prologue, can only be grasped in the light of the most shocking episode of *Still Life*, which also reveals the significance of Bede’s epigraph. This episode, Stephanie’s accidental death, takes place in a chapter pungently entitled with an expression taken from the quotation of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*: “Unus passerum” (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 393-404). As the chapter approaches its ending, the narrator adopts a

tone skilfully free from melodramatic sentimentality to describe how young and vital Stephanie gets electrocuted when she tries to rescue a sparrow that has hidden under her fridge:

And then the refrigerator struck. She thought, as the pain ran through her, as her arm, fused to the metal, burned and banged, as her head filled, 'This is it' and then, with a flashing vision of heads on pillows, 'Oh, what will happen to the children?' And the word, altruism, and surprise at it. And then dark pain, and more pain (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 403).

This unexpected and pointless death is motivated by Byatt's desire to depict a textual accident as shockingly unanticipated as any such disaster is in reality. So, on the one hand, the writer has described the random nature of Stephanie's death as her reaction to D.H. Lawrence's statement about the inexistence of real accidents in human life⁶. On the other hand, the fact that the victim of this cataclysm is a generous and kind-hearted character demonstrates, according to Byatt, how death in fiction can be free from any consideration about the plot or about poetic justice:

'Most deaths in novels are there for a reason, so that death will point up the meaning of the whole story or – in a tragedy – you deserve your death because like Oedipus you've done something wrong. I wanted to say that death isn't like that. It just happens – not necessarily to the person who deserves to be dead' (quoted in Greenfield 46).

Here, the allusion to tragedy as the literary genre that typically depicts death as a punishment echoes a fragment of *Still Life* which offers a metafictional reflection on the representation of death in literature: "Death is more of an end than marriage. Tragedies end with death. Watching the quietus of blind Oedipus, the multiplied nevers of old Lear upon the rack, we feel, Aristotle told us truly, something like relief" (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 416). This reflection includes a reference to *King Lear* that is very significant in the intertextual dimension of the quartet, since the bewildering loss of Stephanie is recurrently associated with Cordelia's pointless death:

Maybe Stephanie had been taken, a deaconess said, so young and so happy, because our Lord wanted Daniel to know the way of a life without such love. Cordelia was killed, Christian critics argue, to effect the reconciliation of Lear with the heavens, to redeem him. [...] Who could believe in a God who killed that life to

⁶ "I remember, myself, being so angry with D.H. Lawrence for declaring in *Women in Love* that there were no accidents, that every man made his own fate, that I constructed a novel with at least six main characters so that I could imagine a real, unpredicted, random accident at the end of the second volume, that my readers would experience *as accident*" (Byatt 2000 / 2001: 85). Byatt's anger and subsequent creative decision about *Still Life* —like the recurrent presence of untimely deaths in her fiction— can be connected with her personal experience of a lethal accident when her son Charles was run over in 1972. This premature death appears in the inscription of *The Virgin in the Garden*, which is dedicated to Charles Byatt; in parallel, the dedication of *Still Life* also mentions a woman that, like Stephanie, died prematurely, and that dedication is significantly placed just before the epigraph from Bede.

teach Daniel Orton a lesson about suffering? Shakespeare killed Cordelia to show that there are worse things in our world than guilt and atonement for guilt, that Lear's wisdom, painfully acquired, and not very great, was of very little moment beside that cry. Why should a dog, a horse, a rat... And even *that* Daniel thought [...] was self-referring (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 419).

The resonance of Lear's bitter line about the life of "a horse, a dog, a rat" in Daniel's thoughts provides a starting point to assess the presence of the sparrow in the scene of Stephanie's death. In this context, the sparrow would be part of the animal imagery from Shakespearean tragedies that, like the creatures signalling for Lear the injustice of his daughter's death, pervades the tragic episode of *Still Life*. Thus, Byatt's choice of a sparrow to trigger Stephanie's lethal accident could be seen as resulting from an intertextual dialogue with *Hamlet*, and in particular with the Prince's statement in the second scene of Act V about how "[t]here is special providence in the fall of a sparrow".

Alternatively, there is a possibility of interpreting the presence of the sparrow in *Still Life* in terms of the dichotomy life-death that the tetralogy articulates through Stephanie's interaction with animals and plants. Since her first appearance in *The Virgin in the Garden*, Stephanie is portrayed in successive attempts at rescuing creatures that are on the brink of death. After nursing unsuccessfully a litter of kittens in that opening novel of the quartet, the elder Potter sister manages to save a seedling of nasturtiums and a dying cat in the course of *Still Life*. This cat gives birth, and one of the surviving kittens chases the sparrow that will eventually bring about Stephanie's death. Although she is able to release the bird from the cat's mouth and to revive it, Stephanie will lose her own life in a failed attempt at setting the bird free.

All these readings about the sparrow in *Still Life* are outshone by an analysis based on the connections with the medieval intertext of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. As a matter of fact, the episode of Stephanie's death is full of linguistic echoes and links with other sections of the novel that invite to explore the presence of the sparrow in the light of the paratextual epigraph from Bede. In this sense, Stephanie's final thought about the word "altruism" recalls her regret at the loss of her conceptual vocabulary (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 370-71); similarly, the moment when her brother Marcus helplessly realises that the refrigerator is not earthed has been foreshadowed in an epiphanic reflection during which "[t]he word 'earthed' came into his mind with a kind of silly coherence" (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 291).

In this same line, several aspects of Stephanie's fatal rescue of the sparrow replicate expressions and images from the medieval quotation that precedes the novel. First, the allusion to the sense of sight in the last line of Bede's epigraph — "[m]ox de hieme in hiemem regrediens, tuis oculis elabitur" — finds an echo both in the description of Stephanie's dying pain with the visual adjective "dark", and in her glimpse of the bird's eye in the darkness just before she gets electrocuted: "[Stephanie] lay down on the kitchen floor [...], seeing in the shadow the live bright eye" (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 403). Secondly, and more significantly, the sparrow in *Still Life* —like Bede's bird— flies swiftly out through the door, catching Daniel's attention only momentarily as he enters the house unaware of the tragedy of his

wife's death: "Daniel came in, frowning with surprise, suspicion, irritation at seeing [some people], over whose heads a sudden sparrow plunged into the night" (Byatt 1985 / 1995: 404).

As a result, the novel enters into an active dialogue with the *Historia Ecclesiastica* that works in two directions. On the one hand, the episode of Stephanie's death enacts the situation depicted in the paratext from Bede on several levels. The sparrow that dominates the simile in Bede's quotation appears literally in *Still Life* as the ultimate cause of Stephanie's electrocution. At the same time, the elder Potter sister suffers directly the meaning of that simile in her untimely death, so that Bede's message about the fleetingness of human life is poignantly illustrated in the curtailment of Stephanie's existence. On the other hand, the intertextual presence of the quotation of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* becomes a bitter clue of the central tragedy of *Still Life*, in such a way that the reader's puzzlement when encountering the seemingly meaningless epigraph foreshadows the overwhelming shock at facing Stephanie's pointless death.

6. CONCLUSION

The centrality of the link with Bede's work in the narrative construction of the climactic episode of *Still Life* becomes a clear proof of the import of medieval intertexts in Byatt's quartet. Indeed, the series incorporates allusions to the Arthurian myth, *Piers Plowman*, and the legend of Caedmon through the Potters' memories, reflections, and actions, while at the same time it establishes a connection with the *Historia Ecclesiastica* that brings together its second and fourth volumes. The force of that connection lies in its relationship with the accidental death of Stephanie, whose absence since the ending of *Still Life* works as a focal point for the development of the mythical imagery of rebirth and renewal in the tetralogy.

This imagery also permeates "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", another of Byatt's works that enters into an enriching dialogue with English medieval literature. In its revival of "The Clerk's Tale", the novella conflates different retellings and interpretations of the story of Patient Griselda that allow the protagonist of Byatt's narrative to come to terms with ageing and death. As she listens to several tales that give new life to Chaucer's account, this character understands how the devastating effects of time can be challenged by the perennial essence of the art of storytelling.

Like the protagonist of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", one of the main characters in *The Game* is powerfully influenced by her professional study of literature in her personal life. Cassandra Corbett, a medievalist fascinated by the Arthurian myth, becomes a parallel to Tennyson's version of Elaine of Astolat in her life of seclusion and creativity. Involved in an ambivalent relationship with the "shadows of the world", Cassandra shares the tragic fate of the Lady of Shalott in a novel that places this Arthurian legend at the centre of its intertextual dimension.

The literary tradition about King Arthur's court also figures prominently in *Possession*. Here, as in *The Game*, the presence of that tradition —and of Malory's

Le Morte D'arthur in particular— is filtered through Tennyson's poetry, which provides the basis for the interaction with the stories of Elaine and Vivien. If the figure of the confined Lady-artist emerges again under the form of a series of correspondences with some characters in the novel, the narrative of Vivien's beguiling of Merlin appears on several levels of *Possession*.

That multifarious presence of the story of Merlin and Vivien in the intricate referential web of Byatt's novel attests to the relevance of medieval intertexts in her imaginative universe. In fact, as this article has tried to demonstrate, Byatt's aesthetic need to keep the past—and the literary creations from the past— alive in the course of her writing career has led her to place the works of the Middle Ages as a pivotal point of her fiction. By doing so, she has managed to prove how we cannot understand (the literature of) the present if we do not understand (the literature of) the past.

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