

UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

**THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN IN
VICTORIAN CULTURE AND THE WORKS OF
A.S. BYATT**

**MĪTS PAR MERLINU UN VIVJENU VIKTORIĀŅU
KULTŪRĀ UN A.S. BAJETAS DARBOS**

MASTER THESIS

Author: **Zane Sarma**

Matriculation Card No. **zs09024**

Adviser: Doc. Aleksejs Taube

RIGA 2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my adviser, Doc. A. Taube for his assistance, encouragement and patience during the research process. I would also like to thank the lecturers and academic staff at the University of Latvia, Department of English Studies at the Faculty of Humanities for their support and understanding, as well as their dedication to create inspiring and informative classes.

ABSTRACT

The Victorian era has inspired an entire genre of neo-Victorian literature, which became popular in the late 20th century thanks to A.S. Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession* (1990). *Possession* is comprised of dual storylines on two temporal planes: the contemporary storyline describes the quest of two literary scholars to find proof of a secret love affair of two famous fictional Victorian poets. The present Master's Thesis examines A.S. Byatt's interpretation of the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien and its central role in *Possession*, as well as allusions to the medieval myth in an earlier work of A.S. Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978). The Master's Thesis shows the tale of Merlin's beguiling by Vivien as a juxtaposition of desire and rationality and discusses how the myth reveals knowledge as the key to power.

Key Words: Byatt, *Possession*, Myth, Victorian, neo-Victorian, Merlin, Vivien.

ANOTĀCIJA

Viktorijas laikmets ir iedvesmojis Neoviktoriāņu žanra tapšanu literatūrā. Šis žanrs guva popularitāti 20. gs. beigās, pateicoties A.S. Bajetas romānam “Apsēstība” (1990), kas ieguvis Bukera balvu. “Apsēstību” veido divi sižeti, kas noris paralēlās laika plaknēs. Mūsdienu sižets atspoguļo divu literatūras pētnieku centienus gūt pierādījumus divu slaveno Viktorijas laikmeta dzejnieku mīlas sakaram. Maģistra darbs pēta A.S. Bajetas interpretēto Merlina un Vivjenas viduslaiku mītu un tā būtisko nozīmi romānā “Apsēstība”, kā arī atsauces uz mītu A.S. Bajetas romānā “Jaunava Dārzā” (1978). Maģistra darbs apskata stāstu par Merlina gūstu kā iekāres un saprāta pretstatu, kā arī atklāj zināšanas kā varas ieguves avotu.

Atslēgas vārdi: Bajeta, „Apsēstība”, mīts, Viktoriāņu, Neoviktoriāņu, Merlins, Vivjena

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. VICTORIAN SEXUALITY AND THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN.....	4
1.1. Silence and Discourse.....	4
1.2. The Victorian Perspectives on the Differences between Men and Women.....	6
1.3. The Roles of the Victorian Woman.....	7
1.4. The Victorian Marriage.....	9
1.5. Victorian Sexuality and the Myth of Merlin and Vivien.....	10
2. THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES.....	11
2.1. Estoire de Merlin.....	14
2.2. Other Myths and Their Differences in Relation to Estoire de Merlin.....	16
2.3. Similarities and Differences between the Versions of the Myth.....	18
3. VICTORIAN READINGS OF THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN.....	20
4. THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN IN A.S. BYATT'S POSSESSION.....	24
4.1. Merlin and Vivien in <i>Possession</i>	25
4.2. Reason versus Desire.....	27
4.3. Byatt's Depiction of the Victorian Marriage.....	31
4.4. La Motte's Relationship with Blanche Glover in <i>Possession</i>	33
4.5. The 20th Century Storyline: Roland and Maud.....	36
5. THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN IN A.S. BYATT'S THE VIRGIN IN THE GARDEN.....	39
5.1. Frederica as Vivien and Alexander as Merlin.....	40
5.2. Knowledge as Power.....	41
6. A.S. BYATT'S <i>POSSESSION</i> AS A NEO-VICTORIAN WORK OF FICTION.....	44
6.1. The Fascination with the Victorian Era and A.S. Byatt's <i>Possession</i>	46
7. INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE WORKS OF A.S. BYATT.....	50
CONCLUSION.....	53
The Myth of Merlin and Vivien in Victorian Culture and the Works of A.S. Byatt.....	55
THESES	55
REFERENCES.....	57

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era has been a source of fascination and inspiration for authors of literary works since the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, which marks the end of the Victorian age. The emergence of the neo-Victorian genre in literature and its rise to prominence thanks to such authors as A.S. Byatt, Sarah Waters and Graham Swift in the latter half of the 20th century, has provided readers with literary works that strive to re-invent the Victorian era.

A.S. Byatt is credited with the popularization of the neo-Victorian genre with her Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession* (1990), which is praised for its use of pastiche of the 19th century poetry and elements of the epistolary genre. *Possession* (1990) deals with two parallel storylines. In the 1980s two literary scholars go on a quest to find traces of a secret love affair of the fictional Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel La Motte. The Victorian storyline follows the beginning and eventual decline of the affair between Ash and La Motte. The storylines of the Victorian and late 20th century converge as the blossoming romance between the researchers, Roland and Maud, mirrors the passionate love story of Ash and La Motte.

A.S. Byatt uses the medieval Arthurian myth of Merlin's capture by the beautiful maiden Vivien. Despite being a powerful wielder of magic, Merlin succumbs to his lust for Vivien and promises to teach her magic in exchange for her love. Vivien accepts Merlin's offer, hungry for his knowledge and power, however, the maiden uses Merlin's magic against him and imprisons him in an invisible enclosure from which he may never escape. Though there are several variations of the myth of Merlin and Vivien, the struggle between knowledge and passion, and the idea of knowledge as a key to power lies at the heart of the tale.

The myth of Merlin and Vivien attracted the attention of Victorian poets and artists because the seduction of the old, wise man by the beautiful, cunning maiden holds a special significance for the Victorians. The authors, literary critics and the readership of the 21st century traditionally view the Victorians as sexually repressed. The particular appeal that the myth of Merlin and Vivien had for the Victorians lies in the tale's depiction of passion overpowering rationality.

The allusions to the myth of Merlin and Vivien can also be found in A.S. Byatt's earlier novel *The Virgin in the Garden*. The novel is set in the 1950s and follows the lives of the Potter family, specifically, Frederica Potter: a precocious and egocentric teenager, eager to make her mark on the world. Frederica is desperately in love with her father's colleague, teacher Alexander Wedderburn. Throughout *The Virgin in the Garden* Frederica attempts to attract Alexander's love and attention while he wants nothing to do with her. Their relationship parallels the myth of Merlin and Vivien as Alexander represents the older man who is seduced against his better judgment by Frederica as Vivien.

The goal of the present Master's Thesis is to examine the re-interpretations of the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien in the Victorian era and in A.S. Byatt's novels.

To reach the goal of the master thesis, the following research questions have been set:

- 1) How do the medieval versions of the myth of Merlin and Vivien vary?
- 2) Why was the myth of Merlin and Vivien popular in the Victorian culture?
- 3) What was the attitude of the Victorians towards the relationships of men and women?
- 4) How can neo-Victorian literature be characterized?
- 5) What is the significance of intertextuality in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*?
- 7) How is the myth of Merlin and Vivien used in A.S. Byatt's novels?

To answer the questions the following **enabling objectives** have been formulated:

- 1) to research the relevant theoretical material on the myth of Merlin and Vivien, its Victorian interpretations, neo-Victorian literature and A.S. Byatt's novels.
- 2) to examine Victorian attitudes towards sexuality on the basis of relevant theoretical material.
- 3) to analyze the myth of Vivien and Merlin in the medieval times.
- 4) to compare the various versions of the myth of Vivien and Merlin.
- 5) to analyze the interpretations of the myth of Merlin and Vivien in the Victorian era.
- 6) to establish the importance of the myth of Merlin and Vivien in the works of A.S. Byatt.
- 7) to examine A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession* as a neo-Victorian work of fiction.

To reach the enabling objectives, the current Master's Thesis has used the methodology of mythology and myth criticism, intertextuality and neo-Victorian literature. **The first chapter** of the present Master's Thesis discusses the Victorian attitudes and issues with sexuality; the **second chapter** describes the varieties of the medieval myth of Merlin

and Vivien, whereas the **third chapter** shows the Victorian interpretation of the medieval myth. The **fourth chapter** aims to show A.S. Byatt's interpretation of the tale of Merlin's capture by Vivien in her novel *Possession*, while the **fifth chapter** discusses the allusions to the myth of Merlin and Vivien in Byatt's earlier work *The Virgin in the Garden*. The **sixth chapter** of the Master's Thesis describes A.S. Byatt's novel as belonging to the neo-Victorian genre; the **seventh chapter** provides examples of Byatt's use of intertextuality in *Possession*. Finally, the Master's Thesis offers **conclusions**, which have been made based on the research.

1. VICTORIAN SEXUALITY AND THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN

Victorians have notoriously been synonymous with sexual repression for decades; it is an idea that has settled deep within the Western mind and has often given a false representation of Victorians as prudes, who repressed all sexual instinct or desire and had little to no knowledge of their own sexualities (Lee, 1997). However, the Victorians had ample insight into intimate relations and dealt with these as part of their daily lives, admittedly, in a secretive and inhibited way (Ibid.).

According to Foucault, the perception of sexuality in the Victorian era was vastly different from what it had been in the in the 17th century when people displayed sexual interest and referred to the functions of their bodies with little discomfort (Foucault, 1990: 3). The attitude towards sexuality of the 17th century gradually became unacceptable in the Age of Enlightenment and then, with the rise of the Victorian bourgeoisie, the view of sexuality altered completely. The Victorians used a variety of restrictive strategies to suppress and govern sexuality. Much of the struggle with sexuality had to do with changing the discourse on sexual matters or enforcing silence.

1.1. Silence and Discourse

In order to deal with the topic of sexuality, the Victorians tried to silence unwelcome discourse on sex by feigning ignorance on all matters pertaining to it: “there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know” (Foucault, 1990: 4). Language allowed the issues of sexuality to ‘materialize’; therefore, it became imperative to control language, thus it became “more difficult and more costly” to call sex by its name in the 19th century (Foucault, 1990: 15).

However, these tactics did not erase the discourse on sex, but rather created new ways in which sex was discussed and dealt with. Logan asserts that the idea of the Victorians’ extreme sexual repression is a myth cultivated in our own modern culture (1995: 293). Besides the particular discourse on sexuality that arose from the Victorian attempts to suppress it, silence in discourse was equally important. There are many types of silences and

they are “an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault, 1990: 27). The nature of silence varies in any situation due to its cause and although the Victorians did not wish to approach the subject of sex directly, it was implicitly manifested in various aspects of life such as discourse on healthcare, politics, science and biology.

The Victorian preoccupation with sexual matters is connected with the Age of Enlightenment which sought to produce a systematized discourse in order to classify and dissect sex as a concept for scientific purposes (Foucault, 1990: 24). Understanding sex was important because it was necessary to observe how it functions within the population and influences birthrates, sterility, fertility, illegitimate births, contraception etc. (Ibid.:26). The government had to be aware of the sexual practices of its citizens and they in turn had to know how to control their sexual behavior (Ibid.). Sex was placed in a “binary system” of “licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden” (Ibid.: 79).

The Victorian government took a particular interest in the sexual lives of its citizens because sex affected other areas of life. The rise of capitalism saw that the workforce was expected to use their bodies for labor in order to produce profit, not for sexual pleasure and gratification (Foucault, 1990: 5). The purpose of sex was solely reproduction and increasing the labor force (Ibid.).

However, the steady rise in birthrate was also highly alarming when it concerned people of the lower and working classes. Although sex was necessary and bourgeois families were expected to continue their line, the government saw the procreation of the working and lower classes as problematic (Clark, 2008: 125).

People were having more sex out of wedlock, which produced a high number of illegitimate children (Clark, 2008: 124). These children were the chief concern of “moralists and policy makers” as they were expected to “become a burden on the state” (Ibid.). As a result, the responsibility for these effects in society was placed on women, who were accused of being temptresses (Ibid.). Women were seen as the architects of their own misfortunes, even more so: their rampant sexuality was the cause of a strain on society itself.

The ‘deviant’ sexual desire of the Victorians and the effects of industrialization on the lower classes fostered prostitution. According to Clark, due to the ineffectiveness of the police in dealing with prostitutes, governments and philanthropists attempted to reform the “fallen woman” through specialized institutions, however these were largely unsuccessful due to the fundamental lack of understanding of how best to aid these individuals (Clark,

2008: 130). The lack of understanding of women who had fallen on hard times was largely due to an erroneous interpretation of the differences between the two sexes.

1.2. The Victorian Perspectives on the Differences between Men and Women

The patriarchal Victorian society spent a considerable amount of time and energy trying to classify human beings and many of those resources were devoted to the study of women. Science tried to explain why women are completely different from men and which of these differences meant that women must ‘naturally’ be subjugated by men.

The Victorians saw the woman as “lag[ging] behind men much as ‘primitive people’ lagged behind Europeans” in body and intellect; it was considered that women remain as children throughout their lives (Russett, 1989: 11). The Victorians presumed that men were “active agents, who expanded energy” and women were passive and conserved it, thus they were considered nurturing to the male (Lee, 1997). Women had to conserve their energy for reproduction (Russett, 1989: 11). Darwin’s theory of natural selection saw the woman’s fragility as “advantageous in finding mates” because men and women were expected to desire the opposite in a mate (Ibid.: 12).

This type of reasoning was used to divide men and women into separate spheres. Men could direct their energy towards other pursuits such as getting involved in the public spheres of art, education and politics, because their role as fertilizers required much less energy than that of the women who had to endure pregnancy, childbirth as well as the rearing of children. Women were therefore thought to be frail and it was assumed they had no energy left over to invest in other areas of life (Lee, 1997).

The pseudo-science of phrenology tried to explain the intellectual strengths and weaknesses, among other characteristics of human beings, by examining the shape of a person’s skull and their physiognomy (Online 1). Phrenology helped establish the belief that there were innate differences in the brains of men and women (Russett, 1989: 18). It was considered that women were guided by feeling and men by rationality (Ibid.:18-19). All of these factors created the sense that women cannot assume the same roles in society as men and even more so, that the woman required governance and supervision by man: from her father to her husband, as well as brothers, doctors and government officials who determined what was best for her.

Even physically women were seen as child-like (Russett, 1989: 28). The woman's menstruation cycle was seen as a "primal curse" and regarded as one of the main reasons why it was obvious women could not aspire to any other sphere outside of domesticity (Ibid.:30).

1.3. The Roles of the Victorian Woman

There was a significant difference between the treatment of the sexuality of Victorian women and men: women were categorized according to their status of either being married or unmarried, both of which laid out a strict framework that defined their usefulness or danger to society. If a woman did not follow the necessary standards and prescriptions of society by following the "angel ideology", she became undesirable and unwelcome - a "fallen woman". A "fallen woman" was one who committed adultery or had sex out of wedlock or worked as a prostitute. The prostitute provided services which were arguably made extremely necessary by Victorian society (Logan, 1995: 295) but she was condemned and shunned nonetheless. Such a woman was condemned even more if her sexual exploits resulted in an illegitimate pregnancy (Ibid.).

Another problematic type of woman was the spinster who resided somewhere between the desired married angel with her steady and necessary position in society and the equally necessary, although publicly rejected and despised prostitute, the spinster could be seen as an anomaly (Ibid.). She lived for no one but herself and thus did not generate any value or contribute to the greater good of society.

An unmarried woman was a threat to the social structure due to "her potential for sexual deviance" (Ibid.). Both spinsters and prostitutes alike were considered deviants since spinsters were not providing any "usefulness" by remaining unwed. Womanhood was first and foremost defined by maternity (Russett, 1989: 43). Spinsters did not assimilate into the alliance model of the family and thus did not produce any offspring. Meanwhile, prostitutes took part in sexual relations without the intent to procreate yet often produced illegitimate and socially vulnerable offspring (Clark, 2008: 130). The prostitute introduced a worrisome element of danger into the stability and respectability of the Victorian family. The prostitute's illegitimate children were burdensome for the state and the Victorian "conscience" (Logan, 1995: 296).

The economic circumstances of the prostitute were also troublesome due to the fact that a woman who earns (in whatever way or no matter how much) money loosens her bonds of dependability and is less subjugated to the control of a man (Ibid.). Although it was highly common for most men to have sex with prostitutes, it was still considered taboo and had to remain a “secretive” and “shameful” matter that people did not speak of (Clark, 2008: 129).

Remaining a spinster presented a number of challenges for the woman, starting with financial struggle and dependency. Unless the woman could provide some services to earn a living or had an allowance or inheritance, she could not hope to live independently. Considering the extremely limited array of employment opportunities, a woman usually had no way of earning a living. The spinster also had to suffer the general disdain of society. However, Logan argues that although this position of “celibacy” is often interpreted in the 20th century as “female silencing,” that is as a position of powerlessness, it can be considered a form of the woman’s self-empowerment (Logan, 1995: 301). The woman’s “celibacy” can be interpreted “as less of a denial of sexuality than as an active protest against female sexual stereotypes,” (Ibid.). Women were a cause of constant anxiety to Victorian society.

A different prism of the woman’s sexuality which holds a significant meaning for A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* is that of female attitudes towards one another. There is a view that the relationships between women could be sensual and sexual without being considered deviant. The images in Victorian women’s magazines suggest that “Victorian commodity culture incited an erotic appetite for femininity in women, framed spectacular images of women for a female gaze, and prompted women’s fantasies about dominating a woman or submitting to one” (Marcus, 2007: 112). This “female homoeroticism” was not presented as lesbianism which would be juxtaposed to heterosexuality but rather considered perfectly normal in female relationships (Ibid.). In the Victorian era, women were able to direct their desire towards other women through close friendships, “[l]ike men, women direct their desires at both masculine and feminine objects” (Ibid.: 115).

When it came to the woman’s sexuality and relationships with men, the Victorian woman was seen either as a passive, frail creature with little to no desire for sex or as an abnormally sexual and “wicked” being. From one point of view, as a descendent of Eve she embodies sin, forever casting man into the perils of temptation; however, she is expected only to project these dangerous desires onto a man and have no inclination for sex herself.

While it was even stated that from a medical perspective husbands should aim to please their wives sexually, it was at the same time argued by doctors that sex was an unenjoyable burden for women and she was not expected to experience any pleasure (Clark, 2008: 139).

1.4.The Victorian Marriage

Victorian life was greatly influenced by the constant control of sexual discourse regarding the institution of marriage. Marriage remained in a constant vice-tight grip of “rules and recommendations”, governed and controlled by a society, which required the marriage to produce tangible results in the form of offspring (Foucault, 1990: 37). Marriage was placed under a microscope: it was not a private matter, nor was sex. It was the public’s concern whether or not a marriage was functioning successfully. Family was therefore to be seen as an alliance that keeps sexuality under control and allows it to be expressed within a certain set of rules and practices (Ibid.: 104-105).

A woman’s worth was measured by her “idleness” as she moved from her father’s household into her husband’s (Logan, 1995: 294). Passivity was attractive and desirable, creating unfulfillable expectations for a large portion of the women in Victorian society. The woman was a sexually desirable object as long as she remained within an “ornamental” role in a household (Ibid.). However, this was an unrealistic and improbable model for a woman outside of the upper-class (Ibid.). It was necessary for women of the lower and working classes to fulfill more active roles in day-to-day life (Ibid.).

The middle-class woman was expected to remain nearly entirely ignorant about sexual discourse and was “not supposed to have access to sexual knowledge” (Clark, 2008: 139). The most telling quotation about this view of the Victorian consensus that carnal relations were a woman’s cross to bear is the iconic line presented in Degler (1974: 1467) of a mother’s advice to her daughter for her wedding night: “Lie still and think of the Empire”.

Victorian scientists were certain that men were naturally partial to sexual love while in women the love of children was predominant (Russett: 1989:19). It was generally agreed that women did not experience sexual instinct to the degree that it existed in men; there were doubts if women experienced any sexual desire at all (Ibid.:44).

A study conducted by Doctor Harry Campbell in 1891 attempted to discover how much sexual desire women possessed. The doctor’s modesty forbade him to question women

directly so he turned to working class men who described the sexualities of their wives: “[o]f fifty-two respondents, only twelve reported the presence of any sexual feeling at all in their wives prior to marriage; forty said it had been completely absent” (Ibid.), some stated that their wives never experienced any sexual desire whatsoever.

This lead Campbell to believe that women could “conceive and bear children perfectly well with no arousal at all” (Ibid.). It could also be concluded that the women who turned to prostitution were those with a stronger sexual instinct (Ibid.).

1.5. Victorian Sexuality and the Myth of Merlin and Vivien

The issues of sexuality which complicated the relationship between women and men in the Victorian era appeared in literature and art. Merlin and Vivien gained influence in Victorian literature and art because it described the power struggle between the two sexes, the woman’s ‘wickedness’ due to her inherent seductiveness and society’s fear of the ‘fallen woman’. The Victorian interpretation of the myth which stems from Malory’s text is significantly different from the original myth of Merlin and Vivien which appears in *Estoire Merlin*. The changes in the interpretation of the myth were influenced by the Victorian ideology. Victorian view of sexuality and the differences between the sexes created a distinctly negative evaluation of Vivien in Victorian art and literature.

2. THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The progress of industrialization and advances in science in the Victorian era presented people with both advantages and challenges. Though the invention of new technologies such as the railroad and telegraph had improved the quality of life for some, technological development also widened the social gap between the rising middle class and the lower and working classes. While the Victorian business-owning middle class reaped the benefits of industrialization, the factory workers and the unemployed experienced a steep decline in living conditions. The shift from agricultural to rural societies had flooded cities with people, which caused an influx in slums. Rampant crime, prostitution and child labor were troubling side effects of progress in the cities.

Besides the issues brought on by industrialization, the Victorians also experienced a change in attitude towards God and religion due to scientific discoveries. Darwin's theories of the origin of man created a new understanding of the world which problematized Victorian faith.

Although authors of the Victorian era addressed the social and moral issues in their works, they also sought escape from the woes of modern life in the medieval legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. The Victorians admired the code of chivalry and honor that presided in the Arthurian myth and regarded it as an ideal for society to strive for.

The cycle of Arthurian legends provided ample inspiration for artists, one of the most popular myths being that of Merlin and Vivien. The myth was depicted in various artworks like that of the painter Edward Burne-Jones, as well as in photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron which were produced as illustrations for Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. The basic premise of the myth is that of the wise seer Merlin – advisor to King Arthur – falling prey to his passion for a beautiful maiden, sometimes called Vivien, Vivian or Nimue, among others. Merlin instructs the maiden in the art of magic, which she ultimately uses against him, exploiting his desire. The Victorians were fascinated with the myth because of its depiction of the relationship between man and woman, reason and sexual desire and the dangers posed by the seductive female.

Merlin is an important figure in the cycle of legends about King Arthur as he guides Arthur towards his ascension to power and uses his abilities of premonition to aid him. The legend of Merlin originates in the medieval Celtic myth of Myrddin, a madman with the power to foretell the future (Online 2). The chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth adopted the legend of Myrddin for his work *Prophetiae Merlini* and later for the poem *Vita Merlini* (Littleton, et al. 1995: 88).

The Vulgate cycle, also known as the *Prose Lancelot*, is a 13th century assortment of Arthurian romances written in French and features a separate tale of Merlin which is based on the 13th century French poet Robert Borron's poem about the seer reworked into prose (Online 3). The 15th century English writer Thomas Malory used the Vulgate Cycle and the post-Vulgate romance to craft the English prose of *Le Morte Darthur* (Ibid.). This compilation of the cycles of Arthurian legends would go on to capture the imagination and fascination of the Victorians. The story of Merlin's capture and disappearance from the courtly world first appears in the medieval text of *Estoire Merlin* in the Vulgate Cycle as well as in an earlier version of the story of *Lancelot – the Non-Cyclical Lancelot* (1215-20) (Larrington, 2006: 5).

Although there are numerous versions of the myth of Merlin's capture, there are elements which remain consistent throughout the tales. Merlin is depicted as a wise, old man of great value to Arthur and Camelot because he serves as a guide and advisor. Merlin's old age underlines his experience and wisdom which makes his susceptibility to the danger of a seductive young woman seem unlikely. It is therefore all the more unexpected when the seer is overcome by his passion which leads to his demise.

In every version of the myth he is a man with extraordinary abilities – he can predict future events and wields magical power which he can use at will. Merlin's ability to use magic is attributed to his parentage as he was fathered by a demon. In some of the myths Merlin is speedily baptized so that he is left endowed with special power which is not tainted by evil. However, in other myths Merlin exhibits negative characteristics such as a particular lustfulness which is blamed on his half-demonic nature.

The maiden in the variations of Merlin's myth is not as consistent as the sage himself. The age of the maiden varies significantly as in some myths Merlin first meets her as a small girl whereas in others she is already a full grown woman. Vivien (as she is referred to in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*) is always characterized as a maiden of great beauty as

well as someone with a strong interest in acquiring knowledge, specifically of the magical variety that Merlin possesses. In medieval texts, magical knowledge is reserved for the male domain and interpreted as daemonic in women so they are denied access to it (Larrington, 2006: 9-11). However, Vivien is not the only woman seeking to obtain magical power; Morgan La Fey, the Dame d'Avalon and the Lady of the Lake are all taught magic by Merlin in *Prophesies de Merlin*.

In most versions of the myth Vivien is associated with the Lady of the Lake who is the foster mother of Lancelot (Online 4). The combination and separation of Vivien and the Lady in the myths has been cause of confusion among scholars. In some myths Vivien becomes the Lady after she has imprisoned Merlin, in others these are wholly separate figures while there are those that present several Ladies of the Lake.

Vivien is not always the reason behind Merlin's disappearance, in Robert de Boron's 13th century romance *Didot Perceval* (Skeels ed. and trans., 1966) and in the 13th century prose *Livre d'Artus* (Larrington, 2006: 98) Merlin makes a decision to leave courtly life and live out his days in solitude. However, the medieval myths to follow expand the tale of Merlin's disappearance and Vivien appears as the reason for it in some form.

Each version of the myth offers an array of differences in the dynamic between the sorcerer and the maiden, however, their relationship is always characterized by an imbalance of power. As part of each myth, Merlin encounters Vivien and either falls in love with her or is overcome with lust. Vivien agrees to be either his companion or lover in exchange for instruction in magical arts. However, there are differences in this arrangement from one version of the myth to another.

When the maiden has received Merlin's end of the bargain to teach her magic, it leaves her at liberty to choose how to proceed with hers - she may decide to trick him out of either hatred, boredom or spite, and to flee, or she may choose to capture him, only to stay with him on her own terms. The motivation for Vivien's capture of Merlin may differ in each myth, however, "the pattern of the sage turned fool for love remains constant" (Larrington, 2006: 99). Medieval scholar Geraldine Heng sees this as an episode exuding irony over the trope of courtly love (2000: 102). Merlin performs as a knight would for his lady and Vivien controls him through "sexual withholding" which provides the story with either "humor or pathos" as it can thus be evaluated as a sort of caricature of chivalry (Ibid.). Vivien acquiring magical power is an unexpected turn of events for any version of the myth,

especially since Merlin expects her to eventually submit to his advances and sexual desire (Ibid.: 103).

Although Merlin's students are shown as clever, skilled and powerful in magical arts, none of the women assume his role and position as an adviser at Arthur's court (Larrington, 2006: 100). Though Vivien proves herself to be cleverer, and more cunning than her teacher, her gender alone prevents her from assuming Merlin's role at court. However, as Heng states, Vivien does not share Merlin's concern for Arthur's realm, but is rather focused on her own interests and priorities, thus she sometimes appears in order to aid others only when it is vitally necessary for the text, otherwise staying out of mundane matters concerning the Arthurian world (2000: 105).

2.1. *Estoire de Merlin*

In *Estoire de Merlin*, also known as *Prose Merlin*, is the first instance of the appearance of the myth of Merlin's imprisonment by a beautiful maiden to whom he teaches magic. Merlin is fully aware of his fate, yet when he meets Vivien (called Nimiane in *Estoire de Merlin*), he is compelled by her great beauty to make her acquaintance anyway:

“Whan Merlin hir saugh he be-hilde hir moche, and a-vised hir well er he spake eny worde, and thought that a moche fole were he, yef he slepte so in his synne to lese his witte and his connyng for to haue the deduyt of a mayden, and hym-self shamed, and god to lese and displese. And whan he hadde longe thought, he hir salued” (Wheatley ed., 1838-1917: 308-309) (When Merlin saw her, he beheld her for a long time/intensely, and observed her without speaking, and thought himself a great fool if he were to sleep so in his sin, to lose his wits and his skill to have the delight of a maiden, and himself shamed, and to lose and displease God. And when he had long thought, he greeted her.)

The composition of these lines highlights the absurdity of his actions: Merlin lists serious consequences that will befall him, however, the next utterance delivers the matter-of-fact salutation to Vivien, sealing his fate. The abrupt greeting at the end of the passage shows that all of Merlin's contemplation has been for nothing, the events have already been set in motion as soon as he has seen the maiden. Although the drawbacks and dangers of Merlin befriending the maiden are apparent, there is nothing he can do but accept the outcome. Merlin's decision not to attempt to stray from the course of his destiny underlines its inevitability. Despite Merlin's great power and wisdom, he is helpless when confronted with love and desire for a woman: passion overpowers rationality.

Merlin impresses the maiden with displays of his magic, conjuring up knights and maidens who dance and sing for her entertainment (Ibid.: 310). Vivien is amazed at the extravagant display and promises to be Merlin's love; however, as Merlin is about to leave, she asks him, "feire frende, shull ye not teche me firste some of youre pleyes?" (Ibid.: 312) (fair friend, shall you not teach me first some of your games?), to which Merlin agrees. Vivien is not content with being merely a spectator, she wishes to possess Merlin's power so she lays claim to a sphere of knowledge that is not meant for her.

The sage wishes to be certain that "youre love shall be myn, and ye also for to do my plesier of what I will" (Ibid.) (your love shall be mine and you will do what I wish for my pleasure). Their relationship is thus an exchange of services based on a mutual agreement – knowledge for love/sex, though this condition is not completely fulfilled on Vivien's part. Vivien does not give up her virginity to Merlin and instead uses magic to make him fall asleep as a precaution against his sexual advances (Ibid.: 634).

Merlin's visits to Vivien are interwoven into the adventures he takes part in throughout *Estoire de Merlin*; he takes detours from his missions and adventures in service of Arthur to teach Vivien magic and to enjoy her company. When the time of his impending imprisonment arrives, Merlin delivers a bitter farewell to Arthur, thus showing that his withdrawal from the courtly world is difficult and beyond his control (Ibid.: 680).

Although it is stated at the beginning of the myth of Merlin and Vivien in *Estoire de Merlin* that the sage cannot escape his fate, it is added at the end that he does not wish to thwart Vivien's plans for him, as he states:

"for so haue I made hir couenaunt, and also I am so supprised with hir love, that I may me not with-drawen; and I haue her taught and lerned all the witte and connyng that she can, and yet shall she lerne more, for I may not hir with-sein ne it disturie" (Ibid.: 680 – 681) (for such is the agreement I have made with her and also I am so overcome with love for her that I may not withdraw myself; and I have taught her all the knowledge and skill she could have, and yet she shall learn more, for I may not withhold it from her, nor avert it).

Vivien imprisons Merlin in order to reverse their roles: before, Merlin was the one visiting her sporadically due to his obligations in Arthur's realm and Vivien was reduced to a static position (Fabry-Tehranchi, 2006). Vivien asks Merlin to teach her the enchantment that may capture a person in a magical space and Merlin tells her that although he is aware of her intentions, he is willing to comply with her wishes (Wheatley ed., 1838-1917: 681). Vivien relentlessly convinces him of her love, saying that he is her only joy and she wishes only for them to be together forever (Ibid.). When Vivien comes into possession of the spell,

she uses it on Merlin while he's asleep under a white hawthorn bush and when Merlin awakes, he is in awe at Vivien's skill: "hym semed he was in the feirest tour of the worlde, and the moste stronge, and fonde hym leide in the feirest place that euer he lay be-forn" (It seemed to him he was in the fairest tower of the world, and the most strong, and he found himself laid in the fairest place in which he had ever lain before) (Ibid.: 682).

Thus the student has surpassed the master: though Merlin had to teach Vivien the enchantment, her talent surprises him. Vivien promises to be with Merlin and keeps her promise, "she hym hilde wele couenaunt, ffor fewe hours ther were of the nyght ne of the day but she was with hym (...) but she wente in and oute whan she wolde" (she kept her word willingly to him, for few hours there were of the night or day that she was not with him) (Ibid.). Her genuine love for Merlin is emphasized as the reason for her decision to imprison him; it is an act that is driven by passion and possessiveness, rather than malice. Vivien does not wish to leave Merlin disempowered, her aim is to secure him for her own ends while she herself retains complete freedom to come and go as she pleases. Vivien's freedom of movement is an important change from her previous static position in which she waited for Merlin to visit her whenever he was available because it grants her independence uncharacteristic of women in the middle ages.

Vivien recognizes that she and Merlin cannot exist as equals within the courtly world – their relationship is not normal within the medieval structure. If Vivien were to engage in a sexual relationship with Merlin before his imprisonment, she would expose herself to danger and become vulnerable as an unmarried woman; therefore, another, separate space is needed so the two can have equal footing (Larrington, 2006: 103). However, as Vivien's capture of Merlin in *Estoire de Merlin* robs Arthur's court of Merlin as a valuable asset, Vivien is depicted progressively negatively in the versions of the myth of Vivien and Merlin that follow (Online 4).

2.2. Other Myths and Their Differences in Relation to *Estoire de Merlin*

In *Prose Lancelot*, Vivien (under the name Niniane) is fused together with the Lady of the Lake whose primary role is to bring up the knight Lancelot (Norris, 2010). Her duty as a foster mother to Lancelot is discussed at length in the *Prose Lancelot*, much more so than her relationship with Merlin and his imprisonment (Online 4). Viviane's maternal role

emphasizes her „value” in the text and allows her to continue to be a significant part of it, despite her transgressions against Merlin. The texts in which Vivien is not responsible for caring for Lancelot, she is depicted more negatively – her role in the myths where she does not fulfil maternal duties is solely that of a trickster who fools Merlin into parting with his knowledge.

Arthurian scholars Littleton and Malcor (1995) interpret Merlin and the Lady of the Lake as connected in the sense that the Lady serves as a “reflection” of the sage. Littleton and Malcor (Ibid.) point out parallels between the two figures as both Merlin and the Lady of the Lake are advisors, powerful wielders of magic and caregivers: Merlin assists Arthur in becoming the king and the Lady helps Lancelot train to become a great knight.

The Merlin of the *Prose Lancelot* is not baptized as he was in *Estoire de Merlin* therefore he inherits some characteristics associated with evil and the daemonic – in this tale he is a lustful old man who is rightfully outwitted by Vivien for trying to take her virginity. In the middle ages the myth can be read as Vivien’s actions are all aimed towards protecting her chastity and thus are to be considered justifiable, even if her arrangement with Merlin to trade sex for knowledge was based on false pretenses. Similarly, in the *Livre d’Artus* Vivien (Niniane in this tale) uses Magic to make Merlin fall into an enchanted sleep to protect herself from unwelcome advances.

Unlike the original *Estoire de Merlin*, the Merlin of *Morte Darthur* is neither courtly nor patient with Vivien. Merlin tries to make her give in to his sexual advances which causes the maiden (Nenyve in this tale) to seek out ways to rid herself of him. Merlin is trapped under a stone and perishes as a punishment for his lustful nature.

In the prose of *Suite du Merlin*, Vivien (named Niviene in this version) does not reciprocate Merlin’s love for her, but is repulsed by his advances and entombs him after he has taught her his magic in order to be rid of the sage’s tiresome attempts to gain her affections (Bogdanow, 1966). Merlin is also despised by Vivien in *Prophesies de Merlin* although no sufficient reason is given for her attitude (Goodrich, 2003).

The version of the myth in *Livre d’Artus* presents a new dimension to Merlin and Vivien’s relationship because the maiden has a relationship with another man. Merlin finds out about the affair and gets involved in a sexual relationship with Morgan Le Fey to whom he also teaches magic. Vivien and Merlin rekindle their relationship before she disappears from the tale (Ibid.).

The addition of other lovers for Merlin and Vivien changes the dynamic of their relationship in the *Livre d'Artus* from the other versions of the myth, particularly the *Estoire de Merlin* on which the *Livre d'Artus* is based. The tale is usually concluded with Merlin's capture or demise but in the *Livre d'Artus* his relationship with Vivien falls apart due to her infidelity and eventual disappearance. If the moral of the previous versions of the myth is arguably that the desire for beautiful women can make fools of even the wisest of men, the *Livre d'Artus* warns against women in a different capacity. The myth reminds the medieval reader of the woman's fickle nature and warns against infidelity.

2.3. Similarities and Differences between the Versions of the Myth

There are significant differences in each of the myths in how Merlin and Vivien meet, what deal they broker and how their relationship develops in order to arrive at the end where Merlin usually meets his imprisonment or doom. Vivien's choice to imprison her mentor is positioned as either justifiable or diabolical depending on Merlin's intentions.

In the versions of the tale where Merlin displays daemonic characteristics such as lustfulness, Vivien fears for the preservation of her virginity and attempts to protect it. Therefore, to the medieval reader, Vivien's concerns justify her decision to either imprison the sage or leave him to die. Merlin's daemonic parentage is emphasized in the tales in which he is particularly lecherous. The sage's daemonic origins are blamed for his pursuit of Vivien's virginity therefore sexuality is connected with evil in the medieval myths.

Merlin's parentage brings out disgust and fear in Vivien in several of the myths even in those where he does not pose a threat to her chastity. Vivien often uses sleep and trickery in the myths to convince Merlin that they have been sexually intimate. Sleep renders Merlin helpless and inactive – it is the only way Vivien can overpower him. Sleep can symbolically stand for 'the eternal sleep' – death; although Merlin's imprisonment does not always lead to his death, it renders him as good as dead to Arthur's realm since he can no longer be of any use to the courtly world. It also signifies his state of unawareness of Vivien's trickery and dislike for him as well as his carelessness in disclosing his secrets as opposed to the maiden's cunning.

In the myth of Merlin and Vivien of the middle ages, the hunger for knowledge in a woman is the catalyst which sets the rest of the events into motion. Vivien's thirst for

knowledge fuels the plot alongside Merlin's lust and ultimately leads to his demise. Merlin's desire for Vivien makes him an easy prey for the maiden's own agenda of acquiring magical power. The myths warn the readership of the middle ages against lust, passion and the cunning woman who tries to take part in a world that is restricted to her. Notably, the readership of the Middle Ages were educated men: either members of the clergy or the nobility. The educated few who were capable of reading were the target audience of the Arthurian myth; educated and literate women were a rarity. However, Vivien in *Estoire de Merlin* is such a woman: she is literate and educated which is evident in the episode where she writes down the first spell Merlin teaches her onto a piece of parchment (Wheatley ed., 1838-1917).

Vivien's prior education fuels her desire for more knowledge and equality with educated men. Though Vivien is not characterized negatively in *Estoire de Merlin*, she is a warning of the dangers of women who break free from the conventions of the society of the Middle Ages. This fear of the educated woman is emphasized in Victorian readings of the medieval myth.

3. VICTORIAN READINGS OF THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN

The Victorian poets and artists were inspired by Malory's *Morte Darthur*, though an 1817 edition by Southey featured an introduction that compiled several other versions of the myth. Additions to Southey's edition from *Estoire de Merlin* and *Propheesies de Merlin* shaped the Victorians' perception of Vivien more so than the original text of *Morte Darthur*. There was also a growing interest in Arthurian myths in France due to Breton nationalism.

Vivien captivated the Victorians more than any other female character in the cycle of Arthurian myths because of her relationship with Merlin. The tale of the wise old man being seduced by a beautiful young woman to hand over secret knowledge struck a chord with Victorians. The myth describes the triumph of passion and sexuality over rationality and experience.

Matthew Arnold was the first among the great Victorian poets who featured Vivien as a character in his poem *Tristram and Iseult* (1852). Featured as an embedded story, Arnold's version of the myth shows Vivien as a shameless trickster who uses Merlin for her own gain and then abandons him after his capture. The Vivien presented in this text is without regret, nor does she harbor any warm feeling towards Merlin. It is not implied that she would eventually return to the prisoner as she does in some of the medieval versions of the tale. Vivien's beauty is blamed for Merlin's carelessness and his desire to cater to her wishes,

She look'd so witching fair, that learned wight
Forgot his craft, and his best wits took flight;
And he grew fond, and eager to obey
His mistress, use her empire as she may.
(Arnold, 1852: 91 – 114)

Merlin falls into a sleep, described as “more like death, so deep” (Ibid.) which foreshadows the events that follow and lead to his demise. Vivien seizes the opportunity to cast a charm on the unsuspecting seer. Although Merlin is trapped forever, Vivien has obtained complete freedom: “(...) she herself whither she will can rove” (Ibid.). The only reason that is given for Vivien's betrayal of Merlin's devotion is that “she was passing weary of his love” (Ibid.).

Arnold's version of the myth is quite short but establishes Vivien as a cunning and dangerous woman who exploits an old man's weakness. Arnold's Vivien disposes of Merlin after she has no more use for him and his love. Vivien's sexual appeal is likened to a

dangerous weapon and her betrayal catches Merlin completely off guard undermining him as a powerful figure in the Arthurian realm.

Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *Merlin and Vivien* is part of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* shows a similar type of Vivien who aims to gain fame from learning the spell with which she could destroy Merlin. Vivien embarks on her mission to cause destruction to King Arthur's order due to her allegiance with Arthur's adversary, Mark of Cornwall. However, this part of the poem, which consists of 140 lines, was added by Tennyson in 1874, indicating that Tennyson was unhappy with the character that he had initially created and felt that he had to make changes to include Vivien better into the story (Hoberg, 1987: 19).

Though she is an ally of Mark, Vivien's reasons for wishing to destroy Camelot seem to differ from Marks. While Mark is sure that Arthur's Knights are chaste, Vivien condemns this chastity and views it as unnatural. Vivien does not long to destroy Arthur and the Round Table because she is evil, but rather to restore the old order (the pagan world order) which does not forbid natural human desires (Ibid.: 22). Hoberg believes that Vivien was becoming an interesting and full-bodied character that could be a true rival for Arthur, even more so than his other enemies; however, he states that Tennyson abandoned Vivien's development and in the end left her a flat character (Ibid.: 20).

Tennyson often draws parallels with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and introduces the Biblical themes of Eve and the Serpent (Larrington, 2006: 151). The pagan world order that Vivien wishes to bring back is in direct opposition to the rational order that Merlin represents. Adler discusses in depth the dichotomy of reason as opposed to passion in Tennyson's work and compares *Merlin and Vivien* to Milton's *Paradise Lost* where similarly to Eve, Vivien is responsible for the fall of man (in the form of Merlin) as a result of her attaining knowledge she has no right to possess (Adler, 1970: 1397). Merlin – like Adam in *Paradise Lost* – succumbs to female charms and temptation and thus is bound to fall from grace (Ibid.: 1398). In Adler's view, Vivien is portrayed in many ways as a symbol of evil (Ibid.: 1400). In the poem Vivien lowers herself onto the ground and slithers into Merlin's lap, showing with her body that he is her master – she is soft, fluid and bendable to his will. The poem presents what seems to be a direct equation of Vivien and a snake, especially with the words “writhed” and “clung” which are used to describe her movements towards Merlin.

At first Vivien's flirtatious tactics do not seem to impress Merlin in Tennyson's poem though the sage does derive some enjoyment from them. Vivien is likened to a kitten by Tennyson in order to emphasize her playfulness, vivacity and girlish nature. She is described as an innocent creature who tries to wound others, yet never succeeds and thus is harmless. Tennyson's description of Vivien underlines the irony in the poem as Merlin is ultimately defeated by Vivien whom he fails to see as a threat.

As Vivien draws closer to achieving her goal to have Merlin hand over the secret spell to her, a storm approaches, symbolizing the sexual encounter that follows. Merlin gives in and Vivien subdues him. The way the maiden sits in Merlin's lap and wraps her arms around him in a snake-like fashion can be seen as suggestive. Vivien clings to Merlin in a manner that can be interpreted as sexual but it also presents an element of danger because a snake is able to strangle and maim. The storm and the encounter show the "Victorian fear of the female sexuality, the vulnerability of the desiring man to the deceptive, rapacious woman" (Ibid.:153). Vivien's seduction of Merlin is far more complex than simply appealing to a man's sexual desires or his longing for affection as Merlin is unmoved by much of what Vivien does. Tennyson's Merlin is worn down by the maiden. In the end, however, he resists Vivien's ploy and tries to remain immune to her attempts at seduction through most of the poem. Vivien bests Merlin through her exploitation of his kindness and the fact that he remains blind to her true power: she pretends to be weak, fragile and easily hurt, thus seducing Merlin into playing a gentle protector.

Both in Arnold and Tennyson's works Vivien symbolizes the fear of the prostitute and the danger such a woman poses for the Victorian family. As Vivien is the sensual and seductive power in the tale, the dynamic between Merlin and the young woman represents the struggle between reason and passion. Moreover, Vivien's power lies not only in her sexuality but also in her education. In seizing Merlin's magical power Vivien shows she is a capable adversary.

Since the Victorians perceived the woman as primarily belonging to the sphere of the home and family, this rebellious figure of Vivien represented the undesirable trespasser who sought to disturb the established order. Victorians argued that women were emotional, frail and intellectually inferior to men and therefore, they were best suited for domestic life (Russett, 1989: 2). The limitations for women were attributed to the natural order of the world and were seen as necessary for society to function successfully (Ibid.). Vivien does

not fit into this framework because she is a woman who desires knowledge and power equal to that of men. She is therefore the perfect embodiment of a threat to the Victorians as a woman outside the control of society.

4. THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN IN A.S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION*

Dame Antonia Susan Byatt, born in 1936, is a British writer and literary scholar. The author has written several notable works of fiction such as *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), *The Game* (1967), the Frederica quartet comprised of *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002), among other titles (Online 6). A.S. Byatt is the recipient of the Man Booker Prize and the Irish Times/Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize for her novel *Possession* (1990) which has gathered much critical acclaim (Online 6). Besides her accomplishments as a writer, Byatt has also lectured on literature and English at the Central School of Art and Design and University College London (Online 5) and written numerous works of literary criticism (Online 5).

The award-winning *Possession* tells the story on two temporal planes: that of the Victorian era and the 1980s. Two scholars, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, go on a search for answers to a mysterious secret affair between two great fictional Victorian poets, created by Byatt – Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel La Motte. Roland inadvertently makes a discovery of a passionate letter Ash, an exemplary husband, has penned to La Motte. Roland seeks out the help of the renowned La Motte scholar and feminist Maud Bailey to aid him in his quest for answers. Their search leads them both to become possessed with the need to know what happened between Ash and La Motte and the scholars eventually form a romantic connection of their own.

As for Ash and La Motte, their tumultuous affair ends in tragedy when La Motte's companion Blanche Glover commits suicide because of the two poets' romantic involvement. Glover is considered to have been La Motte's lover by the contemporary 1980s researchers. Moreover, La Motte becomes pregnant and gives her and Ash's lovechild away to her sister, unbeknownst to Ash, who presumes that La Motte has killed the child.

Byatt's two temporal planes are not fully parallel; however, the events of Ash and La Motte's time are interconnected with those that transpire in the 1980s (Leader, 1996). The romantic connection that slowly forms between Roland and Maud is not the only element mirroring the lives of the two Victorian poets they research. As Roland and Maud follow in the footsteps of Ash and La Motte through Yorkshire, they discover that both scholars share a similar desire for a space that is wholly their own, symbolized by a "clean empty bed in a

clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked” (Byatt, 1990: 290). Similarly, Ash and La Motte discover that they perfectly understand each other as poets, and this mutual understanding is what ignites their affair. The struggle of the surrender of personal freedom is central to La Motte and Ash’s relationship as it is to Roland and Maud’s. In this way the problems of both sets of characters are similar, yet they are presented in different cultural contexts.

Though the Victorian storyline parallels that of the scholars in the 1980s, the two simultaneous narratives reveal the discrepancy between the scholars’ findings and the events that really take place in the lives of La Motte and Ash. The epilogue reveals that Ash meets his daughter Maia: a fact which remains unknown both to Christabel and the two scholars in the 1980s. The scholars are left with the idea that Ash died presuming his child dead. With this episode Byatt seeks to discuss the subjectivity of historical research and casts doubt on the concept of “the Truth” that Roland so fervently seeks. The Victorian narrative in *Possession* suggests that “no amount of literary analysis or letter-stealing can disclose every truth” (Leader, 1996); there are facts and nuances which escape the researcher and the gaps in their fragmented knowledge are filled in by their own ideas.

4.1. Merlin and Vivien in *Possession*

Byatt herself has described myths to be an “organic life” which change shape and are “metamorphic, endlessly reconstituted and reformed (..) A myth derives force from its endless repeatability (..)” (Byatt, 1990: 125, 132 in Hennelly, 2003: 452). The myth of Merlin and Vivien is ‘alive’ in this way as it has been reiterated time and time again in medieval prose and poetry on King Arthur and later in the Victorian era when it regained popularity. The myth has been changed and adapted to fit the mores of the times when it was used. For example, the Vivien of the medieval *Estoire de Merlin* is significantly different from the character created by Tennyson or Arnold in the Victorian era. In *Estoire de Merlin* Vivien does not imprison Merlin out of malice, whereas in the poems of Tennyson and Arnold she captures and abandons the sage remorselessly for the sake of her own agenda. The fact that the myth of Merlin and Vivien has been repeated so many times and served as inspiration for the Victorians as well as Byatt testifies to its power. In *Possession*, Christabel La Motte stays with her relatives in Brittany where every winter her cousin recounts the tale

of Merlin and Vivien, “always the same tale, never twice the same telling,” (Ibid.: 382), which signifies that people’s interpretation and view of the myth changes and is adapted to the needs and wishes of the teller and the listeners; the shifts in the mood, setting and other elements indicate the changing nature of the tale, though the core of the myth remains intact. Christabel’s cousin describes the version of the myth that her father tells:

“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.” (Byatt, 1990: 383)

The myth told by Christabel’s cousin has as many variations as any of the myths in the Middle Ages, of which Mallory’s was favored among the Victorians. The changing tale of Merlin and Vivien indicates that the power struggle of reason versus passion can be read in different ways. Likewise there are possible variations in how Ash and La Motte’s relationship can be interpreted by the reader.

As Ash attempts to explain to his wife his relationship with La Motte, he says his affair was spurred by “a sort of madness. A possession, as by daemons” (Byatt, 1990: 429), which echoes his helplessness in the face of his unexpected and uncontrollable feelings. The theme of possession is prevalent throughout the text and is linked to the myth of Merlin and Vivien in a number of ways.

The title of the novel itself is ambiguous as ‘possession’ may be understood in the sense described by Ash to his wife “or it can suggest a kind of divine (or divinely aesthetic) inspiration, the serial affiliation of which proves difficult to trace” (Hennelly, 2003: 450). Ash and La Motte are passionately attracted to one another and their romantic involvement culminates in a sexual encounter. However, Ash and La Motte’s magnetic attraction is spurred on by an intellectual connection, because they understand each other as artists. As Ash writes “*so that I may write to you as I write when I am alone, when I write my true*

writing, which is for everyone and no one- so that in me which has never addressed any private creature, feels at home with you” (Byatt, 1990: 146) (original emphasis).

In the medieval Arthurian myth Merlin is possessed by Vivien through lust and passionate sexual desire, though Vivien, on the other hand, mainly seeks to acquire Merlin’s knowledge. In *Estoire de Merlin* Vivien is attracted to Merlin because of his power, rather than any physical appeal. Merlin’s possession by his desire for Vivien leads to his doom as he is well aware in some of the myths, including the original *Estoire de Merlin*.

Ash and La Motte are also aware of the danger their affair poses to both their lives in *Possession*. In spite of this, they decide to consummate their relationship, instead of remaining in contact through correspondence. Thus, Ash and La Motte choose to have a sexual relationship and risk everything similarly to Merlin.

4.2. Reason versus Desire

Christabel compares herself to the Lady of Shalott, a famed character entirely different to Vivien in the cycles of the Arthurian legend. Maud is also implicitly linked to the Lady of Shalott, which is one of many similarities between her and Christabel. At the very end of *Possession* it is revealed that Maud is a descendant of Christabel and Ash’s lovechild. Christabel’s connection with the Lady of Shalott is seen through her choice of “similarly follow[ing] the life of art rather than that of marriage and family,” (Hicks, 2010: 66) which is parallel to the ancient myth and its later interpretations by Victorian poets. As Christabel tells Ash,

“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 brights colours of her Web - to ply an industrious shuttle - to make - something - to close the Shutters and the Peephole too -” (Byatt, 1990: 205).

Christabel likens herself to the passive Lady of Shalott in her letters to Ash, made famous by Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem of the same name (Online 7). The Lady of Shalott’s fate is to sit in an enchanted tower weaving a tapestry. She is cursed to sit in her tower, never allowed to leave and participate in the life outside. The Lady of Shalott is weary of leading a solitary existence, watching the world pass her by. The Lady of Shalott’s position is contrary to the “wisdom” that Christabel ascribes to her. Christabel muses on the Lady’s decision not to leave the tower where she resides although it is never the Lady of

Shalott's choice to remain apart from the world in Tennyson's poem. When the Lady catches a glimpse of the handsome Lancelot in her magic mirror, she must pay the price for breaking the rules of her imprisonment with her life.

Although Christabel views the Lady of Shalott's life as peaceful and desirable, the poet herself is imprisoned in a life that is not truly fulfilling to her. Ash aptly comments on Christabel's comparison, stating "Could the Lady of Shalott have written Melusina in her barred and moated Tower?" (Byatt, 1990: 206). Ash insinuates that Christabel's idea of herself as the Lady of Shalott is incompatible with the life of an artist which Christabel has chosen. Byatt states that Christabel as well as Maud, and characters from her other novels that "(...) [t]hey're the woman closed in the tower who has given her soul for her writing but is also somehow destroyed. They're all the Lady of Shalott" (Byatt in Hicks, 2010: 66).

The idea of the 19th century as a period devoted to reason is repeated throughout the novel as Ash states "[w]e are rational nineteenth-century beings, we might leave the coup de foudre to the weavers of Romances," (Byatt, 1990: 211) however, the sudden passion that overcomes both him and Christabel shatters the foundations on which such "rational beings" stand. Ash and Christabel's reason becomes clouded by feelings which are depicted as irrational and uncontrollable.

Christabel both fears and desires her relationship with Ash; she repeatedly attempts to break off their relationship but Ash persuades her to continue their friendship. Christabel sees Ash as a threat to her "solitude" or independence which is the most pressing obstacle for their acquaintance (Hennelly, 2003). Christabel fears that this newly-discovered passion will consume her like fire and she sees Ash as the dragon who creates it. However, Ash says this new experience of their relationship will only benefit Christabel and add to her wealth of knowledge and understanding of the world, which she requires as a writer: "I will tell you - a Pyre - from which you, my Phoenix, shall fly up renewed and unchanged - the gold more burnished, the eye brighter - semper eadem." (Byatt, 1990: 214). Ash tempts and persuades Christabel in continuing their correspondence and, then, to meet him in person, in an allusion to the Biblical episode of the serpent tempting Eve. Ash disregards Christabel's apprehensions about their relationship because he is driven not only by lust and passion, but, perhaps, even more so by curiosity.

After Christabel becomes pregnant with Ash's child, she decides to flee to Brittany to stay with her extended family. There she meets her young cousin Sabine. Sabine is also an

aspiring writer and initially idealizes Christabel, seeing her as the poetess she wishes to become herself. However, Christabel's cold and unaccommodating attitude towards her young cousin causes Sabine to form a rather negative opinion of the poetess. Sabine tells Christabel that she finds Victorian rationality limiting to her as a woman and an aspiring artist, "I write what I can. Not what I should like to write but what I know. I would like to write the history of the feelings of a woman. A modern woman. But what do I know of that, in these granite walls somewhere between Merlin's thorny prison and the Age of Reason?" (Ibid.: 377).

Sabine feels she is trapped within a framework of reason where Merlin's prison symbolizes the constraints of rationality. Sabine believes that outside these constraints is a vivid life that would allow her to write beyond "what she knows". Sabine implies that the experiences she might have outside the life lived by the rules of Victorian rationality may be more fulfilling. Although Christabel has given in to passion and desire, experiencing the happiness and fulfilment Sabine wonders about, she also finds herself in a difficult position as an unmarried woman pregnant with an illegitimate child.

When Sabine's father tells the myth of Merlin and Vivien, Christabel is unhappy with his interpretation and asks for the meaning behind the tale as if it has been lost in this version. Christabel's attitude angers Sabine, who states "we do not talk of meanings in this pedantic nineteenth-century way (..) we simply tell and hear and believe," (Byatt, 1990: 384). To Sabine, Christabel's desire to interpret the myth in a rational way detracts from the experience of the tale. Christabel's search for rational meaning in the myth robs the tale of something vitally essential in Sabine's view, as though the myth must be accepted without further inquiry because it holds some fundamental truth.

Sabine's father offers Christabel his idea of the meaning behind the myth, stating:

It is one of many tales that speak of fear of Women, 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-," (Ibid.)

However, Christabel rejects this interpretation, giving her own as "a tale of female emulation of male power – she wanted not him but his magic" (Ibid.). Christabel's reading of the myth may be connected with her own experience in her relationship with Ash.

Christabel deeply admired Ash as a poet before they met and he had a profound impact on

her own writing during their acquaintance. Ash particularly influenced Christabel's poem on the myth of the water fairy Melusine, which Christabel explicitly acknowledges in her letters to Ash. The Poet's influence on Christabel's writing is also contemplated by Maud, who reluctantly admits to Roland that Ash played a significant role in Christabel's creative process. Christabel "emulates male power" by writing poetry and wishing to be seen as an equal to the likes of Ash and other great poets of her time. She states in a letter to Ash that her work was dismissed by a poet to whom she sent some of her writing:

"The best we may hope for is – oh, it is excellently done – for a woman. And then there are Subjects we may not treat – things we may not know. I do not say that there must be – and is – some essential difference between the Scope and Power of men and our own limited consciousness and possibly weaker apprehension. But I do maintain, as stoutly, that the delimitations are at present, all wrongly drawn – We are not mere candleholders to virtuous thoughts – mere chalices of Purity – we think and feel, aye and read (...) I sent some of my smaller poems – a little sheaf – selected with trembling – to a great Poet – who shall be nameless (...) asking – Are These Poems? Have I – a Voice? He replied with courteous promptness – that they were pretty things – not quite regular – and not always well-regulated by a proper sense of decorum – but he would encourage me moderately – they would do well enough to give me an interest in life until I had – I quote him exactly – "sweeter and weightier responsibilities."" (Byatt, 1990: 197) (original emphasis).

Christabel describes that she is not viewed as a serious author, nor can she ever hope to be considered a 'real' poet because of her sex; she is immediately categorized as a domestic being who must not preoccupy her mind with ambition. Similarly, Vivien is not allowed to lay claim on Merlin's power, yet she does so in spite of what is expected of her in the medieval world or the Arthurian realm.

Christabel either chooses to ignore or completely accept the vulnerable position in society that she is placed in as a result of her affair with Ash. While Ash's reputation goes unscathed and he resumes his married life with Ellen after he and Christabel have had their brief surrender to passion, Christabel's life is forever altered. Her life with Blanche ends and she must secretly give up her and Ash's child to her sister. Much to her unhappiness, Christabel is condemned to be the strange, disliked aunt in her child's life, watching her child grow up from the periphery like the Lady of Shalott she once compared herself to.

While Vivien goes unpunished for her deceit and usurpation of Merlin's power in Christabel's cousin's version of the myth, Christabel herself has to suffer the consequences of her assuming equal standing with men both socially and artistically.

Christabel tells Sabine that "Reason must sleep" (Byatt, 1990: 384) insinuating that without an analysis of the myth of Merlin and Vivien, there can be no evaluation of their

relationship; the meaning of the myth is negated by Sabine's surface interpretation of it. Sabine condemns Christabel's search for generalizations and deeper meanings behind the text, stating, "The stories come before the meanings" and continues "I do not believe all these explanations. They diminish. The idea of Woman is less than brilliant Vivien, and the idea of Merlin will not allegorise into male wisdom. He is Merlin." (Ibid.). Sabine resists Christabel's interpretation of the myth as it is a "phallogocentric reading that relegates women to the position of the feared Other," (Campbell, 2004: 123).

4.3. Byatt's Depiction of the Victorian Marriage

Ash and La Motte are engaged in other relationships when their romance is suddenly sparked through correspondence: Ash is a married man whilst Christabel lives with her friend, the painter Blanche Glover. Ash is considered a model husband by the 1980s scholars, who believe he has lived his entire life in an ideal Victorian marriage. The contemporary feminist researchers in the novel presume Christabel to have been in a lesbian relationship with Blanche. Roland and Maud's discovery of the Ash and La Motte love letters completely changes the world's perception of both poets.

The Victorian narrative shows that Ash's picture-perfect marriage is only a façade. Ellen Ash is revealed to be an example of the frigid Victorian female that knows nothing of sex and is absolutely petrified of the thought of any intimate contact with her husband. However, Ellen Ash's attitude towards sex stems from her environment; neither Ellen's mother nor anyone else helped her understand what sexual intercourse entails. As Ellen marries already well in her 30s (considered quite late for the Victorians), she is completely paralyzed by fear at the prospect of sexual contact.

As a tender and loving husband Ash does not pressure or force his wife into sexual intimacy, but rather sinks into an involuntary and inescapable celibacy. Ash's marriage is therefore a partnership without any passion or sensuality, which leads him to be overcome by emotion and desire when he encounters Christabel. As for her part, Ellen serves Ash as a doting and faithful servant with her entire life completely subordinated to Ash's. Ellen experiences tremendous guilt for what she sees as her failure to play the role of a proper Victorian wife, "The eagerness, the terrible love, with which she had made it up to him, his abstinence, making him a thousand small comforts, cakes and tidbits. She became his slave.

Quivering at every word. *He had accepted her love.* She had loved him for it. He had loved her” (Byatt, 1990: 499). In this way she devotes herself completely to Ash to make up for their non-existent sex life.

Byatt depicts Randolph and Ellen Ash as victims of the perception of sexuality in the Victorian society, which is discussed in greater depth in chapter 1 of this master’s thesis. The enforced silence and the Victorian perception of propriety could lead to a sexually unfulfilling marriage. Though Michel Foucault states that there was an incitement to discourse about sex in the Victorian era, this does not mean that sex was discussed freely by everyone: for example, sex was discussed by doctors and scientists, but not in families or between married couples (Foucault, 1990). Furthermore, Foucault emphasizes the importance of silence about sex in the Victorian era and Byatt enforces this notion in *Possession* through Ash and Ellen’s relationship.

Ash and his wife are both hostages of a situation which is the result of lack of communication about sexuality. Ellen’s terror surrounding marital intimacy depicts the misinformation and misrepresentation of sex to women in the Victorian era. As neither Ash nor Ellen gain any sexual experience before their marriage, neither of them can predict that their union could bring them to such an impasse. The characters are trapped in their marriage with no hope of any resolution: they cannot seek sexual fulfilment elsewhere without grave consequences nor can they separate through divorce, especially considering Ash’s prominent status as a poet beloved by the reading public.

Both Ellen and Ash consider that despite their failed sexual relationship, they have been happy together in a respectful and loving partnership. As Ash is on his deathbed, Ellen reminisces about their life together: “They were happy even then, in the way they had always been happy, sitting close, saying little, looking at the same things, together” (Byatt, 1990: 487). Ellen has lived her life with a fierce determination to be a perfect Victorian wife for Ash, facilitating his success as a poet. Ellen has prioritized Ash’s comfort in order to ease her feelings of guilt for her failure as a sexual partner. Although the couple are able to communicate successfully about art, literature and science, they fail to open a discussion about their sex-lives, “most of what they shared, after all, after all was done, was silence” (Byatt, 1990: 488). Ash and Ellen’s marriage is a symbol of a popular view of the Victorian mindset where appearances matter above all else. What is presented to the outside world is more important than the problems beneath the surface.

4.4. La Motte's Relationship with Blanche Glover in *Possession*

The life that La Motte shares with Blanche is more genuine than Ash's marriage and Christabel is arguably happier in her relationship with Blanche than Ash is with his wife. Blanche and Christabel share not only an intellectual bond, but also gain sexual fulfillment from their relationship. However, while Ellen quietly suffers and accepts Ash's affair with Christabel once it is revealed to her, Blanche is overcome with jealousy and paranoia.

Christabel and Blanche both share an ideal for a life which would be entirely their own as spinsters; both women regard it as a way of life that offers freedom. However, there are drawbacks to this mode of existence which ultimately exposes Christabel to an unforeseen danger of an illegitimate pregnancy, which threatens to ruin her reputation. Although Blanche's concern over Christabel's initial friendship with Ash is rooted in jealousy, the notion that their correspondence does not bode well for her is not dismissible. As La Motte states in a letter to Ash, trying to break off their friendship:

"(...) the world would not look well upon such letters – between a woman living in a shared solitude as I do – and a man – even if that man were a great and wise poet – (...) It is pointed out to me, quite rightly – that if I am jealous of my freedom to live as I do – and manage my own affairs – and work my work – I must be more than usually careful to remain sufficiently respectable in the eyes of the world and his wife – to evade his bad opinions – and consequent niggling restrictions on my freedom of movement" (Byatt, 1990: 202) (original emphasis).

Until the sudden appearance of Ash in their lives, Blanche feels secure in her relationship with Christabel and believes they will go on living in their idyllic private and secluded lives. However, Christabel's affair with Ash erases all prospects of continuing her previous life with Blanche. What's more, the affair leaves her in a vulnerable position as an unmarried woman with an illegitimate and undesired pregnancy.

Campbell states that Byatt has modeled Christabel on Emily Dickinson, whom Byatt holds in high regard (Campbell, 2004: 109). Christabel's Breton heritage provides her with an atypical "sexual frankness" (Ibid.). This inherent sexual frankness is developed further in her uninhibited sexual relationship with Blanche. Ash notes her unexpected knowledge of her own body and preferences upon their first sexual encounter. Though the poet suspects that Christabel and Blanche have been sexually involved in a lesbian relationship, he cannot bring himself to discuss the matter with her due to discursive constraints. The idea of a

sexual relationship between two women is at first repulsive to Ash and then, after some consideration, inspires curiosity; nonetheless, he reverts to silence on the matter.

The first textual evidence of the myth of Merlin and Vivien appears in Blanche's diary where she discusses her plans for a painting: "I have been wondering whether to attempt, in oils, a subject from Malory, the imprisoning of Merlin, maybe, by the damsel Nimue, or the solitary Maid of Astolat" (Byatt, 1990: 51). The sudden correspondence that begins between Christabel and Randolph is what inspires Blanche's painting because it appears as a disturbance in the women's daily life, in which Blanche has thus far felt empowered and confident. Blanche's paintings depict "a female-male power struggle" (Campbell, 2004: 121) where Nimue or Vivien can be seen as a representation of empowerment. In the painting Vivien symbolizes the unyielding, independent female who is capable of taking charge of her own destiny. Essentially, Vivien symbolizes everything Blanche values and wishes for her and Christabel to embody whereas Merlin as a man in possession of superior advantages is in opposition to all of their ideals and wishes.

Anderson suggests that the fictional painting by Blanche (and *The Beguiling of Merlin* by Edward Burne-Jones which adorns the Vintage paperback edition of the novel itself), "perfectly sums up the two women's hope for their little cottage and life together" (Anderson, 2002). Merlin is defeated by his own weapon of magic used against him by Vivien; thus, he is a man overpowered in magic. Blanche's painting shows Vivien's strength as she defeats Merlin with the help of her sexuality, which "represents the triumph of female sexuality and power over men" (Ibid.). The painting is representative of what Blanche desires most of all - a life with Christabel outside the control of the world; a life that belongs wholly to herself as an independent woman. Sadly, Blanche's vision of such a life does not materialize. As Anderson remarks, "significantly, given Blanche's own fate, the picture does not appear to have been finished," (Ibid.). The painting ironically symbolizes Blanche's failed relationship with Christabel and Blanche's broken illusions.

Roland and Maud examine Blanche's journal in order to find some evidence of Christabel's romantic involvement with Ash. The scholars find an entry where Blanche contemplates her painting project of Merlin and Vivien. Blanche's comments reveal a sense of the troubled atmosphere inside the home she shares with Christabel:

"I have sketched oak trees in Richmond Park all week- all my lines are too light for the dark solidity of their girth. What draws us to make pretty what should express Brute

Power? Nimue or the Lily Maid would require a model and the Princess can hardly be asked for so much of her time,” (Byatt, 1990: 51.)

Blanche’s comments on her sketches of the tree can be interpreted as her view of the entire scene between Vivien and Merlin as representative of a power struggle. The “Brute Power” which Blanche hopes to depict in the tree is also the same power Vivien uses against Merlin after she has finally succeeded in her plan.

Blanche worries that Christabel is allowing herself to become distracted from her poetry. The painter worries about the negative effect that Ash may have on Christabel.

Blanche states in her diary about her confronting her companion,

“I asked her how much writing she had lately done, and she laughed, and said she was learning so much, so very much, and when it was all learned she should have new matter to write about and many new things to say. (...) and [she] said I knew she was a good girl, and very strong, and not foolish,” (Byatt, 1990: 53).

Besides obvious jealousy, Blanche is concerned about how a relationship with a man may interrupt a woman’s creative process. Christabel assures her that she is “learning so much” (Ibid.) from her friendship with Ash. Christabel’s stance is thus reminiscent of Vivien whose purpose in her affair with Merlin was to gain knowledge. As a result of her relationship with Ash, Christabel expects to have “new matter to write about”, which emphasizes Christabel’s thirst for new experiences and growth as an artist.

As Blanche contemplates Ash’s intrusion into their lives, she wonders about how to proceed with her painting, “The candle flame ran huge shadows like grasping fingers across the ceiling in the draught. I could put some such running, grasping lines of light and shadow around Nimue and Merlin.” (Ibid.) Christabel and Ash constantly invade Blanche’s thoughts through the figures of Vivien and Merlin. Even in prayer she considers Christabel and Ash’s relationship and the power struggle between them is represented by Vivien and Merlin. The idea of Blanche’s painting of the beguiling of Merlin is symbolic of what Blanche does not disclose outright in her diary. The light and shadows around Vivien and Merlin may serve as a symbol for Blanche’s emotions and uncertainty about her own relationship with Christabel and Christabel’s designs for Ash (and vice versa).

Blanche hides the letters from Ash to Christabel in an attempt to put an end to their relationship and for a while she believes she has successfully dealt with the problem. Ultimately Christabel discovers her scheme and Blanche’s betrayal leads her to accompany Ash on a trip to York. While still convinced of her success, Blanche writes “The Wolf is

Gone from the Door. Dog Tray's hearth is his own. I have begun on the Lily Maid of Astolat, which suddenly seemed best" (Ibid.: 54).

The sudden shift in Blanche's idea for her painting shows that Blanche is convinced Ash is gone for good. Previously, Blanche's idea for a painting of Merlin and Vivien connected Christabel to the woman seeking forbidden knowledge. Now the "solitary Maid of Astolat" (Ibid.: 51) signifies unrequited, unfulfilled love as in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* where Elaine, the Maid of Astolat, falls hopelessly in love with Lancelot and dies broken-hearted (Online 8). Christabel just as Elaine is kept from fulfilling her desires and is made a passive observer of events. Elaine wilts and dies just as Blanche hopes Christabel's relationship with Ash will die. Whereas Vivien is active as a woman who tries to seduce and persuade Merlin, Elaine is passive and submissive to the course of events.

Blanche's bitter disappointment brought on by Christabel's feelings for a man is too much for Blanche to bear. Christabel's affair ruins her relationship with Blanche, which both women initially saw as idyllic. After failing to break Christabel and Ash apart, Blanche decides to take her own life and drowns.

Blanche's choice of death is connected to the references to water in the novel. Vivien as the Lady of the Lake is a water-dwelling being and so is Melusine, the mermaid-like fairy that Christabel writes an epic poem on. Vivien and Melusine are powerful beings that use water as their sanctuary: it is a space belonging wholly to them, similarly to what one might see as Blanche's wish for her secluded life with Christabel. Blanche's death by drowning can therefore be seen as even more ironic.

When Christabel returns from her trip to Yorkshire, she brings back stones as souvenirs and reminders of her time with Ash. Blanche sews these stones into the pockets of her dress and walks into the river to drown herself, thus implicitly blaming Christabel's affair for her decision to end her life.

4.5. The 20th Century Storyline: Roland and Maud

Roland and Maud's storyline runs parallel to that of La Motte and Ash, however the latter influences that of the scholars as they trace the Victorian poets' footsteps in Yorkshire where La Motte and Ash spent time together. Roland is an impoverished post-doctoral researcher who leads a "colorless" existence (Tarbox, 2005: 183), dependent on his equally unhappy

girlfriend Val. They barely get by, living in a sort of “crypt” (Ibid.), unsure of why they are both together. Roland seems “barren of all instinctual energy” (Ibid.) until he makes a daring decision. Roland’s sudden discovery of Ash’s love letter to a woman who later turns out to be Christabel La Motte turns his life completely upside-down.

Roland is oppressed by the life in which he is stuck, a fruitless academic career which seems to be going nowhere largely due to his supervisor’s reluctance to help him in his endeavors to improve his situation. He is the perfect candidate for a hero for Byatt’s story of ‘academics turned thieves and detectives because he “has no stake in the old order” (Ibid.) and is therefore looking to overthrow it and prove his worth as a scholar.

Maud is an accomplished scholar and the leading expert on Christabel La Motte, however, she struggles to break free from her inhibitions about allowing men into her life. After a failure in her relationship with the scholar Fergus Wolff, Maud retreats further into solitude. Roland and Maud’s perception of love and desire is tainted by their theoretical knowledge as scholars: they view love as a mental construct, not as something that is experienced. Initially, for Roland and Maud love is only theoretical, completely void of feeling, in contrast to the passion felt by Ash & Christabel in the Victorian storyline (Hadley, 2010: 110). The contemporary scholars in *Possession* cannot deal with desire and emotion and their knowledge of the construct of romance and love has replaced the experience itself “in just the same way as knowledge about texts and about reading had replaced the pleasure of the actual experience” (Ibid.: 111).

Roland and Maud try to shed their preconceptions about Christabel and Ash and romantic relationships in general because they decide these will hinder their search for answers about the Ash-La Motte love affair.

Both contemporary protagonists “guard their solitude”; they view their autonomy as something that must be sacrificed for love, which they equate with “sex, and sex with being a possession” (Hadley, 2010: 112). Their interpretation of love is not worth the sacrifice of their self-possession. The two scholars share a bond as both long for a space that is not intruded by anyone else. Tarbox (2005) believes Roland and Maud’s romantic relationship begins as the two scholars “dissolve” as separate individuals. Roland and Maud gradually try to free themselves of the theoretic framework through which they see themselves and each other (Tarbox, 2005: 184). Roland and Maud recognize their own longing for solitude and personal space within each other. Although they develop feelings for each other, they are

“exquisitely careful with each other, determined to stay in this *terra nova* that lies between possession and autism” (Tarbox, 2005: 185).

In creating Roland and Maud’s perception of sexuality, Byatt “reverses what might be expected of representations of sexuality in the Victorian era and the late twentieth century” (Hadley, 2010: 112). The usually timid and sexually repressed Victorians, as Ash and La Motte, are shown as “frank and relatively uninhibited in their sexuality” in contrast to Roland and Maud who experience difficulty in relinquishing control over their private space and allowing another to share in it (Ibid.).

Towards the end of *Possession*, Maud and Roland decide to reject the “science-based methodologies” of seeing love and instead use an approach which would allow them to “see the world through the eyes of Ash and LaMotte” (Ibid.); their relationship blossoms as a consequence of following in Ash and La Motte’s footsteps.

Roland’s attitude towards Ash’s letters is not scholarly and “purely intellectual”, as he wishes to possess the letters because of their ‘living’ nature, which allows Roland to form an “emotional” connection to the 19th century poets (Ibid: 127). Roland aims to “understand the past on its own terms and connect it to the present” without appropriating it, but rather embedding it into a personal narrative (Ibid.: 129). Maud also approaches the past on a personal, rather than academic level, which allows her to discover that she is related to both Ash and La Motte through their lovechild (Ibid.).

5. THE MYTH OF MERLIN AND VIVIEN IN A.S. BYATT'S *THE VIRGIN IN THE GARDEN*

Allusions to the myth of Merlin and Vivien are also present in Byatt's *Frederica Quartet*. The essential struggle between reason and passion can be found in the first installment of the quartet, *The Virgin in the Garden*. *The Virgin in the Garden* describes the lives of the Potter family in the 1950s, particularly the three Potter children, Frederica, Stephanie and Marcus. The novels largely center around Frederica who is an extremely intelligent, ambitious girl of seventeen at the beginning of *The Virgin in the Garden*. She is passionate, egocentric and headstrong while her sister Stephanie is almost the exact opposite, resembling her younger sister Frederica only in her intellectual capacities and stubbornness. Marcus is the troubled youngest child of the family, a mathematical prodigy plagued with mental issues brought on by his father's volatile nature.

Another character whose voice is heard in the novels is Frederica's father's colleague, a teacher and dramatist Alexander Wedderburn. Alexander writes a play about Queen Elizabeth I's life to commemorate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The entire town becomes involved in the play and the locals are cast to play Queen Elizabeth I and her royal subjects. Frederica pines for the role of young Queen Elizabeth I because she aspires to become an actress and also hopes to attract Alexander's attention.

Frederica is hopelessly in love with Alexander and desperately tries to attract his interest throughout *The Virgin in the Garden*. The relationship between Frederica and Alexander is where the myth of Merlin and Vivien is most pronounced. Frederica resembles Vivien in her endless (and at first fruitless) attempts to seduce Alexander much like Vivien tries to charm Merlin in Tennyson's Victorian poem. Alexander is initially repulsed by Frederica's persistence and her awkward attempts at seduction embarrass him.

However, by the end of the novel Frederica manages to wear Alexander down and he admits his feelings for her, confirming that her plot to ensnare him has been successful. Alexander is overcome by an irrational and insatiable desire for Frederica, possessed with the idea that he must have her, against his better judgment. Although Frederica is only

seventeen and a daughter of his colleague, Alexander finds himself unable to resist his sudden sexual obsession with the girl.

Even though Frederica has achieved what she has always wanted in that Alexander finally reciprocates her love and desire, she is terrified of taking the final step and consummating the relationship. Frederica lies to Alexander about no longer being a virgin which makes her seem less vulnerable to him. Partly driven by fear of the sexual act itself and even more terrified of Alexander catching her in a lie, Frederica disappears the night the couple have decided to make love. The scorned and frustrated Alexander feels as though it has been her design all along to make a fool out of him, so their relationship comes to an end. The two meet again in the second novel in this series, *Still Life*, and discover, to both their surprise, that Frederica still has some hold over him, though this time in a more intellectual capacity than before.

5.1. Frederica as Vivien and Alexander as Merlin

Frederica's relentless attempts at delivering an impressive performance in Alexander's play, create a sense of her as an unstoppable force of nature for Alexander, despite her peers' and fellow actors' negative opinion of her as a person and a performer:

“Frederica began on the answering declaration: she had meant it to be prettily, though nobly, tentative, but Alexander's presence and her wrath over the fiasco of the dancing had added to it qualities she could not quite control; a touch of impatient aggression, a touch of the pure will to have what she desired, which had taken her so far, and sustained her.” (Byatt. 1992: 73-74).

Frederica relies on her fierce character to overcome obstacles, however, it is also her pitfall because it makes her extremely unlikable to most people. Similarly, in Tennyson's poem Vivien is seen as an embodiment of the characteristics that are ascribed to Frederica: she achieves her plan to seduce and capture Merlin through “pure will”. Vivien is disliked by Arthur's realm in Tennyson's version of the myth, yet she perseveres.

Alexander shares a likeness to Merlin through his position of power: as a writer and dramatist he creates the world in which the rest wish to take part, including Frederica, who is hungry for a chance to become part of the play and prove herself to him. Alexander's solitary and lustful nature are also traits which are shared by Merlin:

“He liked his delicious solitude, certainly, and intended to let no one invade it. (...) he liked fear. Not excessive fear. (...) But the ripple of apprehension, the prickle of hairs on the skin, the sense of panic flight through crashing undergrowth and under whipping

foliage, the alertness of scent and sight bestowed by a flicker of real fear, this he repeatedly provoked.” (Byatt, 1992: 343)

The pleasure and thrill Alexander derives from fear is partly what attracts him to Frederica in the end. She is dangerous to him both because of her age, his social position as a teacher and her unpredictable and fiery character. Merlin is similarly unable to escape the allure of Vivien which is, in a way, a gamble with fate, as he is aware in some of the myths that she will bring about his demise.

Alexander’s benefactor and financier of the play, Mortimer Cropper, talks to Frederica about her obsession with Alexander, suggesting that she may not be aware of what it is that she truly hopes to achieve,

““Do you think you’ll get what you want?”

“I don’t know. That doesn’t seem to be the point.”

“(…) But I don’t think you’ll find what you want is what you want when you get it.””

(Byatt, 1992: 294)

Frederica is not bothered by whether or not she will achieve her goal because she has no notion of giving up. The idea of investing all of her time and energy in the pursuit of Alexander is enough for her to consider it a successful mission. Cropper’s prediction comes true and, indeed, Frederica wins her prize, yet chooses to run away without claiming it. From another point of view, Frederica’s idea still rings true: “that doesn’t seem to be the point” (Ibid.). Her prize has been the capture of Alexander’s desire; she already possesses him without engaging in sexual intercourse.

5.2. Knowledge as Power

On an outing, Frederica accidentally stumbles upon Alexander in an awkward position with his lover – a married woman. She does not despair at this discovery but rather decides that Alexander’s relationship with his mistress is simply a hurdle she must overcome. Even more so, the discovery makes her feel empowered, as if she has gained an important advantage over Alexander in her pursuit of the dramatist: “The feeling she had, on seeing Alexander, was one of power. Knowledge was power, as long as one did not muck it up by confusing one piece of knowledge with another and trying to ingest it and turn it all into blood and feelings” (Byatt, 1992: 209).

Frederica calmly and rationally considers that seeing Alexander will benefit her in the right moment. She recognizes that knowledge is a tool to be used to reach her ends and it

will ultimately aid her in her pursuit of Alexander, who in turn feels alarmed by Frederica. Alexander considers her behavior strange and unnerving as she locks eyes with him and stares, having caught him in an embarrassing moment of intimacy with his lover. He contemplates what Frederica might do with her discovery of his love affair, anxious that she might use it against him. However, her scheme is much more intricate and Frederica uses her knowledge of his moment of indiscretion simply to make Alexander feel threatened by her.

Eventually Frederica manages to seduce Alexander, mainly through her powerful performance in his play as young Queen Elizabeth I. When she corners Alexander and professes her love for him, he cannot escape the reply which is now obvious to him: ““O God,” (...) Some demon of politeness, or sense of occasion, or temporary truth, or female will drove him to add, “I suppose I love you too.” He was a man of words. Once those were said, they took hold of him”” (Byatt, 1992: 333). Alexander’s utterance of the words themselves is like an incantation: with his confession of love for Frederica, he gives her power to control him. Frederica’s “will” has gotten the better of Alexander, just as Vivien’s will is what drives Merlin to disclose the secret charm to her which she will use against him.

When Frederica has finally succeeded in her attempts to attract Alexander, he tells her he loves her because she is “very clever” (Byatt, 1992: 349). Alexander thinks that it is imperative to “show her that he now knew it” (Ibid.) in order to acknowledge her intelligence. Frederica replies: “I love you because you can write” (Ibid.). Frederica is enamored with Alexander because of his skill and talent as a writer, and also because of his position of power as the creator of the play. Alexander’s intelligence and power as a writer is similar to Merlin’s power as a seer and wielder of magic. Frederica therefore mirrors Vivien, who wishes to possess the same magical power.

Alexander tells Frederica he sees no future for their impossible relationship, yet she persuades him to continue their affair:

“Just let it go on. I love you.” She said that with a threatening imperative that melted him. Somewhere in the back of his consciousness was the knowledge that she would deal for herself with any consequences. (...) She was the bitch-goddess in the grove, his own creation, or evocation, she was the untouchable girl, safe to want because she could not be had. (...) She laughed and laughed aloud in the garden, lewd and innocent, in charge, and he knew that however he protested he was caught, pure curiosity would lead him on.” (Byatt, 1992: 372-373)

Alexander is infatuated with Frederica’s power over him and the way she creates the sensation of fear that he finds sexually appealing. Frederica is able to capture Alexander’s

desire through her headstrong character, similarly to the way Merlin feels completely disempowered in the face of Vivien's beauty and company in *Estoire Merlin*.

6. A.S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION* AS A NEO-VICTORIAN WORK OF FICTION

The continued fascination with the Victorian era is evident in the literature of the 20th and 21st century as contemporary authors use the Victorian age as a continued source of inspiration for their works. There are several theories as to why the Victorian genre is so popular with contemporary authors, which is discussed in this chapter.

There is a significant distinction between the terms “neo-Victorian” and “historical fiction” and in order to categorize Byatt’s novel *Possession* as belonging to either of these, it is important to distinguish one from the other. The two categories cannot be equated because neo-Victorianism entails more than simply “historical fiction set in the nineteenth century” (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010: 4). ‘Historical fiction’ is in itself a term laden with controversy because ‘fiction’ is positioned as opposite of ‘the truth’, which history is presumed to be (Mitchell, 2010: 15). The distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘history’ lies in the fact that the latter is a supposed representation of actual events, whereas the former is related to imaginary ones meant to entertain the reader (Ibid.). Historical fiction is comprised of both what is considered to be ‘the real’ and the imaginary and the hybridity of this term draws the readers’ attention to the problematic aspects of defining both “history” and “fiction” (Ibid.:18). In comparison with historical fiction, neo-Victorianism can potentially offer “a different sense of the historical imaginary” and does not simply aim to imitate the past, but rather “inherit its position and in some senses displace its precursor” (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010: 15).

It is notable that there is not a significant amount of other time periods which are endowed with the prefix “neo” in a similar way, however, neo-Victorianism has retained its popularity and is expected to continue to do so (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010: 24). Neo-Victorian literature presents the “problem of historical recollection” and the representation of the past in a way that would appeal to the contemporary readership of the 21st century (Mitchell, 2010: 3).

Neo-Victorianism has been a loosely-defined term which can be considered more of an advantage than a drawback. There are several other terms that have been used in place of neo-Victorian in the past, such as ‘post-Victorian’ and ‘retro’/’faux-Victorian’; as Heilmann and Llewellyn (2010) state, many scholars still use the prefix “post” instead of “neo”.

Although the term “neo-Victorianism” is the more popular version used in the 21st century, the prefix “neo” is not without drawbacks: “neo” may “imply a nostalgia and wish to return to Victorianism, whereas it actually means a modification and adaptation of the Victorian style into another” (Ibid.: 5). Nostalgia is seen as a “conservative, negative term” in the 21st century (Mitchell, 2010:5); however, it might be “productive” as it equivocates a “desire for cultural memory” (Ibid.). Thus, nostalgia is a contradictory concept: on the one hand, it inspires writers to ‘keep the past alive’, on the other hand, nostalgia may prove to be disruptive and modify the readers’ perception of history, according to the author’s own ideas (Ibid.: 6). Neo-Victorian suggests that “Victorian era is brought into contact with a new context, it is not subsumed within that new context” (Hadley, 2010: 3). Thus, the contemporary authors of the 20th and 21st century seek to view the Victorians from the perspective of their own era.

Though all fiction after the end of Queen Victoria’s reign in 1901 is essentially post-Victorian it is not also automatically neo-Victorian. In the same way as not all 19th century narratives can be considered Victorian, similarly not all fiction of the 20th century that deals with the Victorian period is necessarily neo-Victorian (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010: 6-8). Neo-Victorianism is rather more of a distinct branch of the historical-fiction genre (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010: 24). Mitchell states that historical fiction could no longer survive as a genre the end of the nineteenth century because there was a clash between the authors’ “perspectivist historicism” and the “demand for moral commentary upon characters’ actions”; the views on the characters would evidently come from the author herself, instead of echoing the historical figures in the literary work (Mitchell, 2010: 21). This discrepancy would create “a kind of psychological anachronism” (Ibid.). There is an important division between “parody and innovation, pastiche and reinterpretation” which is “an important demarcation that separates genres on the border between neo-Victorian texts and historical fiction set in the nineteenth century” (Ibid.). Neo-Victorian authors try to emulate the Victorian style, but not without a distinct purpose: it is not imitation for its own sake.

Fiction about the 19th century sometimes strives to fix “aspects of the Victorian age, or the Victorians’ attitudes to the specifics of sex, gender, and erotic relationships” (Ibid.). Thus, some works of neo-Victorian fiction may depict a more knowing and uninhibited attitude towards sexuality of the Victorians, e.g. in the case of Byatt’s *Possession* and the

relationship between Ash and La Motte. Neo-Victorian fiction became popular around a time when there were most likely no Victorians left; this allowed the authors of the 1980s and onwards to be free of “personal memory” of the Victorian era, which might hold them back from reinterpretation and novel representation of the 19th century (Mitchell, 2010: 12). The Victorian era is both close enough and far enough not to induce any “anxiety of influence” for contemporary authors of the 20th and 21st century (Hadley, 2010: 9).

Language and narrative influence the perception of history as much as it does fiction; therefore, the historical narrative cannot be heralded as any one ‘truth’ (Mitchell, 2010: 24). History as a narrative has an author and the historian’s own influence on the narrative undermines the notion of history’s “privileged access to the real” (Ibid.). The past cannot be “simply mediated” through primary sources; it is transmitted through the historian’s own interpretation of past events (Ibid.).

6.1. The Fascination with the Victorian Era and A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*

It is difficult to determine whether the late 20th and 21st century authors use the neo-Victorian form because it allows to create narratives with closure or rather as a tool to examine themes and issues that “can be projected backwards onto our forebears” (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010: 27). Contemporary writers use Victorian texts as “an imaginative repository” (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010: 21) which can be problematic if authors choose to use real persons as characters in their texts as it raises ethical issues of misrepresentation.

A.S. Byatt uses *Possession* in order to evoke “a vanished world and time, for articulating the significance of the humanities” (Keen, 2001: 34). The view of humanities as an important source of information and understanding of the world is in decline; therefore, Byatt’s attempts to create a positive evaluation of the humanities are particularly relevant in the 21st century. The dual plot of *Possession* creates “a hierarchical relationship between the present and the past” but instead of giving an advantage to the present, the plot of the Victorian era has more influence (Headley, 2010: 124). As Roland and Maud trace Ash and La Motte’s stay in Yorkshire, they begin to echo the poets in the Victorian era: “the afterlife of the past threatens to take over the present” and the Victorian poets seem to reach Roland and Maud beyond their temporal plane (Ibid.: 125)

Neo-Victorian fiction is considered a natural extension of postmodernism; while several postmodern authors have written fiction that fits within the neo-Victorian framework, their work cannot be counted among “other postmodern historiographic metafiction”; the neo-Victorian fiction seeks to not only be self-reflective, in the usual tradition of postmodernism, but to closely examine the “Victorian forms of historical narratives (Hadley, 2010: 19).

A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* can be considered the catalyst for the trend of the neo-Victorian novel in the late 20th century (Heilmann, Llewellyn, 2010: 18), “catapult[ing] neo-Victorian fiction into the mainstream” (Hadley, 2010: 2). Byatt herself has stated that there are more reasons to write about the past other than the fact that the present is an effect of it; it is as important to write about the past in order to keep the literature and language of the past alive for the pleasure of the reader (Ibid.). The dual storylines of A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* when “read together, dramatise the process of reconstructing an earlier time” (Mitchell, 2010: 1).

Possession can be viewed as an archive romance because it fits into the framework of this sub-genre with characters who are researchers, engaged in a romance adventure (Keen, 2001: 35). The research is the key to the plot action and features “climactic discoveries and rewards”, which are gained after suffering “discomforts and inconveniences (...) in the service of knowledge” (Ibid.). The archive romance also emphasizes sex as the prize at the end of the quest and “material traces of the past revealing the truth” (Ibid.).

Possession deals with a “possession” which aims to “re-centre the literary text as a medium for cultural memory” (Mitchell, 2010: 94). Byatt’s novel juxtaposes “scientific truths” with desire, which is a “disruptive excess that cannot be accounted for nor fully explicated by science” (Ibid.: 95). Byatt chooses the Victorian age as the background for *Possession* because it is a time when “the literary text did play a more central, and valued, role in propagating knowledge” (Ibid.). The fictional Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash is both literary and scientific; his poetry combines “religious belief, pagan mythology, history and science, which attempts to both discover and communicate truths that, he believes, are not accessible through only one of these means” (Mitchell, 2010: 95).

The contemporary storyline of the 1980s in *Possession* is filled with references to “impersonal, dense and scholarly works” that do not assist in enlivening the past, but rather complicate the scholars’ perception of it (Mitchell, 2010:96). Byatt depicts 20th century scholarship as “plagued by its subjugation to categorical and methodological imperatives; by

each critic's overwhelming commitment to practices that are depicted as more scientific than literary and thus unsuited to the critic's task, rendering their knowledge flawed" (Mitchell, 2010: 96).

According to Mitchell, Byatt's *Possession* suggests that she wishes to "reassert the authority of the Author"; however, seen as Byatt is not only the author of the text, but also a critic and reader herself, *Possession* is "split between the authority of the author and the power of the reader, and critic, to make meanings" (Mitchell, 2010: 103).

The title of A.S. Byatt's novel is used as a recurring theme throughout the text and 'possession' appears in various contexts; the literary scholars in the novel attempt to 'possess' the Ash and La Motte love letters and the characters on both temporal planes attempt to possess one another, or to escape possession. One of the scholars depicted in the contemporary storyline of *Possession* is the American scholar Mortimer Cropper, Roland's adversary and a fanatical collector of any and all items connected with Ash. Cropper collects Ash's relics in order to evoke a closeness with the great poet; the novel's title 'possession' is shown in a material sense as Cropper seeks to possess whatever remains of Ash (Ibid.). Byatt's use of Cropper as a rich American is her commentary on decline of the English economy in the 80s (Ibid.). Cropper propagates the myth of "Acquisitive America" (Ibid.). The relationships between Ash and La Motte in the Victorian era and Roland and Maud in the 1980s are also closely connected with 'possession' as "textual desire" because, similarly to a lover, it must "both possess (...) and be possessed (Mitchell, 2010: 106). Byatt further satirizes academia through the characters of James Blackadder, Fergus Wolff and Leonora Sterne: scholars who are "reductive" or fixated "on a single concern", such as sexuality, which creates an erroneous or imprecise interpretation of the works of Ash and La Motte (Headley, 2010: 127).

Possession ends with Ash accidentally meeting his daughter Maia and becoming aware of who she is; however, no one but himself and the reader is aware of this encounter and his knowledge. The scholars in the contemporary storyline are convinced that Ash died unaware that his and La Motte's child was alive; this creates an emphasis of the reader's role who alone may access this information about the past, not the scholars who theorize and analyze the past (Mitchell, 2010: 106). The ending is presented as a postmodern element which indicates that "the past remains unknowable", undermining the findings of Roland, Maud and the other scholars because they never learn the truth about how Ash met his child.

It is a past that cannot be captured in the textual evidence found by the scholars and underlines the ambiguity of the past (Ibid.: 138). The reader has to “actively engage” with the text, just as Roland and Maud do, in order to solve the mystery of Ash and La Motte; this way the past is revitalized (Headley, 2010: 118). Byatt seems to insinuate that the interpretation of the past must show a “balance” between “a scholarly and an emotional approach” in order to ensure the correct treatment of documents and evidence of the past (Ibid.: 130).

Possession suggests that the past is not closed off to the reader, rather it allows the reader to find connections with it through material evidence such as the texts that Roland and Maud discover (Ibid.: 139). The past becomes tangible and available for the reader as she engages with the text; Byatt’s *Possession* provides letters and diary excerpts that facilitate the view of the past as ‘alive’.

7. INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE WORKS OF A.S. BYATT

Intertextuality is “one of the most fraught and uncertain terms in literary criticism” (Kilbride, 2016). Intertextuality helps “reveal” the author’s “intention”; however, it also requires the reader to possess outside knowledge in order for the text to make sense (Ibid.). Julia Kristeva coined the term ‘intertextuality’ in 1969 and it refers to the relationships of the text with other texts. Kristeva “referred to texts in terms of two axes: a horizontal axis connecting the author and reader of a text, and a vertical axis, which connects the text to other texts” (Kristeva, 1996 in Chandler, 2014). The texts share codes and each reading of the text depends on “prior codes”, which must be determined in order to form a better understanding of a text (Chandler, 2014). No text can be considered ‘unique’ as all texts are interconnected and based on others; even language itself determines that we are embedded within the framework of intertextuality as speakers because “language is a system which pre-exists the individual speaker” (Ibid.).

Since every text contains elements of another, ‘authorship’ is a problematic term when viewed from the perspective of intertextuality (Ibid.). Roland Barthes proposed a concept of “the death of the author” in opposition to “the birth of the reader” (Ibid.), which shifted the importance from author as the creator of the text to the reader who constructs the text. No text can be interpreted by the reader without taking into account the context in which it was created; the reader draws upon an unavoidable “primary frame” when approaching the text (Ibid.). There are “multiple codes from wider contexts – both textual and social” that the text uses as a source and the awareness of these codes provides the reader of the text with some preconceptions as to the text’s “intertextual framework” (Ibid.).

Barthes has stated that “[a]s soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively (...) the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (Barthes, 1977: 142) (original emphasis). Barthes considered the author a product of modern society, as in the Middle Ages, authorship was not particularly important (Ibid.: 142-143). The decline in the significance of the author “utterly transforms the modern text” (Ibid.: 145) because the text is not separate from the author and thus, does not exist in terms of a “before and an after” (Ibid.): the text and the author exist simultaneously in the “*here and now*” (Ibid.) (original emphasis).

Intertextuality presents a challenge for the reader's interpretation of the text because some intertexts may not be recognized or understood by the reader, thus detracting from the accuracy and quality of the intended interpretation. It is imperative that the author of the text uses intertexts in a way that allows the reader to grasp the intended meaning: "The writer-reader relationship is dependent on the latter's capacity to understand, and *not misunderstand*, the writer" (Shastri, 2001: 9) (original emphasis).

A.S. Byatt's *Possession* contains several intertexts and "might function as a base or touchstone for the reader's knowledge of other literary works" (Kilbride, 2016). The intertextuality used in *Possession* "mediates cultural memory since it constantly evokes the memory of other texts" (Mitchell, 2010: 104). The novel can therefore be seen as "an exciting detective game" because the reader must try to follow and grasp the intertexts, which "engages both the intellect and the emotions"; the reading constitutes "an endless process of reaching back for additional meanings, imitating the process of knowledge", which is a key factor for postmodernism (Ibid.: 105).

Keen has argued that the intertextuality in *Possession* is largely 'manufactured' and therefore not as challenging to the reader as *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, both of which feature direct allusions to literature and art: the reader is expected to recognize Roland and Maud (and the other scholars) as experts in their field of literary scholarship; however, the reader herself does not have to be well-versed in the intertexts which are present in *Possession* in order to completely understand or enjoy it (Keen, 2002).

However, even the characters' names themselves are linked to certain intertexts which enrich the interpretation and understanding of *Possession* if the reader is aware of these connections. For instance, Maud's name is a reference to a poem by Tennyson (1855), which influences not only the reader's interpretation of the literary scholar, but also is used by Roland to draw his first impression of Maud (Shastri, 2001: 9). Similarly, Christabel, too, is named after Coleridge's poem (1799-1800). The Victorian poets created by Byatt have originated in real authors of the Victorian age; Ash is often recognized by readers and researchers as based on Robert Browning while La Motte is a combination of Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson (Kilbride, 2016). The romantic relationship between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning may have been an inspiration for Byatt since the fictional poets' love letters in *Possession* echo the correspondence between the Brownings (Ibid.). Ash's poetry is based on the poems of not only Browning, but also contains elements

of Tennyson and Swinburne. Swinburne's poem *The Garden of Proserpine* (1909) is directly referenced in *Possession*.

There are references to the poetry of Tennyson throughout the correspondence between Ash and La Motte; in particular, to Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott* (1832), to whom Christabel compares herself as discussed in the chapter "The Myth of Merlin and Vivien in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*" in this Master's Thesis. The poem is particularly significant for the characterization of La Motte and reveals her own perception of herself as a passive observer of the outside world; the tale of the Lady of Shalott is also linked to the relationship between Ash and La Motte as their romantic involvement results in La Motte's loss of independence and solitude (Kilbride, 2016).

A.S. Byatt uses intertexts in order to create a sense of authenticity for the reader and to give a deeper insight into the characters and themes. Byatt's intended reader has some knowledge of the 19th century literature and culture, as well as some notion of the general tendencies in literary theory. Though the intertexts enrich *Possession*, it may prove complicated for some readers to grasp the idea of the text without sufficient background knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The popularity and appeal of the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien in the Victorian age stems from its themes of sexuality, knowledge versus desire and power relations between men and women. The scientific theories by Darwin and the popularity of the pseudo-science of phrenology influenced the Victorian view of the differences between men and women, as discussed in chapter 1 of the present Master's Thesis.

The prevalent ideology of the Victorian era limited the opportunities available for women outside the domestic sphere. The Victorians saw the woman as biologically and intellectually inferior to the man; the sole purpose of the woman was to birth and rear children. The Victorian attitude towards sex and modesty lead to repression and silencing of sexual discourse in the 19th century; however, there was an implicit incitement to discourse about sex in such areas as science and politics.

The medieval cycles of Arthurian myth gained increasing popularity in the Victorian era because of nostalgia for a simpler time and also an admiration of the courtly world. Thomas Mallory's version of the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien was particularly enticing for Victorian poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. The medieval myth of the beguiling of Merlin inspired Victorian poets and artists through its rendition of the power struggle between a man and woman.

There is a discrepancy between the original version of the myth which first appears in *Estoire Merlin* and the Victorian interpretation of the tale. In *Estoire Merlin* Vivien is a literate woman who is hungry for knowledge and power, who ignites Merlin's desire because of her great beauty. Vivien and Merlin decide upon an arrangement, according to which the sage agrees to teach Vivien all that he knows and she promises to be his love in return. Though Vivien imprisons Merlin in an invisible tower, from which he may never escape, her motives are not malicious. Vivien reciprocates Merlin's love and wishes to keep the sage all to herself; the maiden also hopes to learn even more of Merlin's magic. Vivien retains the ability to come and go as she pleases, while Merlin remains static in his enchanted prison. Vivien's enchantment reverses their roles, as previously Merlin was the one visiting her during intervals in his adventures in the service of King Arthur.

The interpretation of Vivien and Merlin's relationship by Victorian poets and artists is vastly different. Arnold briefly mentions Vivien in his poem *Tristram and Iseult*, in which

the maiden uses Merlin's love against him; Vivien imprisons the sage because his love has grown tiresome and leaves. Tennyson's interpretation of Vivien is even more negative: Vivien is explicitly described as an opportunistic harlot whose attempts to seduce Merlin are pathetic and meager. Vivien succeeds in her capture of the wise sage only because Merlin is touched by her emotional manipulation and the maiden manages to wear the sage down.

In the poems of Arnold and Tennyson, Vivien abandons Merlin with no intention of ever returning; in both poems Vivien's role thereafter is miniscule, even though she has gained significant power. In contrast, in the medieval versions of the myth of Merlin and Vivien that supersede *Estoire Merlin* (i.e. *Mort Artu*, *Livre de Perceval* etc.), Vivien's role is expanded and she becomes the Lady of the Lake after learning magic.

A.S. Byatt uses explicit references to the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien, as well as to Tennyson's poem of the same name in *Possession*. Byatt alludes to the myth in her earlier work *The Virgin in the Garden*. The protagonists of *Possession* – fictional poets Christabel La Motte and Randolph Henry Ash, struggle with the inherent 19th century rationality and the desire they feel for one another.

The Master thesis has successfully answered the research questions, as is evident in the chapters outlined in the introduction. However, more in depth research is needed for the discussion of A.S. Byatt's *Possession* as a neo-Victorian novel, as well as the intertextuality used in *Possession*, *The Virgin in the Garden* and other works. A.S. Byatt continues to be of interest to literary scholars and theorists, which has resulted in an abundance of theoretical material, only part of which has been used in this research work.

THESES

1. The sexual repression of the Victorian era silenced discourse on sexuality in society, bar a select few areas of life such as medicine and politics, in which sex was discussed implicitly.
2. The Victorians justified the limitations for women in the 19th century with scientific theories such as those cultivated by phrenology and Charles Darwin; according to these theories, the woman was classified as frail, emotional, biologically and intellectually inferior to men.
3. Women were assigned social types according to their 'usefulness' in society: a respectable woman was expected to marry and produce children.
4. All women who deviated from the norm were considered unfavorable for Victorian society. The most dangerous types of woman for the Victorians were the prostitute and the spinster.
5. The first instance of the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien can be found in the medieval text of *Estoire Merlin*, which describes Merlin and Vivien's arrangement to exchange Merlin's knowledge of magic for Vivien's promise of love.
6. *Estoire Merlin* differs from the other variations in the medieval myth because Vivien is not portrayed negatively, while in the later versions Vivien appears as a cunning and opportunistic woman.
7. The Victorian interpretation of the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien shows the maiden as a symbol of the prostitute.
8. The 19th century rationality of the Victorians ensured their fascination with the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien because it showed knowledge as being overpowered by desire.

9. A.S. Byatt's *Possession* uses the medieval myth of Merlin and Vivien to show the relationship between the two Victorian poets as an opposition of rationality and desire.
10. A.S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden* does not explicitly mention the myth Of Merlin and Vivien, but allusions to the myth are present in the relationship between Frederica, who symbolically stands for Vivien, and Alexander as Merlin.
11. A.S. Byatt's *Possession* is the catalyst for the popularization of the neo-Victorian genre.
12. A.S. Byatt's *Possession* as a neo-Victorian work of postmodern fiction emphasizes the importance of the reader versus the fictional scholars.
13. A.S. Byatt incorporates various intertexts of the 19th century in *Possession*: some intertexts are manufactured by Byatt in the instances of her use of the pastiche of Victorian poetry, while other intertexts are explicit allusions to the 19th century culture and literature.

REFERENCES

1. Adler, Thomas P. "The Uses of Knowledge in Tennyson's Merlin and Vivien." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 11.4, 1970: 1397 – 1403.
2. Byatt, Antonia S. *Possession: A Romance*. New York: Random House, 1990.
3. Byatt, Antonia S. *The Virgin in the Garden*. New York: Vintage International, 1992.
4. Clar, Anna. *Desire: A History of European Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
5. Campbell, Jane. *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*. Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2004.
6. Cavendish, Marshall. *Sex and Society, Volume 2*. New York: Marshall Cavendish Reference, 2010.
7. Degler, Carl N. "What Ought To Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century." *The American Historical Review* 79.5, 1974: 1467-1490.
8. Heng, Geraldine. *Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory*. (p. 97–113) From: Thelma S. Fenster (ed.). *Arthurian Women*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
9. Harland, Catherine R. "Interpretation and Rumor in Tennyson's Merlin and Vivien." *Victorian Poetry* 35.1, 1997: 57-68.
10. Hennelly, Mark M. Jr. "'Repeating Patterns' and Textual Pleasures: Reading (In) A. S. Byatt's 'Possession: A Romance'." *Contemporary Literature* 44.3, 2003: 442-471.
11. Hicks, Elizabeth. *The Still Life in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.
12. Hoberg, Thomas. "Duessa or Lilith: The Two Faces of Tennyson's Vivien." *Victorian Poetry* 25.1, 1987: 17-25.
13. Logan, Deborah. "The Economics of Sexuality: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Victorian "bad conscience"." *Women's Studies* 24, 1995: 293–305.
14. Littleton, Scott C. Malcor, Linda, A. "Some Notes on Merlin." *Arthuriana* 5.3, 1995: 87-95.

15. Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007.
16. Wheatley, Henry B. (ed.). *Estoire Merlin*. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co. 1838-1917.
17. Skeels, Dell (ed. and trans.). *Didot Perceval, or, The Romance of Perceval in Prose*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966.
18. Norris, Lacy J. *Lancelot-Grail: Chapter Summaries*. London: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 2010.
19. Bogdanow, Fanny. *The Romance of the Grail: A Study of the Structure and Genesis of a Thirteenth-century Arthurian Prose Romance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966
20. Arnold, Matthew. *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems by A*. London: B. Fellowes, 1852.
21. Mitchell, Kaye. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
22. Heilmann, Ann. Llewellyn, Mark. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
23. Tarbox, Kate. *Desire for Syzygy in the Novels of A.S. Byatt in The Contemporary British Novel Since 1980*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
24. Barthes, Roland. *Image - Music – Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977.
25. Shastri, Sudha. *Intertextuality and Victorian Studies*. India: Orient Longman Limited, 2001.
26. Hadley, Louisa. *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative, The Victorians and Us*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Electronic Publications

27. Larrington, Carolyne. *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*. 2006. Available from https://datubazes.janet.lv/login?url=http://datubazes.janet.lv:2095/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=174502&site=eds-live&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover [Accessed April 12, 2016]

28. Lee, Elizabeth. *Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality*. 1997. Available from <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/sextheory.html> [Accessed April 12, 2016]
29. Anderson, Nathan. *NoveList Book Discussion Guide: Possession by A. S. Byatt*. 2002. Available from <http://novselect.ebscohost.com/Display/TreeNodeContent?format=html&profile=s7762005.main.novsel2&password=dGJyMOPY8U2vpgAA&ui=501353&schema=http:&source=018313&version=2.1&print=true> [Accessed April 10, 2016]
30. Fabry-Tehranchi. *Continuity and Discontinuity: Illuminating and Interlacing the Adventures of Viviane and Merlin in the Prose Merlin*. 2006. Available from <http://merg.soc.srcf.net/journal/06illumination/fabry.php> [Accessed April 12, 2016]
31. Leader, J. A. *S. Byatt's Possession-- Postmodern or Post-Postmodern?* 1996. Available from <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/uk/byatt/jlpomo3.html> [Accessed April 3, 2016]
32. Chandler, D. *Semiotics for Beginners*. 2014. Available from <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem09.html> [Accessed May 15, 2016]
33. Kilbride, J. *Byatt: Intertextuality*. 2016. Available from <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/byatt-intertextuality/> [Accessed May 15, 2016]
34. Parini, J. *Unearthing the Secret Lover*. 1990. Available from <https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/13/specials/byatt-possession.html> [Accessed April 3, 2016]

Internet Sources

1. Available from <http://www.historyofphrenology.org.uk/overview.htm> [Accessed March 13, 2016]
2. Available from <http://datubazes.lanet.lv:3881/EBchecked/topic/376171/Merlin> [Accessed April 18, 2016]
3. Available from <http://datubazes.lanet.lv:3881/EBchecked/topic/37033/Arthurian-legend> [Accessed April 18, 2016]

4. Available from <http://vault.hanover.edu/~battles/arthur/ladyoflake.htm>
[Accessed March 10, 2016]
5. Available from <http://www.asbyatt.com/biography.aspx> [Accessed March 10, 2016]
6. Available from <http://themanbookerprize.com/people/s-byatt> [Accessed March 10, 2016]
7. Available from: <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/tennyson-lady-of-shalott-1842> [Accessed March 25, 2016]
8. Available from: <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/theme/elaine-of-astalot>
[Accessed March 25, 2016]