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'Flashing into the Crystal Mirror': The Recurrence of the Mirror Motif in Three Arthurian Works

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'Flashing into the Crystal Mirror':
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Abstract

When constructing "The Lady of Shalott", Tennyson resorts to the medieval atmosphere of King Arthur's court to set a poem in which the development of the action is dictated by the pervasive force of a mirror. This object, which controls the Lady's fate, is the one that rules the sense of duality existing in the "The Lady of Shalott". Indeed, the duplications and contrasts on which the poem is based emerge from the encounter of symmetrical and opposing forces face to face, precisely the type of encounter which lies at the heart of the process of refraction in a mirror. In this sense, the mirror in Tennyson's poem could be seen not simply as a physical object, but above all as the expression of a motif characterised by the phenomenon of optical repetition and all the

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processes literally or metaphorically emerging from it. In conflating the Arthurian theme and the exploration of this motif, Tennyson is reviving a pattern which underlies, on different levels, two significant works of the medieval English Arthurian body: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur*. While in *Sir Gawain* the mirror is the source of the symmetrical structure of the poem, the influence of the mirror motif in *Le Morte appears under the form of a multi-shaped duality. The aim of this paper is to investigate the way in which the mirror motif recurs in these three Arthurian works.*

1. The mirror in "The Lady of Shalott": A physical object ruling duplication and contrast

Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" (which is set in the medieval atmosphere of King Arthur's court) has been read as a recreation of Plato's 'Myth of the Cave', as a reflection on "the nature and dangers of creative imagi-nation" (Ebbatson, 1988: 45) or even as a literary approach to the pressing question of the impossibility of absolute knowled-ge; however, it is, above all, a poem about a mirror.

The mirror (a traditional motif in classical mythology) is the object which accompanies the Lady in her incessant labour of weaving, the instrument that provides her with the "shado-ws of the world" which she reproduces in her "magic web", and crucially, the means whereby she can have a glimpse of Sir Lancelot, the image of dazzling light which impels her to

"look down to Camelot", and thus to break the 'laws' imposed by the curse. It is only when the mirror cracks "from side to side" that the Lady realises that her life has come to an end, the moment which signals the beginning of the preparation of her own 'death ritual'. Despite being cracked, however, the mirror is such a pervasive force that it still accompanies the Lady even while her 'death barge' is carrying her down the river towards Camelot; in fact, instead of being a separate object, the mirror has become part of the Lady herself, who now has a "*glassy* countenance" (line 130; emphasis added), the countenance that Lancelot sees reflected as a "lovely face" when the Lady's corpse arrives at Arthur's court.

In this context, the lines "From the bank and from the river / He flashed into the crystal mirror" (105-6) are not only a climactic moment of tension in the poem, but they constitute the passage which contains the key to "The Lady of Shalott": the whole poem is articulated around the instant in which the mirror refracts the double reflection of Lancelot and his image in the water; in other words, the before and after in the life of the Lady is marked by the moment in which the mirror becomes the link between the Lady and Lancelot, who represent opposing forces. In contrast with the Lady, who only has contact with the "shadows of the world", Lancelot is described in ter-

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ms of dazzling light; while, according to A. Dwight Culler, the Lady is a "fairy" creature, a "secret spirit of nature" (1977: 44) representing "the world of the sacred, the divine, the magical" (1977: 48), Sir Lancelot is a down-to-earth figure whose vital energy is expressed in his simple song "Tirra-lirra".

This song serves at the same time as a 'mirror object' which reflects the two songs of the Lady; that is, in the same way as the image of Lancelot works as a boundary between the Lady of Parts 1 and 2 (who is weaving tirelessly) and the Lady of Part 4 (who is preparing her own death), the "Tirra-lirra" song works as a boundary between the Lady's magical and natural song of Part 1 (which can only be heard by the reaper) and the "mournful carol" of Part 4 (which, like the swan's song, announces her death). On a formal level, this duplication and contrast of songs is paralleled by the musical cadence of 'Shalott' and 'Lancelot', which are the words that rhyme with 'Camelot' and which are alternated in the refrain. The fact that these two words (Shalott and Lancelot) are never used in the same stanza (except in that in which, through the mirror, the Lady sees the reflection of Sir Lancelot) represents formally the clash between the opposing forces embodied by the Lady and Lancelot.

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The play with duplications and contrasts is the basis of Tennyson's poem, and this is why, as Isobel Armstrong points out, "the Lady is locked into rigid oppositions, such as the rural and the urban, isolation and community, female and male, the aesthetic and the real" (1993: 83). However, the sense of duality in the poem, of the encounter and clash of opposing forces, is only made possible by the existence of the mirror, the only object that, like the Lady, has contact with its counterpart: while the 'fairy' Lady sees the image of the down-to-earth Lancelot, the static mirror shows on its surface the reflection of the dynamic river. In other words, the poem hinges on "a sense of optical repetition" (Ebbatson, 1988: 47) which is developed through the use of the mirror, the object which lies at the heart of "The Lady of Shalott".

In using the mirror as the basis for his poem, Tennyson does more than creating a work that evokes the classical myth of reflection; what gives a deeper significance to its use is that the weaving Lady is not Arachne, and that the beautiful man whose image is reflected is not Narcissus. They are a damsel who lives near Camelot and Arthur's knight Lancelot; that is, instead of presenting a classical atmosphere for the development of the classical myth of the mirror, Tennyson resorts to the medieval atmosphere of Arthur's court. And it is here that

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this poem about a mirror has relevance not only in itself, but also in relation to the tradition of the Arthurian myth. In fact, by linking the Arthurian theme and the mirror, Tennyson is reviving a pattern which underlies, on different levels, two of the key works of the medieval English Arthurian body: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.

In both medieval works, as in "The Lady of Shalott", duplication and contrast, the encounter of symmetrical and opposing forces are so important that we could see the mirror in Tennyson's poem as the physical embodiment of a motif (the motif of the mirror and optical reflection) recurrent in Arthurian literature. This motif pervades the structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, while in *Le Morte Darthur* it works on several levels, being interwoven with the action in such a way that only through careful examination symmetry and contrast, the pattern of 'mirrored' and 'replaced' characters, becomes evident. The purpose of this paper is to explore the way in which the mirror, that physical object which articulates Tennyson's poem, works as a recurring motif in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur*, therefore revealing a connection among these three works that is based on the conflation of the Arthurian theme and the emergence of the optical reflection of a mirror as a powerfully organising force.

2. Structural symmetry: The hidden force of the mirror in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Placed in the tradition of English alliterative poetry, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be seen as an Arthurian poem in its theme, though formally it is an expression of the mirror motif as a structural influence. As Donald R. Howard has remarked, "no one who reads *Sir Gawain* fails to notice its elaborate, symmetrical structure" (1968: 159); and it is at this point, in the concept of symmetry, where the mirror plays a crucial role. In fact, the principle which lies behind the organisation of Gawain's adventure is a combination of "balance, contrast and antithesis" (Howard, 1968: 159) which results in a very complex design. The idea of duality, of converging and opposing forces (that is, of two images which encounter each other face to face, which is the basis of the reflection in a mirror) is the key to the disposition and development of the episodes that constitute the core of this poem.

Thus, according to Felicity Riddy (1999:107), the poem hinges on two plot elements which involve mirrored instances of the binary articulation Game-exchange: "the Beheading Game -an exchange of blows- and the Exchange of Winnings Game". Similarly, following Howard's analysis of the structure of *Sir Gawain*, the poem is organised in two stages, which co-

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rrespond with Sections (or Fitts) Two and Three as paralleled in Section Four, so that the events of the arming of the knight, the description of a building and the confession are mirrored from the first stage into the second, with the only difference that the nucleus in the first involves the three temptations by the lady of the castle (which at the same time are alternated with the three hunting scenes), whereas the nucleus of the second hinges on the three strokes given by the Green Knight.

However, the degree to which the mirror motif pervades the structure of the poem is not only restricted to plot elements or to the organisation into stages made up of different episodes, but as studies like that carried out by Michael Robertson reveal, it reaches such complexity that the treatment of symmetry can be rendered even in mathematical terms. As a matter of fact, as Robertson suggests, *Sir Gawain* can be divided into groups of eleven stanzas, establishing a pattern in which the first hunting / temptation scene (stanzas 46-56) serves as a hinge around which the sequence of scenes Court / Journey / Castle (stanzas 1-45) and the mirrored sequence Castle / Journey / Court (stanzas 57-101) are arranged (Robertson, 1982: 780-81).

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This 'mathematical' structure developed on the basis of the number eleven (which, at the same time, embodies in itself the mirror motif in the optical reflection 1|1) acquires deeper significance considering the symbolic value attached to numbers in the Middle Ages. In fact, according to Robertson (1982: 784), 11 represents 'transgression' in its going beyond the perfection of 10, and this 'transgression' is mirrored on a wider level in the total number of stanzas, 101 (which is again an optical reflection), a number that goes beyond the perfection of 100. At the same time, if we link the central number in the structure of the poem (11) with the central number in its symbolic imagery (the 5 of the Pentangle, a number associated with perfection and incorruptibility), the result is the mingling of two opposing forces (truth and perfection *vs* transgression and failure) which is the blend that Sir Gawain himself embodies since, according to Robertson, the knight "transgresses through his courtesy, fails precisely from perfection" (1982: 785).

This clash (and reconciliation) of contrary elements is echoed at the same time by the opposition of two symbolic objects connected with Gawain: the shield and the girdle, which, as Howard points out, are "paired so that they reflect the moral choice which confronts the hero" (1968: 167), in such a way

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that the shield (the emblem of Gawain's knightly virtue) is replaced later by the girdle (the emblem of his fault). The coming into terms of the opposition between these objects (which implies the reconciliation of their symbolic values, and as a result of the two 'sides' of Sir Gawain) is, moreover, echoed by the agreement of the two modes recognised by J. A. Burrow (1965: 171): the "romantic" mode (the parallel of the number 5 and the shield, as it is "associated with the superlative test") and the "realistic" mode (the parallel of the number 11 and the girdle, as it is "associated with the partial failure in the test"). Thus, as the duality 5/11 (mirrored in the wider 'spheres' of symbolic meaning and mode) suggests, the "tendency to match and contrast things is the dominant feature of the poem's style" (Howard, 1968: 169), so that it transpires not only on structural and symbolic levels, but also on the surface one, with the opposition between "the unpleasant journey and the agreeable life of the castle, fasting and feasting, youth and age, beauty and ugliness" (Howard, 1968: 169).

Nevertheless, the strength of the mirror as a structural force does not end here, but it pervades two other elements which are crucial in the poem. On the one hand, parallelism and duality are the basis of what could be considered the central episode in *Sir Gawain*: the realisation of his failure in 'trawþe'

when he is exposed by the Green Knight in the Green Chapel. The appeal of this moment is drawn not only from its significance as the discovery of Gawain's 'fall', but much of its force comes from the impact that it produces on the readers when they realise that the Green Knight and Bertilak, the lord of the castle, are the same person. It is now that appearance (the appearance of two different characters) is contrasted with reality (the identity of the Green Knight as Bertilak), a contrast that also affects Sir Gawain in the opposition between what he appears to be (the most perfect knight) and what he really (and unavoidably) is (a human being).

At the same time, this clash between appearance and reality, a clash that readers acknowledge as they come near the ending of the poem, is mirrored in another clash which only becomes apparent after the reflection on the meaning of words. Apparently, when we (and Gawain) 'hear' the expression "Green Chapel" we immediately associate it with the image of a sanctuary or any other religious building; however, when we actually 'see' it, it is only "a lyttel on a launde, a lawe as hit were" (line 2171), some kind of burial mould that looks like "an olde caue / or a creuisse of an olde cragge" (2182-83). The seeming inconsistency between this image and our expected image is, as Angela Carson (1968: 246-47) has remarked,

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an ironic play with our inability to see beyond appearances: etymologically, the 'chapel' where Sir Gawain and the Green Knight meet is not the 'private sanctuary' (coming from Old French 'chapelle'), but an archaic word deriving from 'chapler' ('to cut down'). Again, the Gawain-poet has played with our trust in appearances: in the same way as we have been in contact with the 'real' Green Knight since Gawain arrives at the castle, we have been in contact with the 'real' meaning of 'chapel' from the moment that the Green Knight challenges Gawain. In two mirrored instances of shock, the poem reinforces our awareness that, like Sir Gawain, we are human beings, and in the same way as he fails in 'trawþe', we fail in our ability to see the 'truth' behind appearances.

On the other hand, the mirror motif also shrouds the most important feature of the poem on its formal level: its sound quality. As Alain Renoir has suggested, there is a conjunction between "the patterns of sound... and the sense of key passages" (1968: 145); the complex patterns of sound in the poem are developed not only for the sake of alliteration, but also to 'echo' (or 'mirror') "the effects of the visual descriptions" (Renoir, 1968: 145). Thus, in the same way as in Tennyson's poem Lancelot's image of dazzling light was echoed (or mirrored) by his song since both established a boundary between

the before and after of the Lady, in *Sir Gawain* the duality between visual images and sound effects is expressed in how sounds echo images, and images mirror sounds so that they are interwoven in an 'endless knot'.

3. The emergence of reflection in *Le Morte Darthur*: Duality and the pattern of mirrored and replaced characters

Alliteration and sound are also important in the other medieval work which combines Arthurian theme and the motif of the mirror: Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* **(note 1)**. As Terence McCarthy remarks, "alliteration can be found throughout *Le Morte*, especially in passages where the emotional impact is strong" (1991: 134); however, the most significant use of this device is not the search for sound effects, but it is connected with the pattern of naming characters, mainly the naming of brothers. From Balin and Balan (I.69), Sir Galihodin and Sir Galihud (I.286), Sir Bleoberis and Sir Blamor (I.329), the brothers with whom Breunor le Noire and Lancelot have a confrontation (Sir Plenorius, Sir Pillounes, Sir Pellogris, Sir Pellandris, brothers all of Sir Plaine), the four brothers that Gareth meets (Sir Percard, Sir Pertolepe, Sir Perimones, Sir Persant of Inde), to even Gawain and his brothers (Gareth, Gaheris and Agravain), Helius and Helake (II.131), and the

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two brothers who fight against one of Gawain's enemies, Sir Agloval (Sir Goodewin and Sir Gawdelin), knights are again and again given their names on the basis of alliteration.

The crucial point about this pattern is not the musical quality in itself, but the fact that it reveals how the powerful force of the mirror motif that pervaded "The Lady of Shalott" and *Sir Gawain* is also at work in *Le Morte*. In fact, what all these instances of name-alliteration share is that the pattern is applied to brothers, to groups of brothers (either pairs or groups of four) whose basis is the idea of duality, the same duplication that lies at the heart of the process of refraction in a mirror. Thus, while in Tennyson's poem the mirror motif appeared in the form of a physical object that ruled the development of the poem and in *Sir Gawain* it was the source of the symmetrical structure, the mirror reveals itself in Malory's work in the form of a multi-shaped duality.

This duality can be seen, as a matter of fact, both on a surface and on a core (or deep) level. On the one hand, apart from the linking of pairs of brothers by alliteration, the idea of duplication is explicitly rendered on the surface level by the emphasis on the number 'two', which is recalled again and again throughout the work: Uther falls sick *two* years after Arthur's birth (I.14), Arthur is advised by Merlin to ask the help of *two*

kings (who, significantly, are linked by the alliteration of their names: King Ban and King Bors), some of Tristam's earliest adventures are the confrontation with *pairs* of Arthur's knights (I.330, 336-37), and the number 'two' pervades the dreams and visions of the knights during their quest of the Sangrail (*two* women and *two* animals in Percival's dream, *two* birds and *two* flowers in Bor's vision).

On the other hand, this surface recurrence of the number 'two' becomes crucial as the organising force in Books III and IV, where duality is revealed not only in the structure of both episodes (which reflect what Larry D. Benson regards as Malory's tendency to work "toward the creation of para-llels", 1976: 70), but also in how the characters involved are interrelated, so that Book IV could be considered a 'mirro-red image' of Book III. Indeed, both episodes are arranged around two main elements (which at the same time exemplify on a microlevel the two main elements on the macrolevel of the 'hoole book'): love (in Book III the wedding of Arthur and Guenever, in Book IV Merlin's falling in love with Nimue) and quests and adventures (in both cases involving three knights, one of whom is always Sir Gawain, creating thus a symmetry of the design characterised by Beverly Kennedy as "the triple quest pattern", 1992: 60). Moreover, these two elements are

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not independent but interconnected, and thus while in Book III the wedding is the frame of the quests carried out by the three knights (Gawain, Tor and Pellinor), in Book IV one of the characters that is involved in the love relationship described at the beginning (Nimue) creates a link with two of the adventurous knights (Gawain-Pelleas, Marhaus and Uwain), who are as a result interwoven in a complex interlock: Nimue, who rejects Merlin, is in love with Pelleas ("... and loved together during their life days", I.158), who has been in turn rejected by Ettard, the lady with whom Gawain has lain, failing thus in his 'trawþe' since he had "plight his troth unto Sir Pelleas to be true and faithful onto him" (I.154).

The link between these two episodes based on a dual pattern is Sir Gawain, whose role as a hinge between the two Books is significant because he is the character that embodies in himself the interconnection between the two levels (surface and core) on which duality is revealed in *Le Morte*. As a matter of fact, while in these two episodes Gawain is one of the structural (or 'core') forces that contributes to their mirror quality, he is at the same time constantly connected with the topic of revenge (as McCarthy points out, "he starts his career in *Le Morte* as he finishes it, seeking family vengance", 1991: 13), a topic in which the element of duplication emerges

again on the surface level, on the parallel between the families (Gawain's and Lamorak's) involved in rivalry and revenge. In fact, Gawain's family consists of four brothers (Gawain, Gareth, Gaheris and Agravain) and one stepbrother (Mordred, the youngest); similarly, Lamorak's family also consists of four brothers (Agloval, Lamorak, Dornard and Percival) and one stepbrother (Tor, the eldest), in such a way that the emphasis on groups of brothers involving the number 'two' that appears throughout the work here acquires deeper significance since it underlies the mirroring of two families that reflect the ideas of rivalry and revenge, two of the elements connected to the movement of decline of Arthur's court.

Thus, the figure of Sir Gawain, the link between the two levels on which duality is at work, opens the way for the exploration of the organising force of the mirror on the deep level, a force whose effects can be analysed in the way in which characters (both the characters themselves and the connections between them) are arranged and developed through the idea of duplication.

Indeed, duality emerges in the life of King Arthur, who is brought up by 'duplicate parents' (Sir Ector and his wife) and has two sons (Borre, referred to as "a good knight", and Mordred, the one who will destroy him), and it also pervades the life

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of Sir Tristam (to whose adventures one third of *Le Morte* is devoted). The pattern of duplication in Tristam's life is reflected in many episodes, as when his step-mother's scheme of poisoning the Tristam-child (interrupted by Tristam's stepbrother, who drinks the poison by accident, I.305) is mirrored in Isoud's mother's scheme of enchanting Isoud and King Mark by means of a love drink (interrupted by the Tristam-adult, who drinks it together with Isoud by accident, I.345). Similarly, in Book VIII, Chapters 15 and 30 develop another repetition of pattern: a knight (Sir Bleoberis and Sir Palomides) asking for a recompense that happens to be a lady loved by King Mark and Tristam (an earl's wife and Isoud); in both cases, Tristam is expected to rescue the lady, but in both cases he is late. Finally, the third mirrored episode involving Sir Tristam is even more relevant since it establishes a connection between the two 'Isouds' in Tristam's life: on two occasions Tristam is wounded with an envenomed weapon (I.316, 367) and he has to be healed by a lady, Le Beau Isoud (*daughter* to the King of Ireland) in the first case and Isoud Le Blanche Mains (*daughter* to the King of Brittany) in the second, and the conclusion of both episodes is that Tristam falls in love with them. At the same time, his attitude towards each Isoud shapes a dual perspective on the notion of love-marriage: while in his attachment to the former Tristam "aspires to the sublimated

love that can inspire", his marriage to the latter implies an approach to "the stolid satisfaction of the married man" (Hoffman, 1996: 75).

The possibility of considering these 'Isouds' as duplicates acquires further significance if we take into account the fact that it allows us to establish one of the most important links in Malory's work: the connection between Tristam and Lancelot. As in Tristam's, in Sir Lancelot's life there are also two 'duplicate' women with the same name: Elaine (daughter to King Pelles and Galahad's mother) and Elaine le Blank (whose token Lancelot wears in a tournament, II.391); however, what connects these ladies is not Lancelot's love (as it is in the case of Tristam) but the jealousy of the most important woman in Lancelot's life: Queen Guenever, whom he defines as "... the fairest lady and most of bounty in the world" (I.404).

This idea introduces the claim made by several critics (among them, Goodman and McCarthy) that one of the main functions of the Tristam section is to set a parallel (or foil) to Lancelot and Guenever's relationship by presenting the adultery between Tristam and Isoud. As Jennifer Goodman remarks, "... the great love triangle of Tristam, Isolde and King Mark of Cornwall... [parallels] the much more complex relationship of Lancelot, Guinevere and Arthur" (1988: 52); indeed, although

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"the love of Lancelot and Guenevere is regularly shrouded in ambiguity... [while] with Tristam and Isolde there is no ambiguity" (McCarthy, 1991: 28) and "the foil is never allowed to upstage the protagonist" (Goodman, 1988: 53), what McCarthy calls "the frequent points of resemblance" between the two adulterous relationships (two young men in love with a king's wife, who has also another admirer -Meliagaunt and Palomides-) show how the mirror motif structures the connection between the pairs of lovers, a connection that is recognised by Isoud herself ("... there be within this land but four lovers, that is, Sir Lancelot and Queen Guenever, and Sir Tristam and Queen Isoud", I.359). According to Kennedy, this parallelism is used by Malory to establish an analogy between Tristam and Lancelot that aims at enhancing the contrasts existing between two types of knighthood, in such a way that the duality Tristam-Lancelot stands for the opposition between the Worshipful and the True knight and lover (Kennedy, 1992: 94).

Moreover, the link between Tristam and Lancelot is made explicit throughout *Le Morte* not only by the correspondence between certain episodes (like their fits of madness), but especially by constant comparisons made by other knights: "... of his [Tristam's] might and hardiness we knew none so

good a knight, but if it be Sir Launcelot du Lake" (I.360); [to Tristam] "... ye are the man called the most of prowess except Sir Launcelot" (I.407). All the connections between Tristam and Lancelot (both on a personal level and on the level of the love-triangle) fulfil a two-fold purpose: firstly, they emphasize the contrast between the two betrayed husbands ("... King Arthur and King Mark were never like of conditions", II.468), in such a way that Arthur's virtues are enhanced when the clash between his personality and that of King Mark ("... the falsest king and knight... the most coward and full of treason", II.29) is revealed. Secondly, these connections meet the objective of stressing the importance of Sir Lancelot, who has been considered by some critics Malory's favourite knight (McCarthy, 1991: 23) or the central hero of *Le Morte* (Lumiansky, 1964a: 92).

As D. S. Brewer points out, of the "some half-dozen characters" that "continually recur" in Malory's work "Arthur and Lancelot are the most important" (1963: 45); in fact, Lancelot's preeminence is so strong that we could advance the hypothesis of considering that in the case of Arthur and Lancelot the duality enforced by the mirror motif does not emerge in the form of parallel, but in the form of 'replacement'. This possibility would suggest that the role which one could expect to

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be played by King Arthur is performed instead by "the man of most worship in the world" (I.382). As a matter of fact, Arthur's prowess as a warrior (described in Book V, where Arthur even kills the Emperor Lucius, I.182) is soon overshadowed by the strength (and, using one of the images of "The Lady of Shalott", the 'dazzling light') of Lancelot's success both in helping damsels and in having the victory at tournaments. According to R. M. Lumiansky, this 'superiority' is already hinted at even in Book V, since "a primary purpose of [this Tale is] to introduce Lancelot as the chief knight of the Round Table, with stress upon his... military prowess" (1964a: 91). Even if we consider that, despite this idea suggested by Lumiansky, Arthur is the protagonist of Book V, his dominance is soon replaced by that of Lancelot, who, as Malory himself remarks, increases "... marvellously in worship, and in honour" (I.194). While Arthur appears as a passive figure in many jousts, Lancelot "... in all tournaments and jousts and deeds of arms... passes all other knights" (I.194) until he achieves "the greatest name of any knight in the world" (I.230).

Arthur's passivity and Lancelot's contrasted activity become crucial in two episodes related with Queen Guenever: when she is accused of treason after a banquet (in which numbers, as in *Sir Gawain*, are very significant since she invites 24

knights, the same number as the days Lancelot has remained unconscious for his 24 sinful years), it is Sir Lancelot (and not Arthur) who rescues her (II.385-86); similarly, when Guenever is about to be immolated after the adultery has been discovered by Meliagaunt, it is Sir Lancelot (and not the king) who fights to defend her (II.445-46). However, the moment in which Lancelot's superiority is most clear is the description of Sir Urré's healing, which takes place during the period of decadence of Arthur's court and the Round Table, decadence which is mirrored not in Arthur but in Lancelot, who in the quest of the Sangrail appears as a rebuked sinner instead of as a praised victorious knight.

This episode (narrated in Book XIX, Chapters 10-12) has attracted the attention of many critics because it reinforces Lancelot's predominance as "the best knight of the world" when he is the only one who manages to heal Sir Urré, so that, despite being a sinner, "Malory's Lancelot is still singled out for a special sign of God's grace" (Goodman, 1988: 55). Several explanations have been given to this passage, like the suggestion that Lancelot can succeed because, once the sinless men (Percival and Galahad) have died, he is the most perfect knight among the sinful (Benson, 1976: 228), but the general impression that it produces as being "a total

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vindication of Lancelot" (McCarthy, 1991: 45) opens the way for considering this episode (regardless the interpretation we choose) as the final proof of Lancelot's replacement and dominance over Arthur.

Moreover, Lancelot's preeminence is reflected in many other aspects of *Le Morte*. Indeed, although the work is full of parallelisms like that existing between Tristam and Lancelot (such as the 'duplicated' episodes undergone by two of the knights who see the Sangrail, Percival and Bors, with parallel dreams and parallel temptations) and replacements like that existing between Arthur and Lancelot (such as Merlin's 'substitution' by Nimue, who embodies the positive force of magic previously represented by Merlin), the most important instances in the pattern of structural duality in *Le Morte* are the ones in which Lancelot himself is the 'mirrored' entity. Those are the moments in which Lancelot becomes (as it happened in "The Lady of Shalott") the real-world object whose image is projected by the refracting surface of the mirror motif in other characters: in Gareth (who parallels Lancelot) and in Galahad (who replaces Lancelot).

The connection between Lancelot and Gareth (whom McCarthy calls "Malory's second favourite") is emphasized from the beginning, when, after being despised by Sir Kay (that nic-

knames him 'Beaumains'), Gareth is treated kindly only by Sir Gawain and Lancelot, who replaces "the real brother to provide an ideal of behaviour the young Gareth can adopt" (McCarthy, 1991: 24). Thus, since Gareth is "the most likable member of [Gawain's] vengeful family" (Goodman, 1988: 54), "epitomizing more admirable qualities than any of his brothers" (Guerin, 1964: 113), his deliberate identification with Lancelot ("... he would be in Sir Launcelot's company... he withdrew himself from his brother Gawain's fellowship", I.299) is significant because it not only shows Gareth's explicit rejection of his family (an action that signals a pattern of opposition to his brothers to the point that "Sir Gawain's devaluation is crucial to the enhancement of Sir Gareth"; Wheeler, 1993: 119), but above all it marks his position as Lancelot's parallel.

This parallelism, which pervades the deepest traits of their characters (such as "their oneness in ideals and in innate goodness"; Guerin, 1964: 115), emerges in the similarities of some episodes (while Lancelot is always ready to help damsels, Gareth undertakes all his adventures to help Lady Lyonesse) and in the recurrence of certain patterns, such as the clash between appearance and reality (which was a key to understanding *Sir Gawain*): while Lancelot (like many knights throughout the work) appears in disguise when he borrows

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Kay's armour, creating "a situation in which there is a gap between a knight's real ability in combat and his apparent ability" (McCarthy, 1991: 21), in the case of Gareth the contrast 'appearace *vs* reality' becomes evident when the apparent page Beaumains reveals himself as the real knight Sir Gareth, Arthur's nephew (I.278-79). Above all, the possibility of regarding Gareth as Lancelot's duplicate is emphasized by the fact that, like Lancelot himself, Gareth is also a 'mirrored image' on the two levels at which duality works throughout the whole *Le Morte*: on a core (or deep) level and on a surface level.

On the one hand, Gareth's parallel on the core level is Balin, whose story, as Thomas C. Rumble remarks, is full of details of both anticipation and back-reference. This character shares with Gareth two main points of resemblance: Malory's sympathy towards them (a feeling that in the case of Balin, Roger Sherman Loomis characterises as "a certain kinship to the unhappy hero", 1963: 176) and the enhancement of their innate virtues. At the same time, Balin plays an important role in *Le Morte* regarding the preeminence of the mirror motif since he foreshadows two of the most significant characters in Malory's work: Gawain and Arthur. In fact, according to Kennedy, Balin anticipates Gawain in his loyalty to his family, his

skill as a fighter and his fatalism (1992: 218); moreover, the mirroring process existing between Balin and Arthur can be seen in how "the story of Balin... foreshadows the still distant but inexorable Arthurian twilight" (Norris, 1999: 62), so that "Balin is... the central figure in a tragedy that mirrors the larger tragedy of the fall of Camelot" (Norris, 1999: 55).

On the other hand, Gareth's parallel on the surface level is Sir Breunor le Noire, whose adventures are narrated in Book IX. Like Gareth, this knight arrives at Arthur's court as a poor man who proves to be of noble birth, and like Gareth he is despised and nicknamed by Sir Kay (who calls him 'La Cote Male Taile'), but at the same time supported by other two knights (Lamorak and Gaheris); moreover, both Gareth and Breunor undertake a similar pattern of adventures in order to help a lady that constantly rebukes the knight.

All these points of resemblance between Gareth and his 'parallel' on the surface level produce what McCarthy calls a sense of *déjà vu* (1991: 31), a feeling that acquires further relevance if we consider the possibility of applying it beyond the limits of the connections between the stories of these two knights. Indeed, when analysing the wider sphere of the Arthurian works that play with the motif of the mirror, the dimension of *déjà vu* can be used to establish connections between *Le Morte* and

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each one of the other works in which the mirror motif recurs ("The Lady of Shalott" and *Sir Gawain*). In this sense, the notion of *déjà vu* opens the way for the exploration of certain correspondences between *Le Morte* and *Sir Gawain* on the one hand, and between *Le Morte* and "The Lady of Shalott" on the other.

Firstly, dealing with the hypothetic links between Malory's work and *Sir Gawain*, the central element of 'resemblance' is Gareth's story, where Gareth's adventures show several analogies with those undertaken by his brother, Sir Gawain, in the alliterative poem. Like *Sir Gawain*, which contains a fantastic element that emerges from the world of ancient myth and folktale, Gareth's story "is structured according to patterns reminiscent of folklore" (McCarthy, 1991: 23); furthermore, and coexisting with this 'profane' element, in Gareth's tale (at least at the beginning) there is a religious atmosphere similar to that of *Sir Gawain*, as both narratives open with religious celebrations at Arthur's court: Christmas and Pentecost. This atmosphere is interrupted by the arrival of a 'huge' and mysterious character: the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain* and Gareth himself (who is described as "large and long and broad in the shoulders", I.231) in *Le Morte*. However, very soon the initial tendency to connect Gareth and the Green Knight disap-

pears, and instead the *déjà vu* leads the reader to see Gareth as the 'duplicate' of Sir Gawain: while in the alliterative poem it was Sir Gawain who asked Arthur to be the one accepting the strange visitor's demand, in Gareth's story it is Gareth who requests the king to be the one undertaking the adventures to help Lady Lyonesse and her sister (I.235).

As the narration progresses, the parallels between Gareth and his brother continue to become apparent, and thus Gareth's tale echoes three significant elements of *Sir Gawain*: the predominance of colours, the theme of temptation (combined in *Sir Gawain* with that of 'courtesy' and the acceptance of a magical object), and probably the most shocking image of the alliterative poem, that of the Green Knight picking up his head as he leaves Arthur's court. The importance of colours, which in *Sir Gawain* appears as the visual impact produced by the description of the Green Knight in Part One, Stanza 8, is much deeper in the tale of Sir Gareth, where "color, both literal and figurative, stimulates the imagination in Gareth's victories" (Guerin, 1964: 109) and where colours are used to reveal Gareth's qualities and identity (McCarthy, 1991: 25). In fact, Gareth's adventures become a series of confrontations with knights of different colours (one of them, significantly, is a Green Knight described as "... all in green, both his horse

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and his harness", I.243, and with "a green shield and a green spear", I.244) and Gareth himself changes his colour when, following the pattern developed in *Sir Gawain* of accepting a magical object from a lady, he takes a ring that protects the life of that who bears it (I.284).

The fact that the element of the magic object is connected in *Sir Gawain* with Bertilak's wife, and therefore with temptation, opens the way for the exploration of another 'link' between the two works: like his brother, Gareth is also tempted when Gareth's host (like Sir Gawain's host) sends him his daughter (the equivalent of the lady of the castle), and like his brother's, Gareth's 'courtesy' proves to be strong enough as to resist temptation (I.254) without breaking the laws of hospitality, for "like Gawain, Gareth avoids offending the young lady by giving her a kiss" (Kennedy, 1992: 140). Finally, and as the clearest example of its fairy-tale qualities, the story of Gareth also contains a beheading scene similar to that described in *Sir Gawain*: to prevent the physical encounter between Gareth and Lyoness, Lyoness's sister resorts to a 'magic' knight who is twice beheaded by Gareth, and twice anointed so that his head "... stuck as fast as ever it did" (I.274). In doing so, Lyoness's sister (whose name, Lynet, follows again the pattern of alliteration) establishes a contrast whereby the duality

Lyoness-Lynet embodies two different histories of desire: the tendency towards its immediate fulfilment and that towards its deferral (Kelly, 1999: 27).

Secondly, and still in the context of the connections which could be established on the basis of the notion of *déjà vu* among the Arthurian works that play with the motif of the mirror, the possible links between *Le Morte* and "The Lady of Shalott" are all centered around one of the most important and ambiguous images in Malory's work: the moment in which "many fair ladies" carry the wounded Arthur to Avalon on a barge (II.517). This image, like the description of the Lady's death ritual in Tennyson's poem, relies on the interlock of three basic elements: lady - water/barge. Such interconnection, however, is not a new one, but it appears at different times throughout *Le Morte*, as when Arthur finds a ship full of damsels (I.125-26) or when Sir Gawain and other two knights meet three ladies at a fountain (I.147).

Above all, the scenes in which the feeling of *déjà vu* is stronger are related to two ladies whose resemblance with the Lady of Shalott could allow us to see them as 'mirrored' characters that at the same time foreshadow the protagonist of Tennyson's poem. The first of them, Percival's sister, bleeds to death and is at her request "laid... in a barge" (II.350), whe-

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re Lancelot finds her later. The second (Elaine le Blank, called the Fair Maide of Astolat) is such a clear parallel with the Lady of Shalott that "Tennyson could not later in his life recall whether he had read of Malory's Lily maid of Astolat" (Ebbatson, 1988: 45). In fact, both Tennyson's and Malory's ladies die for Lancelot (who rejects Elaine though he has worn her token in a tournament, II.412) and both lie on a barge till they arrive at Camelot, where the king and the knights go to see their corpses (II.414).

Leaving aside the relevance of Gareth's story (which Eugene Vinaver characterises as "a genuine example of the technique of a modern tale applied to medieval romance", 1967: lxxiii) as the starting point for analysing the three Arthurian works on the basis of the sense of *déjà vu*, doubtless its trascendence arises from its role in establishing Gareth as Lancelot's most important 'parallel'. Together with this parallelism, the preeminence of Lancelot in *Le Morte* is enhanced by the other process whereby he is used as the real-world object whose image is refracted by the mirror: the replacement by Galahad, his own son and the character that shares with him the longing for "that which is difficult and dangerous to attain,... in Lancelot's case named Guinevere, in Galahad's the Grail" (Hoffman, 1996: 77).

Galahad, whom McCarthy compares with Arthur by referring to him as "another child of destiny" (1991: 7), has in fact many points of contact with the king, something which is very significant bearing in mind that Arthur is in turn replaced by Lancelot (closing then the circle of the three generations: Galahad replacing Lancelot replacing Arthur). Like the king, Lancelot's son is begotten through magic and deceit in an episode that mirrors Arthur's conception though with a reversal of the male and female roles: whereas Merlin, for the sake of Uther's sexual gratification, makes Igraine believe that she is lying with her husband, Dame Brisen, for the sake of Elaine and her father's desire for an heir, makes Lancelot believe that he is lying with Guenever (Norris, 1999: 64). Moreover, in the same way as Arthur is able to draw the sword in the stone, only Galahad manages to grab a magical sword on a floating stone (II.342).

However, Galahad goes beyond King Arthur because, like Lancelot, he is called "the best knight of the world" (II.192, 246); at the same time, and since he "... is a maid, and sinner never" (II.266), Galahad goes beyond Sir Lancelot as he succeeds where his father fails: in the quest of the Sangrail. While Lancelot declines as part of the general downward movement of Arthur's court (he is described as "defouled with

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lechery", II.273, to the point that he is "overtaken with sin", II.269), Galahad (whose "pure virginity" is constantly empha- sized) replaces his father when, by achieving the Sangrail, he fulfils the prophecy of being "much ever than ever was Sir Lancelot" (II.195).

This replacement, nevertheless, does not last long, and very soon after carrying out his mission, "the noble knight Sir Ga- lahad" (II.328) dies "to find the life of the soul" (II.367); the- refore, the foreground is again for Sir Lancelot, who in the final episodes of Malory's work embodies the struggle of two contrary forces. On the one hand, he is the 'chosen knight' who can heal Sir Urré; on the other, he is the 'treacherous knight' whose adulterous relationship with Guenever leads to the final collapse of Arthur's kingdom. Thus, even at the very end, Lancelot's 'dazzling light', that which 'blinded' the Lady of Shalott, is still so strong as to rule the fate of Arthur's now shadowy court, and even at the very end the hidden power of the mirror (which lies behind Lancelot's dual force) pervades Malory's work.

4. Conclusion

Throughout *Le Morte*, parallels and replacements, duplication and duality are made possible only by the influence of the mirror, a hidden but strong motif that structures the symmetry

of *Sir Gawain* and articulates the development of "The Lady of Shalott". Indeed, as this paper has tried to show, the mirror which accompanies the Lady of Shalott is a physical object that rules the duplications and contrasts on which Tennyson's poem is based, but at the same time the mirror is also the embodiment of a motif of optical reflection that underlies two of the key works of the medieval English Arthurian body: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur*. While in the alliterative poem the hidden force of the mirror emerges in the form of structural symmetry, Malory's work plays with the phenomenon of reflection by displaying a multi-shaped duality that governs a system of mirrored and replaced characters.

In this context, by resorting to the medieval atmosphere of King Arthur's court to set his poem about a mirror, Tennyson is reviving a literary pattern whereby the mirror motif recurs in different Arthurian works. Thus, when in Tennyson's poem Lancelot "flashes into the crystal mirror", the mingling of light and shadows, of appearance and reality, on the refracting surface are only the reflection of a much more powerful interweaving: the coming together of the Arthurian myth and the structural force of the mirror, a combination which lies at the heart of "The Lady of Shalott", *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur.*

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1. For *Le Morte Darthur* the two volume edition by Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) has been used. This edition follows that published in 1485 by William Caxton, who regarded *Le Morte Darthur* as a single work, divided into twenty-one Books and subdivided into chapters.

Taking Caxton's edition as a primary source, I have analysed *Le Morte Darthur* (to which I refer as "Malory's work") on the basis of its unity. This does not imply a rejection of Eugene Vinaver's perspective (according to which *Le Morte Darthur* is not a single work but a collection of eight different tales), since his point of view leaves room for my attempt to analyse the force of the mirror motif as the source for a multi-shaped duality reflected mainly in the characters. In fact, as Vinaver himself remarks, "the view that Malory wrote eight separate romances does not imply that there are serious discrepancies in their portrayal of characters or that there are no links or similarities to be found between them" (1967: xliii).

With regards to the formal features of the text, the name of the characters (except for Sir Lancelot, for whom I have followed the most usual spelling) and the spelling of the quotations correspond to those of the Penguin edition. Since the work is divided into two volumes (Volume I: Books I-IX; Volume II: Books X-XXI), when quoting a passage the number of the Volume (in Roman numerals) is followed by the number of page(s) in this Penguin edition.

When subsequently referring to Malory's work, I use the abbreviated title *Le Morte.*