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Metafiction, Fairy Tale, and Female Desire in A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Master of Arts in English

English Department

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Dedication

To my fiancé, Robert Vox Howard, who loves both the poet and the poem in me, and who likewise creates and inspires. Thank you for everything, my love.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my professor, Ashley Shannon, for providing challenging courses in both my undergraduate and graduate studies, for introducing me to *Possession*, and for all of the help over the years. Your courses have been extremely influential to me, both academically and personally.

Abstract

Analysis of the novel *Possession: A Romance* by A.S. Byatt, in which Byatt contributes to a metamorphosis of the fairy tale genre through a reappropriation of individual tales and characters, such as the Grimm Brothers' *Little Snow White* and *The Glass Coffin*; Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*; and the French fairy story *Melusine*. Analysis of the metafictional devices Byatt uses to achieve this reappropriation such as the writing and reading of letters, journals, and works of fiction within the novel, as well as an intertextuality created by repeating fairy tale allusions. Analysis of Byatt's character development of Christabel LaMotte, Ellen Ash, and Maud Bailey. Analysis of Byatt's investigation of the female struggle for intellectual activity (autonomy, privacy, artistry), a struggle that conflicts with cultural expectations of feminine domesticity and subservience and is in tension with the female desire for passion (love, sexuality, motherhood).

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I. Introduction

A.S. Byatt's 1990 Man Booker Prize winning novel *Possession: A Romance* tells of two parallel and interconnected tales set in Great Britain in the 1850s and 1980s. Two contemporary academics, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, research the Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. When Roland uncovers a letter by Randolph to an unknown woman that appears to be the beginning of a romance, a quest begins to determine who the letter was intended for, if the person ever received the letter, and what type of relationship, if any, ensued. Such a discovery has the power to re-write history, as Randolph was always considered to be a devoted and loyal husband. When Roland suspects Christabel as the possible recipient of Randolph's letter, he connects with Maud Bailey to learn more. Randolph and Maud become literary detectives questing after the truth. Multiple narrators and forms of narration move the reader back and forth in time between Victorian and modern day England. A novel that reads as both a Romance and a detective story climaxes in dramatic fashion with grave robbery, a fierce storm, and even the hooting of a distant owl, all Gothic Romantic tropes used to stir the reader's emotions.

Byatt has a long lasting scholarly and literary interest in genre and the ways stories evolve, evident in a wide variety of her published scholarship and fiction, including *Possession*. In her essay "Old Tales, New Forms," speaking of myths and fairy tales, Byatt writes: "I want to look at some of the ways in which these old tales and forms have had a continued, metamorphic life. . . .The novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has always incorporated forms of myths and fairy tales, working both with and against them" (124, 130). When considering her novel *Possession*, Byatt continues the tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth century novel as

she “work[s] both with and against” the fairy tale genre, contributing to the genre’s “metamorphic life” (124, 130).

Indeed, Byatt contributes to the metamorphosis of the fairy tale genre through a reappropriation of individual tales and characters, such as the Grimm Brothers’ *Little Snow White* and *The Glass Coffin*; Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen*; and the French fairy story *Melusine*. Reappropriation occurs when a group reclaims something that has been appropriated, or adopted, from them and used in a derogatory or unfavorable way toward the very group it was taken from. Originally, fairy tales were passed down orally, often by women. Yet, it was men, such as the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen, who published fairy tales. Through these publications, and the contemporary work of such men as Walt Disney, a genre with a limited portrayal of women was created and deeply embedded in Western thought. Byatt reclaims the fairy tale, and by adding a desired complexity to her female characters, and even a complexity in the manner the tale is developed, portrays women in a more intricate fashion.

A major way that Byatt achieves this reappropriation is through her use of metafictional devices such as the writing and reading of letters, journals, and works of fiction, as well as an intertextuality created by repeating fairy tale allusions. Metafiction is a literary genre that draws attention to itself as a work of fiction, often through self-reflection. Born of the modernist and post-modernist literary movements, metafiction is viewed as a relatively new form of writing. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* or John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* are two examples of texts widely considered as esteemed works of metafiction, largely because they both part from traditional narrative techniques. Both of these novels have moments when traditional narration disappears: the narrator speaks directly to the reader and at times even enters the scene

of the story as a contributing character. Byatt, however, never has *Possession*'s narrator break the fourth wall. In fact, writing about Fowles' work in her study "Forefathers," Byatt speaks against what she calls "mimicry":

Fowles has said that the nineteenth-century narrator was assuming the omniscience of a god. I think rather the opposite is the case — this kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and inner life of characters — as well as providing a Greek chorus — than any first-person mimicry. In *Possession* I used this kind of narrator deliberately three times in the historical narrative — always to tell what the historians and biographers of my fiction never discovered, always to heighten the reader's imaginative entry into the world of the text. (55–56)

When Byatt writes "this kind of fictive narrator," it's in reference to a third-person omniscient narrator, a more traditional narrative technique that Byatt approves of and puts to use in her work (55–56). Considering that Byatt praises and puts to use such a narrative technique, some readers may not at first consider *Possession* a work of metafiction. Yet, the novel draws attention to itself as a work of fiction. *Possession* is heavy with metafictional devices such as intertextual allusions (both of fairy tales and of works from other genres), works of fiction contained within the novel (again, both of the fairy tale genre and otherwise), and characters writing and reading within the novel. This last device, that of characters writing and reading within the novel, is one of the critical metafictional devices Byatt uses to reappropriate the fairy tale genre and develop *Possession*'s characters.

Byatt brings the reader's attention to writing and reading within the novel through both direct and indirect means. Directly, Byatt draws attention to writing and reading by writing specifically about the activities. For instance, near the conclusion of the novel, Byatt writes, "It is

possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking, or looking on, or sex,” but novels “do not habitually elaborate on the equally intense pleasure of reading” (*Possession* 510–511). Byatt continues with a list of negative reasons why this is the case, but then allows that for some readers, such as Roland Michell, and I’d add for fans of her novel, their natures “are at their most alert and heady when reading is violently yet steadily alive” (511). Byatt follows this with an aside meditation on the word “heady,” directly drawing attention to her act of writing: “What an amazing word ‘heady’ is...” (511).

Byatt, or her narrator, then directs her readers to “think of this—that the writer wrote alone, and the reader read alone, and they were alone with each other” and that there are different types of readings, such as dutiful, personal, impersonal, and even readings “when the knowledge that we *shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how” (*Possession* 511–512). Byatt directs her readers to consider her act of writing *Possession* alone, our act of reading her novel alone, and what type of reading experience it is for us. She encourages active analysis of her words, words she aims to make “violently yet steadily alive” as she reappropriates the fairy tale genre (511).

Indirectly, Byatt draws attention to writing and reading by weaving metafictional devices throughout her story that draw attention to the activities. For example, within *Possession* Byatt writes her characters both reading and writing essays, autobiographies, biographies, poems, letters, journals, and fairy tales, all of which are contained within the novel either in their whole form or in snippets. Characters repeatedly read the writing of one another, allowing *Possession*’s reader a glimpse into the fictional authors’ texts.

Ultimately, then, by cultivating an awareness in her readers that they are reading an intentionally crafted work of fiction, rather than to simply let them get lost in a good story, Byatt

encourages her readers not to take anything within *Possession* as certain, but to question and even play with the serious issues she presents within the text. For instance, as a scholar and academic herself, she has a respect and admiration for academia present in her novel. However, she is unafraid of poking fun at some aspects of the field, such as biographical scholarship (Mortimer Cropper and his inaccurate *The Great Ventriloquist*), deconstructive criticism (Roland Michell and his decision to be less concerned with what words *can't* communicate and more concerned with what they *can*), and feminist criticism (Leonora Stern and her predictable *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte*) (Byatt *Possession* 120–124, 513, 265–267). Byatt's playfulness, irreverence, and even disagreement with aspects of academia including critical theories, theologies, and stereotypical scholars should be acknowledged and considered throughout any reading and criticism of *Possession*. This, however, does not negate the fact that Byatt is still indeed interrogating critical feminist concerns within her text.

For in spite of the novel's intentional playfulness, through Byatt's reappropriation of fairy tale, *Possession* investigates the female struggle for intellectual activity, a struggle that conflicts with cultural expectations of domesticity and subservience. This female desire for intellectual activity is often in tension with a female desire for passion. Within *Possession*, Byatt connects passion with love, sexuality, and motherhood, while she connects intellectual activity with autonomy, privacy, and artistry. The investigation focuses on the contemporary Maud Bailey, as well as the Victorian Ellen Ash and Christabel LaMotte. These three distinct characters are critical to both Byatt's feminist investigation and her reappropriation of the fairy tale genre.

II. Fictional Characters Fictionalizing Themselves: Letter Writing and The Fairy

Melusine

Within *Possession*, letters between various characters serve as a metafictional device within the narrative that draw attention to the acts of writing and reading, as well as provide character development. Robert B. Heilman reports, “[Byatt’s] third-person narrative...is used in no more than sixty percent of the novel. The rest comes to us as texts...by the subordinate authorships of various Byatt characters. Nearly every one of them writes letters at one time or another, enough letters to remind us of the epistolary novel” (608). Of all “the subordinate authorships” that Byatt creates, of which there are many, letters are the genre Byatt utilizes the most (608).

Furthermore, of all the characters writing letters within *Possession*, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte supply the largest volume with about 70 pages of letters total (Heilman 609). Their correspondence, while a noteworthy presence within *Possession*’s entirety, serves as the center of the novel and a key part of its plot development. The correspondence also draws attention to writing and reading as the Victorian characters, contemporary characters, and we read the letters.

Additionally, Byatt uses the correspondence as a key form of character development for the Victorian lovers, as well as the contemporary lovers Maud and Roland: “Byatt creates her characters in part by their writing, of which we see a good deal and which is a significant form of characterizing activity” (Heilman 609). In reference to the character development of the Victorian lovers, in her 1993 study Susan Thomas writes, “...the poets of *Possession* build a correspondence on their fictions, spinning a web of identity in a perpetual act of writing and rewriting...” (94). Letter writing allows Christabel and Randolph to fictionalize themselves and

each other. When two people are physically in the presence of one another, body language and tone of voice influence perception, in addition to the words being spoken. Yet within a correspondence, all of the influence weighs on the words. Thus, within the genre of letter writing the possibility of manipulating one's perception is more plausible than it is when two people are face-to-face. Via an elimination of potentially truth-telling body language and tone of voice, Christabel and Randolph are able to reveal what they choose to each other, not necessarily their authentic selves. Consequently, the two Victorians craft intellectual musings that highlight their knowledge and wit, creating a false sense of intimacy through their writing. For while Randolph openly desires to meet in person from the beginning of the correspondence, Christabel clings to her privacy for quite some time. Christabel's initial attempt to maintain her privacy results in the couple not actually knowing each other as intimate friends or lovers would.

Byatt highlights letter writing's false sense of intimacy when Christabel reflects upon her eventual meeting with Randolph. After they meet in person for the first time since they began corresponding, Christabel writes:

And did you find—as I did—how curious, as well as very natural, it was that we should be so shy with each other, when in a papery way we knew each other so much better? I feel I have always known you, and yet I search for polite phrases and conventional enquiries—you are more mysterious in your presence (as I suppose most of us may be) than you seem to be in ink and scribbled symbols.

(Perhaps we all are so. I cannot tell.) (Byatt *Possession* 209)

A couple that on paper appears quite intimate, has to “search for polite phrases and conventional enquiries” once they are actually in each other's presence (209). Furthermore, the fact that the

two poets eventually take a trip together confirms that letter writing alone doesn't establish true intimacy.

While writing doesn't completely satisfy either character emotionally, it is critical to the development of their relationship and their individual characters. Within the letters, an especially significant aspect of Byatt's character development of Christabel LaMotte is in the character's association with a reoccurring motif: the Melusine. Through her use of the genre of letter writing, Byatt develops this Melusine motif through Christabel and Randolph's discussion of Christabel's epic poem *The Fairy Melusine*, as well as by having Christabel directly associate herself with the French fairy.

For those unfamiliar, there have been many different versions of the fairy Melusine tale over time and Jacques Le Goff is an expert of the topic. In his comprehensive 1980 study, Le Goff provides a thorough history of Melusine. The tale seems to have its beginnings as early as the 12th century and evolved into the version most currently remembered sometime around the late 14th century. In summary, Elinas, king of Albania, marries a woman named Presine that he meets in the woods. Presine agrees to the marriage only if he promises never to be present at the birth of any of their children. Yet, when Presine gives birth to three daughters, Melusine being one of them, Elinas betrays her trust and looks at her during the birthing process. Presine disappears, taking her three daughters, who learn of their father's betrayal when they turn fifteen years old. Angry, the sisters imprison their father in a mountain as punishment. Presine, somewhat surprisingly, is furious with her daughters for disrespecting their father and punishes all of them in different ways; Melusine is turned into a serpent every Saturday and will be eternally punished unless a man marries her. Upon her marriage, Melusine will become mortal. However, if Melusine's husband should ever see her in her snake form, she will lose her

mortality and become again eternally punished. In time, Melusine marries Raimondin, whom she makes swear never to view her on Saturday, and brings him great prosperity in the form of heirs, castles, and property. Eventually, Raimondin betrays Melusine's privacy and sees her in her serpent form. Later, when one of their sons performs wicked deeds, Raimondin blames Melusine for their son's actions and says, "Oh, most false of serpents, by God and His great deeds, you are nothing but a phantom, and no heir born of you will be saved" (209). Melusine thus flies away as a winged serpent and only returns at night to nurse her two youngest children (205–210).

Twice in the fairy Melusine tale a woman's trust is betrayed and dire consequences occur. In both instances the woman's privacy is not respected. As the correspondence unfolds between Randolph and Christabel, we learn both how critical privacy is to Christabel and how in several ways she too has her privacy violated. As Gillian M.E. Alban astutely claims, "[Byatt] uses the Melusine myth as a way to explore certain feminist views, woman and androgyny, and the goddess..." (16). "Woman and androgyny" is a topic well covered in Virginia Woolf's beloved *A Room of One's Own*, a work that Byatt is undoubtedly familiar with (16). In fact, Byatt has the character Fergus Wolff mention the text. Speaking of the poem *The Fairy Melusine* by Christabel, Fergus states that "Virginia Woolf knew it, she adduced it as an image of the essential androgyny of the creative mind" (Byatt *Possession* 39). This reference encourages us to think of the poem and the character in light of Virginia Woolf's famous theory of the androgyny of the creative mind. Furthermore, the reference is yet another metafictional device that draws attention to the novel as a piece of writing and creates intertextuality.

In reference to the above passage about Woolf in *Possession*, Nancy Chin states that "because serpents are most often masculine in modern thought but frequently had female faces in medieval and Renaissance art, Melusina as serpent/mermaid/dragon appears androgynous" (198–

199). Chin's assertion that "serpents are most often masculine in modern thought" may refer to Sigmund Freud's reading of the snake as primarily a phallic symbol in his dream interpretation theory (198–199).

To expand upon Chin's explanation of how Melusine "appears androgynous," the similarity between a snake and a male sex organ is worth consideration (198–199). Such a similarity leads the fairy to appear, and therefore symbolize, both male and female, with the bottom half representing the masculine and the top half representing the feminine. Byatt brings this reading to mind, albeit from a somewhat different angle, via the feminist scholarship of Leonora Stern. The character writes that Melusine "is, as has been pointed out, in her aspect of water-serpent, a complete being, capable of generating life, or meanings, on her own, without need for external help" (Byatt *Possession* 267). Such "a complete being" symbolizes the androgynous as he/she would have to possess both female and male reproductive capabilities in order to, as Leonora phrases it, perform "generation without copulation" (267).

Thus, the androgynous nature of Melusine was an influencing factor in Byatt's decision to have Christabel write about the fairy. By transforming the French fairy story into the epic poem of one of her main characters, Byatt weaves Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and the argument that a creative mind needs to be androgynous in order to successfully create into *Possession*. When discussing the art of writing fiction, Woolf tells us, "it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (1250). As Christabel too is a writer of fiction, referencing Woolf in a conversation about Christabel is Byatt's means of suggesting that Christabel also believes in the importance of the androgyny of the creative mind.

The theory of the androgyny of the creative mind that Melusine symbolizes speaks loudly of the female struggle for intellectual activity that Byatt investigates throughout *Possession*. As a Victorian woman, Christabel often feels stifled intellectually. When discussing her writing with Randolph within their correspondence, Christabel admits with frustration that in reference to female writing “the best we may hope is—oh, it is excellently done—for a woman” (Byatt *Possession* 197). Christabel desires to be viewed as genderless when it comes to her artistry. She does not want her writing to be seen as only “excellently done—for a woman,” but simply as “excellently done” (197).

Yet, the cultural expectation of feminine domesticity prevalent during the Victorian period did not include female writing. The conventional role of women was one of subservience to her husband and household duties. Therefore, the intellectual activity required of creative writing was not encouraged nor expected. This explains why Christabel is flattered and appreciative of Randolph’s acknowledgement of her intellect and skill, while simultaneously afraid of losing her autonomy as a result of their relationship. Susan Thomas discusses Christabel’s ability to have such conflicting emotions when she writes:

[Christabel] portrays herself alternately as interested in [Ash’s] literary companionship and wary of his interest, pleased by and attracted to their developing discourse but appalled by the threat to her autonomy. Like Barret, she must deal with the dual, seemingly conflicting roles of woman and artist; she must also confront the idea that her proper realm of production lies in the domestic — as opposed to the male-dominated public — domain. Her self-deprecation in the presence of Ash illustrates this conflict: she compares his ‘great works’ to her own ‘merely fragile or glistening female productions’ and refers to ‘the Rush of

[Ash's] intellect and power of writing.' Moreover, while she assures him of 'a receptive and a Thoughtful reading' of his work, LaMotte demurs that she 'cannot promise intelligent criticism.' (91)

Christabel's struggle for intellectual activity against cultural expectations of feminine domesticity is all too apparent in "her self-deprecation in the presence of Ash" (91). Such statements come not from a Christian sense of humility (as they could have since "Christabel has a strong but peculiarly English devotion to Jesus" [Byatt *Possession* 365]), but from a lack of self-confidence.

Within Christabel and Randolph's correspondence, the two characters often discuss Christabel's interest in, and writing of, the fairy Melusine. At one point, Christabel writes Randolph: "I am interested in other visions of the fairy Melusine—who has two aspects—an Unnatural Monster—and a most proud and loving and handy woman" (Byatt *Possession* 191). The idea of Melusine's dual natures reflects Melusine's androgyny and the fairy's complexity. Melusine's dual natures, and their likely tension, also directly correlate to Byatt's investigation of the tension between female passion and intellectual activity. As "a most proud and loving and handy woman" Melusine symbolizes love and motherhood (191). Yet, as "an Unnatural Monster" Melusine symbolizes female power and autonomy (191).

In order to develop both her character Christabel and her ongoing investigation, Byatt advances her conversation about female power by having Christabel write sympathetically about Medusa and other female mythological beings. In the poem *The Fairy Melusine*, Christabel writes:

But let the Power take a female form
And 'tis the Power is punished. All men shrink

From dire Medusa and her writhing locks.
Who weeps for Scylla in her cave of bones,
Thrashing her tail and howling for her fate
With yelping hound-mouths, though she once was fair,
Loved by the sea-god for her mystery
Daughter of Hecate, beautiful as Night?

(*Possession* 317)

While power is generally hailed and respected in males, the lines “But let the Power take a female form / And ‘tis the Power is punished” draw attention to the fact that within Greek mythology many, while certainly not all, of the powerful female figures are portrayed as hideous and destructive (consider Sirens, Gorgons, and of course Medusa who turned men to stone with just her gaze) (Byatt *Possession* 317). These females are extremely powerful and thereby developed in Greek mythology into beings that should be feared and demonized. They symbolize male fear of female power with Medusa as possibly the most famous of these symbols.

Commenting on the above passage from *Possession*, Monica Flegel explains Christabel’s intentions:

LaMotte’s poems and fairy tales interrogate the beliefs of her Victorian society, particularly those regarding—and restricting—women. In ‘The Fairy Melusina,’ for example, LaMotte challenges traditional views of the supposedly monstrous women of mythology...LaMotte recognizes that, according to patriarchal traditions, what is truly monstrous about the powerful witches, sirens, and female creatures of myths and fairy tales is that they are powerful. In rewriting fairy tales

and Breton mythology, LaMotte is able to question, therefore, the assumptions made about these women. (415–416)

As Christabel questions “the assumptions made about these women,” Byatt demands that we also question our assumptions about mythological women, as well as our assumptions about the women Byatt creates in her novel and even about women in general (415–416).

One of the means Byatt uses to get us to reexamine our perception of Medusa is through the sympathetic word-choice that Christabel uses in her poem. When writing about Scylla in the excerpt of *The Fairy Melusine* cited above, Christabel uses words such as “weeps” and “hollowing” that arouse a sense of sympathy for the mythological being, a character who typically is not presented in a way to evoke such an emotion (317). The description brings to mind someone who is so lonely she feels completely empty inside, or hollow, leaving her crying and moaning alone in unwanted solitude. Such sympathy for Scylla may be interpreted as pity for all “monstrous” females, including Medusa.

Furthermore, Christabel uses language that presents Medusa as a victim rather than a perpetrator: “But let the Power take a female form / And ‘tis the Power is punished” (Byatt *Possession* 317). Within these lines Medusa is not the one punishing others, but the one who is punished. As “...All men shrink / From dire Medusa and her writhing locks,” the powerful Medusa is doomed to an existence full of anguish and loneliness (317).

In a study that reviews the historical depictions of the same being in India, China, and Greece, Elmer G. Suhr reveals the following about the Medusa faces represented on Greek artifacts:

The bulging eyes, the distended cheeks, the leering open mouth, in fact the appearance of the whole face speaks of an intensely dramatic experience more

concerned with its own subjective feelings than with conveying a frightening effect to another person or object; whatever effect it may have in the latter respect is a byproduct of its own experience. (91)

Suhr's interpretation understands that Medusa underwent "an intensely dramatic experience" that leaves her in anguish. Christabel's portrayal of the mythical being provides one explanation for such pain, reasoning that female power comes at a terrible price.

Another point worth considering when analyzing Byatt's use of Medusa in relation to Melusine is the serpent similarities between the two beings. Medusa is famously depicted with snakes hissing and writhing all over her head, while Melusine has the serpent tail. With the similarity between a snake and a male sex organ adding male physical characteristics to otherwise female bodies, the two women can both be interpreted as symbolizing androgyny, making it quite appropriate that Christabel would include Medusa in her Melusine poem. In fact, the two seem to be inversions of each other, physically and otherwise. While Medusa is destructive with her gaze turning the living into stone, Melusine is productive with her creation of heirs, castles, and property. Yet, traditionally, both characters were largely, although not exclusively, viewed in a negative manner. One instance in which Melusine was not completely viewed in a negative manner occurred during the Medieval period when it is known that Melusine, while viewed adversely, managed to arouse a latent sympathy.

Melusine's productivity is part of what makes her "a most proud and loving and handy woman," and as previously mentioned, this aspect of Melusine symbolizes love and motherhood (Byatt *Possession* 191). It's this aspect of Melusine that has been wrestled with over time, while the aspect of her being "an Unnatural Monster" was consistently present (191). During the Medieval period, Le Goff reports that authors of the tale did not look upon Melusine favorably:

“medieval authors explained very clearly what Melusina represented for them. All of them took her for a demonic succubus, a fairy identified with a fallen angel” (217). Le Goff even states that for Medieval authors the husband is in fact the hero of the story. Nonetheless, sympathy for Melusine, from these same Medieval authors, existed:

Who is the hero of *Melusina*? The fairy’s husband, no doubt. According to the logic of the tale, reinforced by contemporary ideology in the sight of which she is a devil (Christian symbolism of serpent and dragon), Melusina should be wicked...And yet, by the end of the tale, she appears to be the victim of her husband’s betrayal...What accounts for this tenderness toward a demonic woman? (217)

If we view Melusine’s portrayal as demonic as symbolizing the fear of female power, then such “tenderness toward a demonic woman” signifies a latent sympathy, even admiration, of female power. Is it not Melusine’s intellect in combination with her love that brought economic wealth in the form of property and castles for her husband? Plus, Melusine brought prosperity to her husband in the form of many male heirs, and she remains loyal to caring for their youngest children even after her husband rebukes her. A tale with, at best, latent sympathy for female power, creativity, and intellect, in the hands of Christabel becomes a tale with open admiration for female power. Christabel celebrates Melusine for the fairy’s complexity; she does not portray the fairy via the false dichotomy of women as either an angel or a whore, either good or bad, and so on that is often present in literature.

Within *Possession*, Byatt has Christabel’s cousin Sabine write in her journal: “[Christabel] wants to write a Fairy epic, she says, not grounded in historical truth, but in poetic and imaginative truth...” and that “in Romance, women’s two natures can be reconciled” (404).

Sabine isn't sure which "two natures" Christabel is referring to so she asks her cousin and Christabel replies: "men [see] women as double beings, enchantresses and demons or innocent angels" (404). Again, Sabine asks a question, wondering if all women are double and Christabel responds with: "I said all men see women as double. Who knows what Melusina was in her freedom with no eyes on her?" (404). If men view women as "double beings" that are either one thing or another, but never complex, no wonder cultural expectations exist that cause women to suffer a tension between intellect and passion (404). Byatt uses Christabel LaMotte and Virginia Woolf's call for androgyny in female writing to champion women's portrayal as the multifaceted beings that they are, and to draw attention to the need for women to have the freedom to attain both their intellectual and passionate desires.

Through the writing of letters and the Melusine fairy motif, Byatt reappropriates the French tale while also developing a strong relationship between Randolph and Christabel. Melusine is shown as a mythological being with a dual nature, who is both terrifying and comforting, who is both a creative, autonomous woman who demands privacy and a passionate, comforting woman who fulfills the roles of mother and wife. These traits may at first appear to be conflicting, yet we learn that this tension, in addition to the androgynous nature of Melusine previously discussed, is a key part of why Christabel in fact writes her poem *The Fairy Melusine*.

Randolph Ash comments on the dual nature of the tale, on the differing images that are presented through it:

What is so peculiarly marvelous about the Melusine myth, you seem to be saying, is that it is both wild and strange and ghastly and full of the daemonic—and it is at the same time solid as earthly tales—the best of them—are solid—depicting the

life of households and the planning of societies, the introduction of husbandry and the love of any mother for her children. (Byatt *Possession* 193)

Christabel greatly appreciates Randolph's insight and via her response we see that Randolph has indeed understood Christabel's view of Melusine:

You have read my thoughts—or made clear to me what were my predispositions—not in an intrusive way—but with true insight. She is indeed—my Melusine—just such a combination of the orderly and humane with the unnatural and the Wild—as you suggest—the hearth-foundress and the destroying Demon. (And female, which you do not remark on). (196)

Randolph writing that the Melusine tale through Christabel's eyes is “wild and strange and ghastly and full of the daemonic—and it is at the same time solid as earthly tales” (193) is an insightful statement into Christabel's goal to portray Melusine in all her complexity, a complexity Christabel wants acknowledged within her self and all of womankind. She does not want to portray Melusine as either/or but both/and, because Melusine, woman, and humankind in general are “such a combination of the orderly and humane with the unnatural and the Wild” (196). Christabel wants to discard gender and write an epic poem that gives the intricate nature of Melusine its due.

After discussing the androgyny of the creative mind, it would be remiss not to discuss another key point of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, even *the* point to her text, that Byatt develops through Melusine and Christabel: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write” (1229). In other words, a woman must have the autonomy money can buy and the privacy a room allows “if she is to write” and be artistic (1229). Melusine serves as the perfect metaphor for Christabel's, not necessarily Byatt's, desired creative androgyny and the

need for “a room of one’s own”¹ (1229). Christabel wants female writers to be judged by the same criteria as male writers and to therefore be taken equally seriously. Yet, she also knows that female writers need the luxury of a “room of one’s own” in order to write to their utmost potential (1229); a luxury that is rare for most Victorian women to possess; a luxury attempted by Christabel through the Bethany project. Christabel believes that in order to maintain the cherished autonomy that allows her intellectual activity, she has to remove herself from society as much as possible.

The Bethany project is a symbol of Christabel’s attempt to create “a room of one’s own” (Woolf 1229). Christabel writes to Randolph: “We formed a project—my dear Companion and myself...we were to renounce the outside World—and the usual Female Hopes (and with them the usual Female Fears) in exchange for—dare I say Art...” (Byatt *Possession* 204–205).

Christabel’s “dear Companion” is her friend and probable lover Blanche Glover. The two women establish their residence in the Bethany cottage and spend time painting, writing, reading, and enjoying one another’s company with little interaction with the outside world. Within this household, the women create for themselves the luxury of solitude known by males, but often denied females. By “renounc[ing] the outside world” the two women attempt to create a space outside of conventional expectations of gender (204–205); a space in which they are free to contemplate and create art as they see fit, unfettered by cultural expectations of feminine domesticity and subservience that would demand their time go to their husband, children, and household duties only, or, even worse, to another woman’s husband, children, and household

¹ I note the distinction between Christabel’s and Byatt’s desire because while it would be hard to seriously consider Byatt not agreeing with the need for uninterrupted privacy in order to create, there are factors to do with Byatt’s writing that don’t agree with Woolf’s assertion that “it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex,” such as her embracing some of the aspects of Cixous’ *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. This aspect of Byatt’s writing will be discussed in detail later in this thesis.

duties while serving as a governess. In Blanche's suicide note, we read that one of her reasons for committing the tragic act is because she refuses to be a governess again: "I cannot again demean myself to enter anyone's home as a governess. Such a life is hell on earth, even when families are kind, and I would rather not live than be a slave" (333).

The Bethany project is the two friends' initially successful attempt at autonomy, privacy, and artistry, aspects all associated with intellect within *Possession*. However, Randolph (both welcome and unwelcome) eventually invades the sanctity of their creative space just as Raimondin invades Melusine's. In the French tale, Melusine needs her privacy respected every Saturday. As long as this need for solitude is met, Melusine is very creative, as represented by her creation of prosperity in the form of male heirs, castles, and property. But once this privacy is betrayed, once Melusine no longer has "a room of her own" every Saturday, the creativity ends (Woolf 1229). And as *Possession* unfolds, we learn that Christabel's creativity eventually ends as well. Far more tragically, as a result in part of the male intruder on the privacy of the Bethany project, or in other words in part from the interference of the outside world, Blanche's life comes to an end.

Blanche's suicide note gives Byatt another opportunity to develop her plot and characters using a metafictional device. We read the note as Maud re-reads the note, and we learn that one of the reasons for Blanche's despair is the failure of the Bethany project. Blanche writes:

I have tried, initially with MISS LAMOTTE, and also alone in this little house, to live according to certain beliefs about the possibility, for single independent women, of living useful and fully human lives, in each other's company, and without recourse to help from the outside world, or men. We believed it was

possible to live frugally, charitably, philosophically, artistically, and in harmony with each other and Nature. Regrettably, it was not. (Byatt *Possession* 333)

While this may be read as a passive-aggressive punishment of Christabel for not living up to their attempted ideals, Blanche's understanding that it isn't possible to live "useful and fully human lives" as "single independent women" speaks strongly of the Victorian cultural expectation of females (333). Such an expectation did not leave room for the intellectual activity Blanche so greatly required. Consequentially, rigid Victorian expectations influenced Blanche's suicide, either feeding into an ever-present depression or causing a situational depression. Born in a different time or place that allowed female autonomy, an intellectual active and productive Blanche may have very well flourished.

Christabel also greatly requires intellectual activity. Throughout the novel, Christabel is established as an intellectual artist who highly prizes her solitude for the autonomy it grants her and the ability it gives her to have "a room of her own," as previously discussed (Woolf 1229). Near the beginning of her correspondence with Randolph, in a letter sent to him she writes:

Oh, Sir, you must not kindly seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude. It is a thing we women are taught to dread...but they have lied to us you know, in this, as in so much else. The Donjon may frown and threaten—but it keeps us very safe—within its confines we are free in a way you, who have the freedom to range the world, do not need to imagine. (Byatt *Possession* 152)

Christabel's meeting Randolph, and the relationship that ensues, puts an end to Christabel and Blanche's cherished relationship and puts an end to Christabel's beloved solitude. This occurs not only because of Randolph's presence, but also because of Christabel's eventual pregnancy.

Once pregnant, Christabel gains motherhood at the expense of her privacy. While carrying a child, she can literally never be alone. Even after the birth, although Christabel does not raise her daughter Maia herself, she serves as an aunt to the child and is forever surrounded by multiple family members, and most likely guests to the home as well (Byatt *Possession* 542–543). Christabel’s privacy has been violated by the unplanned: unplanned passion, unplanned pregnancy, and unplanned motherhood. This violation is reminiscent of Melusine’s privacy being violated. Yet, whereas when Melusine’s privacy is violated she no longer creates the prosperity she once did in the form of heirs, castles, and property, Christabel’s violation of privacy seems to initially propel her into the creation of her best writing. Unfortunately, similar to Melusine, it then apparently puts an end to her literary career, as previously mentioned: “Motherhood inspires LaMotte’s best poetry but also ends her life as a creative writer” (Chinn 181). When Chinn refers to Christabel’s “best poetry” she is speaking of the three poems on pages 411–413 in *Possession* and, of course, *The Fairy Melusine*. Chinn contends that the “pain of separation produces the last lyrics and *The Fairy Melusine*...But after this act of creation, like Melusine after her banishment, Christabel LaMotte is no longer productive or creative” (201). Having a child thus plays a critical role in fully developing Christabel’s epic poem *The Fairy Melusine*, and then ends Christabel’s creativity as Melusine’s creativity also ends.

For better or for worse, with her privacy forever vanished, motherhood even propels Christabel into becoming a version of Melusine. Monica Flegel writes that “at all points in her life, LaMotte defines herself and is defined by others through her connection with and similarity to fairy-tale figures” (417). This “connection with and similarity to” Melusine is the strongest during and after her pregnancy (417). For example, during Christabel’s pregnancy, her cousin Sabine describes Christabel by writing in her journal: “I hate her smooth pale head and her

greeny eyes and her shiny green feet beneath her skirts, as though she was some sort of serpent, hissing quietly like the pot in the hearth, but ready to strike when warmed by generosity” (Byatt *Possession* 396). Sabine actually views Christabel as “some sort of serpent,” making a very strong comparison between the woman and the fairy (396). Furthermore, near the end of the novel, via newly discovered letters, Christabel’s own writing reveals that she has seen herself as Melusine. Christabel writes to Randolph:

I have been Melusina these thirty years. I have so to speak flown about and about the battlements of this stronghold crying on the wind of my need to see and feed and comfort my child, who knew me not...She loved her adoptive parents most deeply...Me she did not love. To whom can I say this but to you? She sees me as a sorcière, a spinster in a fairy tale, looking at her with glittering eye and waiting for her to prick her poor little finger and stumble into the brute sleep of adult truth. (544)

Not only is Christabel revealed here as a version of Melusine through her own writing, but also as a “sorcière” and “a spinster in a fairy tale” (544). After deliberately alluding to many fairy tales throughout *Possession*, Byatt turns one of the novel’s main characters into a fairy tale character. This transformation firmly establishes the connection between Christabel and Melusine that runs throughout the novel and completes the reappropriation of the fairy Melusine tale that Byatt develops in order to interrogate and expose the female struggle for intellectual activity against cultural expectations of feminine domesticity and subservience. Byatt’s reappropriation of the fairy Melusine tale also exposes the tension the female struggle for intellectual activity has with the female desire for passion in the forms of love, sexuality, and

motherhood: “By connecting LaMotte to Melusina, Byatt evokes the difficulty of being both artist and mother” (Chin 181).

This “difficulty” Chin writes of, the difficulty of being an intellectually active artist who values her autonomy and simultaneously a sexual being who passionately loves her partner and child, proves to be a struggle that Christabel cannot win (181). While initially inspired by motherhood into completing her epic poem, upon its completion the Victorian poet slips into the cracks of anonymity until contemporary feminists within *Possession* revive her. Christabel is never able to find a balance between her intellect and her passion, serving as a warning against any patriarchal expectations that create this tension and a plea for change. While Christabel certainly fares better than her companion Blanche, she nevertheless suffers an unappealing fate.

III. Private Writing for the Public: Journaling and Little Snow White

In addition to Christabel LaMotte, Ellen Ash is another Victorian female character unable to balance her passion and her intellect. While not fully denying herself all the desires A.S. Byatt associates with passion or intellectual activity, the character comes terribly close. Byatt develops Ellen, the wife of the famous Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash, almost exclusively through the metafictional device of journaling. Beatrice Nest, a British scholar within *Possession*, studies Ellen's journal entries and allows Maud Bailey to read them. Maud is interested in the journals as part of Maud and Roland's investigation of Randolph and Christabel's affair.

Via Ellen Ash's journal entries, we learn that Ellen is so fearful of sexuality that she maintains an abstinent marriage. This failure as a lover, wife, and potential mother haunts Ellen throughout her marriage, a fact Byatt reveals largely through a Snow White motif within Ellen's journal. Ellen suffers from depression and headaches seemingly caused by her latent guilt, in addition to the stresses of managing a household and staff (Byatt *Possession* 242–253). Ellen experiences migraine headaches so badly that she writes in her journal: "The headache introduces one to a curious twilight deathly world in which life and death seem no great matter" (250). This "twilight deathly world" represents a place between life and death, between day and night (250). It is reminiscent of Snow White's state in the glass coffin where the princess is dead to the world, yet is still in fact alive.

In her following journal entry, Ellen writes: "I took more laudanum and went back into my dark room. No writer has written well enough of the Bliss of sleep...of the bliss of relaxing one's grip of the world and warmly and motionlessly moving into another. Folded in by curtains, closed in by the warmth of blankets..." (Byatt *Possession* 251). In her medicated state, "the Bliss of sleep" consumes Ellen, leaving her content to lie "motionlessly" (251). The description

evokes a vision of a sleeping Snow White. The line “folded in by curtains, closed in by the warmth of blankets” gives off a sense of entombment (251). As an escape from the stresses of life, Ellen seeks the sedated state that Snow White was tricked into.

Finally, with Snow White images already floating in her readers’ minds, Byatt has Ellen directly compare herself to the fairy tale: “I lay suspended almost as Snow White lay maybe, in the glass casket, alive but out of the weather, breathing but motionless” (*Possession* 252). Ellen lies in her room as if she lies in “the glass casket” of Snow White (252). She is alive but, due to her headaches, she is suspended in a death-like state. While headaches may be caused by many factors, Ellen’s headaches and death-like state should be read as a physical response to Ellen’s personal life. Monica Flegel writes: “Ellen’s image of herself is poignant; like ‘Snow White’ suspended in the ‘glass casket’ (252), Ellen is trapped within the social restrictions that regulate women’s lives, within the lie that she and Randolph live, and within her own fears, from which Randolph is unable to rescue her” (418). The “lie that she and Randolph live” is of course referring to their abstinent relationship (418). Byatt writes that Ellen had lied “to her sisters, implied a lie in her bashful assertions that they were supremely happy, that they had simply had no good fortune with children” (*Possession* 499). Out of an extreme sense of Victorian morality and guilt, Ellen represses her sexual desire and lives a lie, one she cannot even share with her sisters. It is a combination of this guilt, fear, and shame for living a lie that make Ellen give in to depression and sleep, appearing as a Snow White.

Ellen is imprisoned by her guilt, fear, and shame as Snow White was imprisoned by glass, but as Flegel points out, Ellen’s prince, Randolph, “is unable to rescue her” (418). By using the *Little Snow White* fairy tale in the characterization of Ellen Ash, Byatt strongly emphasizes the devastating results of a life in which a woman completely discards her passionate

side. Ellen denies the passionate side of her that would make her a lover and a mother, and as there proves to be no prince charming to save her, she and her marriage suffer for it. For while the couple live together amicably enough until death parts them, they never share the physical intimacy they could have as spouses, nor do they create the family they may have. Love is the only passion out of love, sexuality, and motherhood that Ellen allows in her life.

While love does exist between Ellen and Randolph, Ellen's near total denial of female passion, and Randolph's eventual acceptance of this, comes with a price. Near the end of the novel, we receive Ellen's true thoughts on her abstinent marriage: "The eagerness, the terrible love, with which she had made it up to [Randolph], his abstinence, making him a thousand small comforts, cakes, and tidbits. She became his slave. Quivering at every word. He had accepted her love" (Byatt *Possession* 499). Byatt's choice of the word "slave" is a strong one, meant to deliver a disturbing and distressing image to the reader. And on Randolph's deathbed, Ellen admits, "That other woman, [Christabel], was in one sense his true wife. Mother, at least briefly, of his child, it seemed" (499).

Randolph and marriage do not lead to the happily-ever-after that Ellen had expected and *Little Snow White* demands. Byatt complicates the idyllic vision of marriage as the cause of perfect happiness that many fairy tales present, including *Little Snow White*. This reversal of expected outcomes draws even more attention to the devastating results of Ellen's dismissal of sexuality and motherhood from her life. The simple act of getting married is not enough to give Ellen perfect happiness. As a Snow White, Ellen traditionally would have warmed from the kiss of her true love, leaving the cold world of pre-pubescent virginity and entering the hot world of adult sexuality, but that is not the case. Instead, Byatt reappropriates the *Little Snow White* tale, making it a warning tale against denying female passion and making Ellen its frigid victim.

With Ellen's ability to so completely deny her passionate desires, the same dramatic extremism may be expected when it comes to the female desire for intellectual activity, but this isn't the case. For while I agree with Monica Flegel when she writes that "Ellen is trapped within the social restrictions that regulate women's lives" (418), I must add that Ellen struggles and exerts her independence in some very unique ways within the confines of her society's restrictions.

Ellen Ash struggles with her desire for intellectual activity just as Christabel LaMotte does. Byatt eloquently summarizes the female tension between passion and intellect that she's investigating within *Possession* when she has Ellen write in her journal, "I meant to be a Poet and a Poem" (134). Ellen declares that she had intended to be both an intellectually active woman and a passionate woman, both "a Poet and a Poem" (134). Sadly, as the word "meant" is past tense, through Ellen's eyes this intention never became reality, and at first this view seems accurate. She spends most of her time responding to the fan mail of her husband, running her home, or in a sleep/death-like state aided by laudanum, which are all activities not readily associated with being either a poet or a poem. Suffering from an inability to find balance and relieve the tension between her need for intellect and passion, it may at first seem as though Ellen has forsaken any attempt at intellectual activity.

Yet, on further consideration, it must be taken into account that Ellen spends time writing in her journals. This past time may at first seem of no particular importance, but actually is central in Byatt's development of an otherwise simple, potentially even boring, character into a complex one. Before reading Ellen's journal entries, we are made to view them as dull, lifeless ruminations. Very early on in the novel we hear from Mortimer Cropper that "Ellen Ash is dull" (Byatt *Possession* 36). Then, immediately prior to Ellen's journal entries appearing in the novel

for us to read, Beatrice Nest confides to Maud that after 25 years of studying Ellen, she believes the woman's journal entries are dull intentionally:

When I started on it, I thought, what a nice dull woman. And then I got the sense of things flittering and flickering behind all that solid — oh, I think of it as *panelling*. And then I got to think — I was being led on — to imagine the flittering and flickering things — and that really it was all just as stolid and dull as anything. I thought I was making it all up, that she could have said something interesting — how shall I put it — intriguing — once in a while — but she *absolutely wasn't going to*. (240)

In fact, Beatrice Nest believes Ellen Ash wrote her journal “just to baffle” (239). Considering this, a rather boring character becomes intriguing. Why would someone intentionally write a dull, supposedly private, journal with the intent to baffle a future audience? Can we consider someone with such an odd intent behind her behavior dull? This reading relies on whether we choose to believe Beatrice Nest's take on the woman or not, but as Beatrice has been researching her for 25 years, Byatt presents her as a reliable source.

Adrienne Shiffman's 2001 study offers some very interesting insight into Ellen and her journal. At first, most would likely consider a journal as something privately written for no intended audience, so the idea of specifically constructing a journal for any reason may seem unlikely. But as Shiffman highlights, there are two sorts of journals: the kind truly written for no one to ever read and the kind written with the knowledge in mind that someone, someday may read it. In fact, this same point is made by Byatt in *Possession* when she has Christabel's cousin Sabine write in her journal, “Am I writing this for Christabel to see, as a kind of *devoir*— a writer's exercises—or even as a kind of intimate letter, for her to read alone, in moments of

contemplation and withdrawal? Or am I writing it privately to myself, in an attempt to be wholly truthful with myself, for the sake of truth alone?” (365). The character Sabine considers the same two types of journaling Shiffman outlines in her paper.

As Byatt is interested in the construction of different literary forms, it comes naturally that the author is interested in the journal as a literary form. Shiffman writes, “Byatt presents a fictional reconstruction of a nineteenth-century female diary in the journal of Ellen Ash, and, in doing so, she exposes the genre as a textual construct. In other words, Byatt reveals the diary as fiction in her creation of a fictional diary” (95). Shiffman continues by explaining how “the boundaries between diarist and author, ordinary and extraordinary, private and public conflate, and the female diarist ultimately emerges as a powerful literary talent” (95). Suddenly, if we agree with Shiffman’s reading, Ellen Ash is not only *not* dull, but also a “powerful literary talent” (95). Ellen is one who, although she writes privately, writes with a public intent. Ellen is one who, when she could simply write random musings on her daily activities, chooses to create a well-crafted “fictional diary” (95). It seems Ellen is, in her own way, “a poet” after all, embracing her desire for intellectual activity.

Shiffman’s reading only confirms Beatrice’s notion that Ellen wrote with intention. Shiffman declares:

Ellen Ash writes herself as the ideal embodiment of Victorian femininity, overtly aware of the necessary element of female inferiority that lies at the center of this ideal,” yet, “her perfected, feminine domesticity is exposed as a deliberately manufactured and, hence, fictional construct. Ellen’s careful process of selection and omission in the design of her journal illustrates her familiarity with the

cultural ideology of separate, gendered spheres as well as her subversive deconstruction of it. (96–97)

The “careful process of selection and omission in the design of [Ellen’s] journal” refers to the self-editing Byatt works into the journal entries, such as words crossed out or topics briefly mentioned, but never actually developed or returned to with clarification (96–97). Ellen’s journal reads as if she wants the reader to at first take her for the perfect domestic female her culture expects, but on further contemplation to notice the constructed nature of her writing, and hence the constructed nature of such cultural expectations.

While Victorian society may call for Ellen to sacrifice her desire for intellectual activity, a desire Byatt connects with autonomy, privacy, and artistry, the character resists such expectations even while portraying herself as the perfect Victorian wife. For with further reflection, isn’t the act of writing the journal an autonomous decision to be intellectually active and express herself? Furthermore, Ellen’s journaling symbolizes both privacy and artistry when considering the secluded time needed to compose and the constructed nature of her writing. And although it comes at a price, Ellen’s decision for celibacy is not a submissive act, but an autonomous decision, revealing a paradox at the heart of Victorian cultural norms.

Through Ellen’s journal entries, Byatt provides one of her two Victorian women who suffer from an inability to balance her need for intellectual activity and passion. While Christabel does create the epic poem she intends to, she doesn’t publish after *The Fairy Melusine*. And while Christabel does embrace the passion that leads to motherhood, this motherhood is experienced in the “lesser” than form of being an aunt. While Ellen does not become a great poet as she once dreamed, she does create a well-crafted work in the “lesser” form of journaling. And while Ellen could have children in a socially accepted manner, she refuses to allow the passion

that would have led to motherhood. In similar, yet different ways, Christabel and Ellen symbolize the female struggle for intellectual activity against cultural expectations of feminine domesticity and subservience, as well as the tension this need for intellectual activity has with female passion.

IV. Patriarchal Binary Thought in “Victorian” Text: Fairy Tale Retelling and *The Glass Coffin*

In addition to her use of the Fairy Melusine within the letters between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, as well as her use of Snow White within Ellen’s journal, Byatt uses the Grimm Brothers’ *The Glass Coffin* within Christabel’s fictional writing as a means of reappropriating the fairy tale genre. By using such a metafictional device as having a character write a fairy tale, Byatt reappropriates the traditional Western fairy tale through its retelling, while also developing her main Victorian female character.

In her essay “Old Tales, New Forms,” Byatt writes, “By the time I wrote *Possession* in the 1980s my interest in both character and narration had undergone a change — I felt a need to *feel and analyse* less, to tell more flatly, which is sometimes more mysteriously...I found myself using stories within stories, rather than shape-shifting recurrent metaphors, to make the meanings” (131). Her retelling of the Grimm Brothers’ *The Glass Coffin* within *Possession* is an excellent example of Byatt using “stories within stories,” an example that moves away from the patriarchal ideology that fairy tales generally espouse and explores the female desire for intellectual activity, with an emphasis on autonomy, that Byatt investigates throughout her novel (131).

Patriarchy is often revealed in the language of a text through what the French feminist Hélène Cixous called patriarchal binary thought. Binary opposition, a tenant of structuralism, states that people understand all elements of human culture in terms of opposites, such as white and black or good and bad. In time, the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida noted that one term within a binary opposition is always privileged. Building upon these two theories, Cixous applied them to feminist gender studies. She revealed that when examining the language in a text

not only are binary oppositions present with one term privileged, but that within patriarchal binary thought the privileged term is always the stereotypically masculine term (Tyson 83–131, 209–280).

Cixous lists such oppositions as activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, and head/heart, and then asks her readers “where is she?” (“Sorties” 37). Where is the woman in the above binary oppositions? Culturally, woman is associated with the second term in each couple, while man is associated with the first term, the term that is representative of power, action, and control. Cixous states, “Male privilege, shown in the opposition between activity and passivity, which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity” (38).

It is this opposition of activity/passivity that is present within the Grimm Brothers’ *The Glass Coffin* and represents the patriarchal ideology that Byatt’s version of the fairy tale moves away from. The princess’ physical inactivity represents the female struggle for intellectual activity against cultural expectations of feminine domesticity and subservience. It represents the female struggle for autonomy felt by generations of women, past and present. By crediting Christabel with the writing of the feminist version of *The Glass Coffin* that we find in *Possession*, Byatt develops her character as an artist struggling for autonomy in patriarchal Victorian England, giving us a look into the type of work Christabel creates and the topics she creatively considers.

To summarize, in the Grimms’ version of *The Glass Coffin* a tailor is out traveling and gets lost in the woods. He finds a hut in the night to take shelter in. In the morning he wakes to the fighting of a black bull and a beautiful stag. After the stag kills the bull, it scoops the tailor onto its horns and brings the tailor to a rock wall. The tailor enters the rock through a mysterious

iron door and eventually comes upon a miniature castle and a beautiful, sleeping maiden who is enclosed in a glass coffin. The tailor releases her from her prison, and the maiden tells him of the tragic events that led to her imprisonment. She and her brother lived peacefully alone, until one day a stranger stayed with them. At night, the stranger came into her room using black magic and made a marriage proposal. Outraged upon the maiden's refusal, the magician eventually turned her brother into a stag, shrunk her castle and all who lived within it, and left her to a silent, entombed slumber. At the conclusion of the maiden's story, she and the tailor release the spell that kept the castle in miniature, reunite with the maiden's brother who is again in human form, and marry that very day (672–678).

In this version, the male tailor symbolizes activity and the maiden symbolizes passivity. As a metaphor for activity, the tailor travels through the woods, approaches a strange home for shelter, enters a mysterious iron door which leads him to a beautiful maiden, rescues the damsel in distress, and wins her hand in marriage. All of these events present the tailor as an active character in the narrative. As a male he is portrayed to be in control of his situation. Worth mention, however, is the rare time in which the narrative structure of fairy tale binds even the tailor, the active male, to a moment of passivity and threatens the deconstruction of the activity/passivity patriarchal binary opposition that otherwise is consistent.

The only reason the tailor was in the position to rescue the maiden was because he was passively brought to the rock wall by the maiden's brother (in the form of a stag). It was not his own intellect or strength that put him in a position to save the maiden; it was simply by passively being brought to the right place at the right time. Yes, if one accounts for the brother's role in carrying the tailor, male activity is still occurring, but nevertheless the male tailor, who is the main male character, is experiencing a passive moment when otherwise he is portrayed as active.

In an attempt to not undermine the male gender role of activity that the tale otherwise espouses, the text accounts for this uncharacteristic passivity of a male character by associating it with luck (in the form of a *male* stag). In fact, the fairy tale opens by asserting that concerning a simple man being able to do great things, “what is of the most consequence, [is] that he should have good luck” (Grimm *The Glass Coffin* 672). Likewise, the tale closes by revealing that the maiden “gave her hand at the altar to the lucky tailor” (678). By associating the tailor’s passive moment with luck, a moment that could be viewed as feminine passivity is now portrayed as nothing but good fortune.

On the other hand, the maiden’s passivity is never seen as anything more than a gender role. The female character is the ultimate metaphor for passivity: she has her freedom of speech literally taken from her by the black magician, she is immobilized and stupefied into a slumber within a glass coffin, she is rescued by the tailor, and she apparently has no choice but to marry the tailor as payment for her release.

The character has no control over her situation, and the text presents this passivity as a biologically essential gender role by presenting it as the very will of God. Random luck is not credited, but rather divine providence. When the maiden first opens her eyes and sees the tailor she exclaims: “Divine Providence!”...“my deliverance is at hand!” (Grimm *The Glass Coffin* 675). And upon her release from the glass coffin, the maiden tells the tailor: ““My long-desired deliverer, kind Heaven has guided you to me, and put an end to my sorrows”” (676). The text presents female passivity as something that is a part of women’s biological nature as deemed by God, something that is only natural. God ordains that the maiden needs a male deliverer versus being able to escape the terrible situation herself. Furthermore, even once delivered from her

literally passive state within the glass coffin, the maiden still does not have the capacity to make her own choices.

Patriarchal ideology is further apparent at this point in the text. Not only is the maiden's passivity the will of God, but also divine providence deems that the maiden pay a hefty price for her passivity. She tells the tailor: "On the self-same day when [my sorrows] end, shall *your* happiness begin. You are the husband chosen for me by Heaven, and shall pass *your* life in unbroken joy, loved by me, and rich to overflowing in every earthly possession" {emphasis mine} (Grimm *The Glass Coffin* 676). Fortunately, the maiden's sorrows of being locked slumbering in a glass coffin have ended, but it is worth noting that when referring to "happiness begin[ing]" and spending life "in unbroken joy" the character uses "your" and not the pronouns "my" or even "our" (676). The text dismisses the maiden's right to happiness and bestows the favor upon the tailor, superior in his activity.

Christabel LaMotte's *The Glass Coffin* is similar to the Grimm Brothers' version, with some very important differences. One feminist difference in the tale created by Byatt is a twist to the plotline involving the masculine activity/feminine passivity dichotomy. As previously discussed, in the Grimms' version the tailor has a passive moment associated with luck when the maiden's brother brings him to the rock wall. In Byatt's version, at the hut the tailor takes shelter in, he is offered a choice of one of three gifts as payment for being helpful around the home. The tailor chooses a glass key, a key to an adventure. The old man who bestows the gift tells the tailor: "You must go out of this house'... 'and call to the West Wind, and show *her* your key, when *she* comes, and let *her* carry you where *she* will, without struggle or alarm" {emphasis mine} (Byatt *Possession* 67). Byatt genders the active West Wind feminine, giving it an agency the tailor must submit to in order to go on the adventure at all. Patriarchal ideology is

undermined by the feminine West Wind's agency in a scene where the male character has none, and the male character's passivity is never accounted for or explained away, as is done in the Grimms' version.

After the West Wind delivers the tailor to the desired location, the tailor goes underground and comes upon the lady in the glass coffin. Here a critical difference in Byatt's version of the fairy tale occurs. The tailor unlocks the coffin with his glass key, and the lady tells the tailor her history. She then inquires whether or not, as his right for rescuing her, the tailor will have her hand in marriage. While in the Grimm's version the tailor accepts the lady as his bride without hesitation, in Byatt's version the tailor replies:

‘Of course I will have you,’ said the little tailor, ‘for you are my promised marvel, released with my vanished glass key, and I love you dearly already. Though why you should have me, simply because I opened the glass case, is less clear to me altogether, and when, and if, you are restored to your rightful place, and your home and lands and people are again your own, I trust you will feel free to reconsider the matter, and remain, if you will, alone and unwed.’ . . . (*Possession* 74)

This difference found in Byatt's version of the tale is crucial. Suddenly, through the eyes of the tailor, a story in which the female has no autonomy, in which she is a passive bystander in her own life, seems rather foolish. Byatt's version offers the lady agency. She can now actively choose whether or not to wed the tailor. It is no longer a matter of divine providence or payment for a biologically essential passivity.

Indeed, the lady does choose to wed the tailor. The lady says of her own accord that the tailor “was in every way worthy of her hand,” presumably due to the tailor's decision to grant her

agency (Byatt *Possession* 75). Arguably, the act of marriage does not dismiss the movement away from the patriarchal binary opposition of activity/passivity since the lady exerts agency in choosing to marry the tailor, versus having the tailor forced upon her by divine providence. When the lady is passive and has no agency, as in the Grimms' version, the conclusion is lacking, unacceptable, and undoubtedly patriarchal, yet in Byatt's version, actively choosing marriage can be read as an acceptable ending. This attention to female autonomy strongly develops Christabel, who in the fictitious world of *Possession* is the author of *The Glass Coffin*, as a woman struggling for autonomy. Placing this struggle within a romantic context involving a fairy tale marriage includes Christabel's desire for love, sexuality, and even motherhood into her character development.

In addition to offering the maiden agency, another way Byatt's version moves away from patriarchal ideology is by embracing some of the aspects of Cixous' *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. Cixous proclaims that male writing historically "is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 879).

Furthermore, Cixous states that male writing historically is bound by reason: "Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 879). As a means of breaking free from patriarchal ideology, Cixous encourages, even demands, a feminine writing in which women write untethered by the male infatuation with logic and form and enter history by writing with the freedom of themselves and their bodies.

The freedom of *écriture féminine* flows through Byatt's version of *The Glass Coffin*, a feature that highlights Christabel's feminist freedom as a writer. Feminine writing attempts to reverse "the repression of women" that male writing of the fairy tale genre has for so long encouraged (Cixous "The Laugh of the Medusa" 879). In Byatt's version the language choice is much more descriptive in nature with more than double the word count. It's as if Byatt takes Grimms' traditional text and loosens the male constraints imposed on the story, giving it room to breathe and gracing it with delightful detail. The text is an unabashed love letter to literature and takes its time enjoying the English language and the plethora of descriptors at its disposal. This is clear when comparing the same narrative spots in the two tales, for example, sentences in the opening paragraphs of the narratives.

Grimms' version reads:

A civil, smart tailor's apprentice once went out traveling, and came into a great forest, and, as he did not know the way, he lost himself. (*The Glass Coffin* 672)

While Byatt's version reads:

There once was a little tailor, a good and unremarkable man, who happened to be journeying through a forest, in search of work perhaps, for in those days men travelled great distances to make a meager living, and the services of a fine craftsman, like our hero, were less in demand than cheap and cobbling hasty work that fitted ill and lasted only briefly. (*Possession* 65)

What Grimms' version says in 26 words, Byatt's version says in 64. With more than double the words, Byatt's version provides richer character development and detail. Not only do we learn that a tailor is lost in the woods, but we learn that the tailor is a "good and unremarkable man" and also a "fine craftsman" (Byatt *Possession* 65). The text additionally reveals that the

society the story is placed in is unappreciative of artistic, high quality work and favors “cheap and cobbling hasty work” instead. We now know that the tailor is a talented, but unappreciated, man in search of work.

Another mark of *écriture féminine* in Byatt’s version of *The Glass Coffin* is the flow of time in the fairy tale’s narrative structure. Jessica Tiffin asserts, “[Byatt] continuously explores and deconstructs the nature and workings of her own narratives as well as the problematic relationship between narrative and reality. Fairy tale, as one of the more essential forms of story, is the vehicle by which this interest is most strongly expressed” (“Ice, Glass, Snow” 47). One aspect of the “problematic relationship between narrative and reality” is the flow of time (47). Narrative allows more freedom than reality concerning the passing of time. Yet, traditionally, a fairy tale begins in the past and ends in the present, moving along a linear timeline from beginning to end in a very realistic manner. In a nonrealist genre such as fairy tale, a traditional representation of time is a crafted way of making the unbelievable believable. Likewise, a linear representation of time complies with traditional male writing bound by reason.

However, Byatt’s version alters the narrative structure of *The Glass Coffin* as it plays with the flow of time. In the beginning of the tale, the old man who owns the hut the tailor comes upon in the woods explains in great detail what will happen to the tailor if he chooses to go on the adventure the glass key will bring him, narrating the future (Byatt *Possession* 67–68). Later in the tale, when the lady is released from the glass coffin she gives a detailed history explaining how she became entombed in the first place, narrating the past (72–74). Tiffin writes, “The embedded tales play continually with the flow of time in the story, allowing jumps forward and back in a way very different from the usual placid flow of fairy tale” (“Ice, Glass, Snow” 60). While the Grimms’ version offers narrative in past and present, Byatt’s offers narrative in past,

present, and future. It's worth noting, as well, that when the past is part of the narration in the Grimms' version of *The Glass Coffin*, an uncommon occurrence is taking place. Jessica Tiffin points out how "linearity of plot characterizes fairy tale; diversions and jumps in time (such as the retrospective tale embedded in Grimms' *The Glass Coffin*) are rare" ("Telling Theoretical Tales" 12). Byatt's version of the tale plays with the flow of time, creating "diversions and jumps" that deviate from the expected form imposed upon the fairy tale by the history of male writing (12).

Having established that Byatt's version moves away from patriarchal ideology in some very meaningful ways that contribute to Byatt's investigation and to Christabel's character development, it would be remiss to avoid the ways in which the tale still espouses patriarchal ideology. Jeffrey K. Gibson states, "Byatt appropriates the fairy tale form in order to both challenge and, ultimately, rectify the very limiting and even injurious portrayal of female potential" (86). While Byatt's version of *The Glass Coffin* does indeed "challenge...the very limiting and even injurious portrayal of female potential," is it fair to say that it "ultimately, rectif[ies]" it (86)?

Even with the many ways in which Byatt's version deviates from the traditional fairy tale narrative, the tale is still in fact a narrative in which "he" must save "she." In fact, the tailor saves the lady twice. First, by releasing her from the glass coffin. Second, by killing the black artist that placed the spell on her: "...our hero struck with all his might at [the black artist's] heart, and the glass splinter entered deeply and he fell to the ground" (Byatt *Possession* 75). Hence, the patriarchal binary opposition of activity/passivity is still working within the tale, albeit undermined by the feminine presence of the West Wind, the agency the lady is given in choosing whether or not to marry the tailor, and the use of *écriture féminine* within the text.

However, the change in the tale in which the lady is given agency in choosing whether or not to marry the tailor, while at first promising, renders a troubling question: is agency given really agency at all? The lady does not declare she will be active in her own life and choose whether or not to marry the tailor. The tailor brings the foolishness of the situation to light and offers the lady her autonomy. While certainly a step in the right direction from the Grimms' version, Byatt's version manages to make the lady's activity something she passively receives. This greatly brings the acceptability of the tale's ending in marriage to question.

In fact, was the fate of the relationship determined by patriarchal ideology all along? The heterosexual metaphor associated with a key and a keyhole is the means in which the tailor rescues the lady. Once the tailor sees the keyhole in the glass coffin containing the lady, "he knew that this was the keyhole for his wondrous delicate key, and with a little sigh he put it in and waited for what should ensue" (Byatt *Possession* 71). Viewing the key as a phallic symbol and the keyhole as a yonic symbol, the lady is freed by means of sexual possession by the tailor. Placing such a heterocentric frame on the fairy tale arguably predetermines an ending in marriage and thus threatens dismissal of any remaining sense of agency found in the lady.

And so, while Byatt's version of *The Glass Coffin* certainly makes feminist strides away from the patriarchal Grimms' version in the way it uses plot, language choice, and narrative structure, it has not escaped patriarchy entirely. It still succumbs to patriarchal binary thought by associating women with passivity and men with activity. The question then, is why does Byatt write the tale in such a manner?

One answer is simply that in order to stay true to fairy tale form, as well as the Grimms' original version of the tale, in a way that would leave the tale recognizable, completely ridding the story of patriarchal ideology was impossible or even undesired by Byatt. Another explanation

is apparent when looking at the tale as a story written by the Victorian Christabel, as Byatt intends us to. It is not surprising that the Victorian poet would make feminist strides within the tale without completely ridding it of patriarchal ideology. After all, Christabel makes feminist strides within her life, but due to a tension caused by patriarchal expectations never manages to find a balance between her intellect and her passion. When considering Christabel as the author of *The Glass Coffin*, we may view the inconsistencies in ideology as a product of the character's life and a brilliant form of character development by Byatt.

V. Intertextuality Through Repeating Fairy Tale Allusions: Tales of Glass and Snow

In addition to her use of specific metafictional devices such as the writing and reading of letters, journals, and fairy tales as discussed throughout the previous chapters of this thesis, A.S. Byatt also repeatedly alludes to different fairy tales and creates a rich intertextuality throughout her text. For instance, Byatt uses the fairy tales *Little Snow White*, *The Glass Coffin*, and *The Snow Queen* to develop the contemporary character Maud Bailey, contributing to the reappropriation of fairy tale while doing so.

By surrounding Maud with the color white and glass, Byatt creates a comparison between Maud and the female characters from the three fairy tales *Little Snow White*, *The Glass Coffin*, and *The Snow Queen*. This comparison investigates the female struggle within Maud for intellectual activity and the tension the desire for intellectual activity has with the desire for passion, as represented by love, sexuality, and motherhood within *Possession*. The comparison develops Maud as metaphorically trapped when it comes to personal relationships, trapped by both her fear of sexuality and her fear of intellectual inactivity. It also links Maud to the Victorian characters Christabel LaMotte and Ellen Ash. While Maud is living in contemporary Britain, her struggles are not so dissimilar from the Victorian women's, which is both telling and disheartening. For while feminist strides certainly took place between the 1850s and 1986, here we see the tension nevertheless remains.

Byatt's associates Maud with the color white throughout *Possession*. When we are first introduced to Maud, we read that she is wearing "a long pine-green tunic over a pine-green skirt, a white silk shirt inside the tunic and long softly white stockings inside long shining green shoes" and that she has "milky skin" reminiscent of Snow White's pale complexion (*Possession* 44). This allusion to Snow White both associates Maud with the fairy tale character and with

Possession's character Ellen, creating a connection between the two women who share a fear of sexuality. Noticeably, the color green is being used here as well, serving as an allusion to Christabel's Melusine. This association is secondary, but worth noting as it links Maud to Christabel and creates a connection between the two women who share a fear of intellectual inactivity.

In addition to presenting Maud as physically white, Byatt surrounds Maud with white. Maud's living room is described as "bright white, paint, lamps and dining-table; the carpet was a Berber off-white" and there is a "white divan" and a "white down quilt" (Byatt *Possession* 58, 62). Furthermore, Maud regularly envisions the image of a white bed. At first this image is presented to us as a tangled heap of unruly sheets associated with her ex-lover Fergus Wolff: "Her mind was full of an image of a huge, unmade, stained and rumpled bed, its sheets pulled into standing peaks here and there, like the surface of whipped egg-white. Whenever she thought of Fergus Wolff, this empty battlefield was what she saw" (63). This image, the image of a bed looking like "whipped egg-white," occurs again on page 241 and page 257. On page 291, Byatt reveals that Maud's desire (as well as the character Roland Michell's) is to have no sexual desire and that this is symbolized in the image of an empty, white bed. After Roland confesses this longing, Maud replies, "'That's what I think about, when I'm alone. How good it would be to have nothing. How good it would be to desire nothing. And the same image. An empty bed in an empty room. White'" (290–291).

Jennifer M. Jeffers refers to the lines referenced directly above: "According to Maud and Roland, the image of the white bed stands in for a life of sexual abstinence. Without the complications, the pain, and the uncertainty of romantic or sexual desire, existence could be clean, empty, and white..." (143). Byatt's use of the word "battlefield" leaves us with violent

imagery of the emotions Maud associates with her ex-lover Fergus (*Possession* 63). Comparing “the complications, the pain, and the uncertainty of romantic or sexual desire” with the violence of a battlefield speaks loudly of the emotional wounds Maud suffers from her past relationship and thus develops the character’s desire for celibacy (Jeffers 143). Maud fears sexuality not out of a fear of the physical act as Ellen did, but rather out of a fear of the emotional pain that can result from sexual intimacy. For different reasons, the Victorian Ellen and the modern Maud similarly impose restrictions on their passionate nature.

In addition to Byatt’s use of white, Maud is surrounded by glass in her daily settings. It is as if she is entombed in a glass coffin like Snow White, or likewise the maiden in both the Grimm Brothers’ and Byatt’s versions of *The Glass Coffin*. For example, near the beginning of the novel, when Maud and Roland first meet, they enter Tennyson Tower through “a glass door,” take a “mirror-tiled” paternoster lift to the top of the tower, and then enter her office that is “glass-walled on one side” (Byatt *Possession* 45). Then when the two enter the Lincoln Library, in which Maud likely spends a great deal of her time doing research, Byatt describes it as such:

It was a skeletal affair in a glass box, with brilliant doors opening in glass and tubular walls, like a box of toys or a giant ConstructoKit. There were dinging metal shelves and foot-fall-deadening felt carpets, pied-piper red and yellow, like the paint on the stair-rails and lifts. In summer it must have been bright and baking, but in wet autumn slate-grey sky lay like another box against its repeating panes, in which lines of little round lights were reflected, like Tinkerbell’s fairylights in her Never-Never-Land. (*Possession* 49)

Describing the library as “a glass box” makes a simple correlation between the space and a glass coffin. And the imagery of “little round lights” bouncing about like the fairy Tinkerbell only

strengthens the visual of Maud being encased in glass, making the reader envision the every day “magic” that occurs when light reflects off crystal prisms hanging in a window, sending colorful light about a room (49). Additionally, comparing Maud’s library with Never-Never-Land represents the library as a world outside of reality. Maud hides behind academia in an attempt to live the simple, pain-free life symbolized by the empty, white bed. A behavior not unlike Christabel’s attempt to hide behind the walls of her Bethany project and Ellen’s attempt to hide her true self behind the pages of her well constructed journal.

Thus, the glass library serves as a glass coffin to keep Maud separate from the outer world. Byatt delivers this same sentiment later in the novel when Maud is driving home from Seal Court and is looking at the woods around her through the car’s glass windows, Byatt writes: “Maud was inside, and the outside was alive and separate” (*Possession* 151). Here the car serves as the metaphorical glass coffin separating Maud from “the outside,” just as the library does in the previous passage (151).

Maud is not only surrounded by glass when it comes to her professional life. Once Roland and Maud go to Maud’s home, we read that Maud is surrounded by white as I have discussed, and also by glass. Byatt writes that, within Maud’s living room, “alcoves beside the fireplace held a collection of spotlit glass, bottles, flasks, paperweights” (*Possession* 58). And that Maud’s bathroom is “a chill green glassy place, glittering with cleanness, huge dark green stoppered jars on watergreen thick glass shelves, a floor tiled in glass tiles whose brief and illusory depths one might peer, a shimmering shower curtain like a glass waterfall, a blind to match, over the window, full of watery lights” (63). Again, here we can see Byatt explicitly invoking Melusine within this description. The glass develops a comparison with the snow fairy

tales while being very green and watery as well. Thus, Maud is surrounded by glass at work and at home and Byatt succeeds at multiple allusions within one description.

By considering Byatt's use of the color white and glass in order to develop Maud, we discover Maud as metaphorically trapped when it comes to personal relationships. And while I agree with Jeffers' reading that Maud's desire for no "romantic or sexual desire" is symbolized via the empty, white bed, I elaborate that the reason for Maud's fear of sexuality stems from a fear of intellectual inactivity (143). The character's fear of intellectual inactivity, as well as her fear of being a passive bystander in her own life, leads to emotional and relational inactivity, a struggle and result felt by both Christabel and Ellen, as well.

In addition to creating a comparison between Maud and the Grimm Brothers' Snow White and the maiden in *The Glass Coffin*, Byatt also creates a comparison between Maud and Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen. Jeffrey K. Gibson states, "Byatt's focus on narrative and the storytelling tradition has often coincided with an interrogation of the way women have historically been represented within that tradition, especially with the way these female characters are given very few choices in their own lives" (94). Female characters in fairy tales are indeed "given very few choices in their own lives" (94). In fact, it seems that female characters in fairy tales are generally given only two real choices: submission and inactivity or defiance and activity. Snow White and the maiden in *The Glass Coffin* are a metaphor for submission and inactivity. The Snow Queen, on the other hand, is a metaphor for defiance and activity.

In her essay "Ice, Snow, Glass," Byatt reveals her awareness even as a child of the symbolic opposition between the two types of female characters in fairy tales: "Hans Andersen's Snow Queen was not only beautiful but intelligent and powerful...Andersen makes a standard

opposition between cold reason and warm-heartedness and comes down whole-heartedly on the side of warm-heartedness..." (155). It's as if a woman cannot be "intelligent and powerful" and at the same time be "warm-hearted" (155). In the world of fairy tale, a woman must choose to be either one or the other. This is a terrible choice for a woman of intellect and curiosity: either be submissive, inactive, and wait in a death-like slumber for a male redeemer, as represented by Snow White or *The Glass Coffin*'s maiden, or be defiant and active, but have to deal with what Byatt called "the frightening loneliness of cleverness," as represented by the Snow Queen ("Ice, Snow, Glass" 156).

Yet, the need for women to choose to be either/or does not simply take place in the world of fairy tale, rather it is a real-world choice brought upon by cultural expectations that deny the complexity of women and humanity, cultural expectations that Byatt interrogates throughout *Possession* via her investigation of the female desire for intellectual activity and the tension that desire has with the female desire for passion. The choice to be either/or is not simply a characteristic of the fairy tale genre, but rather a real-world problem exposed through the fairy tale genre. The tension *Possession* investigates is largely why further on in "Ice, Snow, Glass," Byatt states that "preserving solitude and distance, staying cold and frozen, may, for women as well as artists, be a way of preserving life" (158). The need for "preserving solitude and distance" Byatt creates in Maud is not unlike the need she presents using Melusine, Medusa, and Christabel, or even the need she presents using Snow White and Ellen (158). In unique ways, whether it be relationally, sexually, or via literal distance, both Christabel and Ellen also attempt at "preserving solitude and distance" out of fear of sexuality or intellectual inactivity (158).

Discussing a short story of A.S. Byatt's titled "Cold" included in Byatt's *Elementals* collection that tells a feminist version of the Grimm Brothers' *The Snow Queen*, Kathleen

Williams Renk makes some observations that apply just as well to Byatt's investigation within *Possession*. Renk writes, "Although Byatt does not suggest that childbearing, marriage, and artistry are incompatible for all women artists, she does insist that each artist know her own nature and elements, those aspects of herself that are necessary for the development of her creative capacity..." (626). As previously discussed, Christabel is both animated and deadened by childbearing, with motherhood leading to some of her best work and then to an end of her publishing altogether. "Childbearing, marriage, and artistry" seem to be incompatible for the Victorian Christabel, and even for Ellen (626). The modern Maud, a Victorian feminist scholar, chooses to "preserv[e] solitude and distance...[as] a way of preserving life," rather than let potential results of sexuality such as love, childbearing, or marriage corrupt her life as an artist (Byatt "Ice, Snow, Glass" 158).

Maud may not initially qualify as an artist to some readers, however, while the artistic life is represented most strongly in *Possession* through the character Christabel, it is also represented through Maud. Maud, who is a scholar first and foremost, does still create, as all scholars do, through her use of the written language. Theories and ideas are born of the mind and placed on the page by an academic scholar in many of the same ways tales are written by a novelist or clay is sculpted by a sculptor.

Jennifer Tiffin elaborates on Byatt's discussion of the woman as artist within *Possession* by discussing how, odd as it may sound at first, "bathrooms seem to recur in Byatt's fiction" and that "in *Possession* bathrooms...literally reflect the personalities of their owners" ("Ice, Glass, Snow" 57). Citing the description of Maud's bathroom on page 63 of *Possession*, Tiffin astutely states, "in Maud's bathroom...one finds not only a marvelous, fairy-tale realm but the perfect symbolic expression of Byatt's desire for cool, clean, intellectual dispassion" (57). As Byatt has

her fictitious bathrooms “reflect the personalities of their owners,” this desire of Byatt’s for “cool, clean, intellectual dispassion” that Tiffin highlights is a desire shared and symbolized by Maud (57).

Out of a fear of intellectual inactivity, a fear of being nothing more than a slumbering Snow White, Maud has chosen “the frightening loneliness of cleverness” and the “preserving of solitude [and] distance” (Byatt “Ice, Snow, Glass” 156,158). She has chosen to be a Snow Queen. However, this very decision is what, in fact, leads her to be metaphorically trapped, to be inactive, as if a Snow White in a glass coffin, when it comes to love and sexuality. Thus, Byatt associates Maud with both Snow White and the Snow Queen, highlighting the tension between female passion and the need for intellectual activity, all while connecting the modern character with the Victorian Christabel and Ellen.

VI. Conclusion

Byatt crafts the ending of *Possession* in a way that works with traditional fairy tale form, albeit in a very postmodern manner. After longing for sexual abstinence in order to concentrate on her scholarly work and avoid the pain that can come from relationships, at the end of the novel Maud realizes that she is in love with Roland, largely and ironically from the realization that they both longed for the empty, white bed as discussed, and the two characters have sex with each other for the first time. Maud is clearly nervous about losing her “intellectual dispassion” that has been an attempt at safeguarding her heart and clinging to her autonomy (Tiffin “Telling Theoretical Tales” 57). Even her proclamation of love is guarded: “Oh no. Oh no. I love you. I think I’d rather I didn’t” (Byatt *Possession* 550). But as the couple comes together physically, Maud begins to let her guard down: “Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him” (550). Byatt crafts a traditional ending not dissimilar to the one she provides in Christabel’s *The Glass Coffin*, in which the tailor frees the lady from the glass coffin by means of sexual possession. The survival strategy that Maud clung to for so long “grew warm against [Roland]” (550) and she is freed.

Yet, the endings are not completely similar either. Roland is not taking “possession” of Maud in a patriarchal and authoritative manner, nor does the sexual act dismiss Maud’s agency by predetermining an ending in marriage. Roland is taking “possession” of Maud’s “white coolness,” or in other words her “intellectual dispassion” that has kept her emotionally trapped as if a Snow White in a glass coffin (Byatt *Possession* 550). Furthermore, Maud was not literally trapped prior to the couple’s sexual act, passive as the maiden was, but an active participant choosing to have sex with Roland.

Additionally, since this novel is indeed a Romance, Roland is taking “possession” of Maud’s heart, a heart that she has long guarded. Throughout the novel Byatt incorporates Romantic conventions into her story such as a historical setting, green space where characters access nature and discover truths, instances of the supernatural, and plenty of love interests. The love between Maud and Roland ever so slowly takes root throughout the novel and finally blossoms with the conclusion.

Nevertheless, the couple is far too theoretically aware and postmodern for Byatt to write them a “happily-ever-after” ending with exclamations of ecstatic love or the exchanging of marriage vows, as popular culture may expect. In fact, due to Maud and Roland’s careers, it is hard to say whether or not they will even live in the same country as one another for long. Byatt offers narrative closure via the fact that Maud and Roland are now in a relationship, but her ending isn’t as neat and tidy as a “happily-ever-after” ending would be. Jessica Tiffin gives an excellent explanation of the particularly strong need for narrative closure within the fairy tale genre:

The Disneyfication of fairy tale in the twentieth century has perhaps clouded the issue a little, in that modern readership may expect such a closure to be the vaunted “fairy-tale happy ending.” This is not necessarily the case; while many fairy tales do end in marriage or conciliation, others offer retribution...or simply the definitive closing of an episode...The point is that closure is offered, an artificial oversimplification imposed on events so that they have a neatness and self-containment rather different from the messy, ongoing matters of real life. This is, after all, one of the major differences between narrative and reality: the imposition of a simple, recognizable shape. (“Telling Theoretical Tales” 14)

Byatt accomplishes offering the closure the fairy tale genre demands, while not necessarily imposing an “artificial oversimplification” on events (14).

However, while not imposing an “artificial oversimplification” on events (Tiffin “Telling Theoretical Tales” 14), Byatt does end the couple’s story with the hope that Maud’s struggle as either a Snow White or a Snow Queen is diminishing and even on the way to its demise: “In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell...It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful” (*Possession* 551). The “smell of death and destruction” symbolizes the end of Maud’s “intellectual dispassion” and self-inflicted isolation (Byatt *Possession* 551, Tiffin “Telling Theoretical Tales” 57). The smell also symbolizes the reality that death and pain are as much a part of life as pleasure. As previously discussed, when Maud is driving home from Seal Court early on in the novel, she looks at the woods around her through the car’s glass windows: “Maud was inside, and the outside was alive and separate” (Byatt *Possession* 151). When Maud sealed herself off from the world in an attempt to avoid pain, she likewise prevented herself from experiencing pleasure. “The outside *was* alive and separate” (emphasis mine), but now Maud smells life in all its strangeness and chaos (151). She enters the world again, taking the inherent risk of experiencing pain that comes with any relationship, but also allowing pleasure back into her life.

With the “smell of death and destruction” Byatt offers hope to her readers (*Possession* 551). For this “fresh and lively and hopeful” new smell is symbolic of Maud’s tension between intellectual activity and passion coming to an end (551). Byatt offers hope that this particularly feminine struggle is lessening as society progresses toward equality between the sexes. The Victorian women Christabel LaMotte and Ellen Ash were not able to balance these two aspects within themselves, Maud is beginning to achieve a balance, and hopefully women of the future

will be able to reconcile their need for both intellectual activity and passion without suffering emotional or social consequences.

A.S. Byatt's own intellectual activity and passion shine through her writing of *Possession*. Byatt's use of metafictional devices, her reappropriation of the fairy tale, and her investigation of the female tension between intellectual activity and passion, delivered within a text both Romantic and Detective in genre, make the novel both brilliant and entertaining. *Possession: A Romance* is truly a novel in which "reading is violently yet steadily alive," in which the words at once captivate and entertain while demanding conscious consideration, consideration of all that is literary, of female desires and patriarchal expectations, and of what the world has been and what we hope it to be (Byatt *Possession* 511).

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