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Professor Shannon

HNR 499

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Possession: A Romance and A.S. Byatt's Use of Fairy Tales and Myths:

An Investigation of the Female Tension between Passion and Intellect

Abstract: Discussion of the novel *Possession: A Romance* by A.S. Byatt, which investigates the female tension between passion (love, sexuality, motherhood) and intellect (independence, privacy, and artistry) and warns against embracing one identity trait at the expense of the other; analysis of the role of fairy tales and myths in the character development of Christabel LaMotte, Ellen Ash, and Maud Bailey; analysis of the juxtaposition of fairy tales and myths, Victorian England, and England in the 1980s; symbolic meaning of *Rapunzel*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Snow White*, *The Glass Coffin*, selkies, Medusa, and Melusine.

The critically acclaimed A.S. Byatt has received much attention for her contemporary novel *Possession*. While published relatively recently (in 1990) it has already earned much scholarly and critical attention. The novel is riddled with layers upon layers of literary

references, allusions, metaphors, folklore, fairy tale, and mythology; it proves to be a treasure-trove for anyone who loves the literary world.

I have conducted an analysis of the many references and allusions to fairy tales and mythical beings within *Possession*. My analysis primarily focuses on the fairy tales *Rapunzel*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Snow White*, and *The Glass Coffin*, along with the myths of selkies, Medusa, and Melusine. During this analysis I have particularly investigated how these references and allusions are used in the character development of Christabel LaMotte, Maud Bailey, and Ellen Ash. By performing such an analysis, it is clear that *Possession* investigates a tension between passion and intellect; a tension principally endured by women. Within *Possession* passion is often connected with love, sexuality, and motherhood while intellect is often connected with independence, privacy, and artistry. While Byatt presents these aspects most often in the form of female characteristics that prove impossible to unite, the author does so in an attempt to warn against a singularity that would fully deny passion and embrace intellect or vice versa. Byatt asks her readers to learn that the acknowledgement of both passion and intellect is the ideal circumstance for women. It is through the juxtaposition of classic fairy tales and myths, Victorian England, and England in the 1980s that Byatt is able to reveal this lesson. Byatt also depicts a hope that society is progressing toward the equality of sexes, a hope that the day women do not have to struggle with the tension between passion and intellect is getting closer, a hope that is largely represented by Maud Bailey.

The tension between passion and intellect that *Possession* investigates is of personal importance to A.S. Byatt herself. In *A.S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* Christien Franken discusses an interview between Byatt and Nicolas Tredell in which the author expressed her need to keep passion and intellect separate. Byatt explained “her desire to keep these layers of identity

– the passionate woman and intellectual – apart” as a “strategy for survival” (Franken 28).

Franken writes of how Byatt admits that in her youth she had hoped to embrace both identity traits at once, but that the eventual separation of passion and intellect “goes a long way to explain how difficult it must have been for her to reconcile her identity as a woman with her intellectual aspirations in the 1950s” (28).

It is imperative to keep this identity struggle in mind when considering Byatt’s use of fairy tales in *Possession*. A wonderful description of fairy tales by Kate Bernheimer can be found in the “Foreword” to *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*: “Fairy tales represent hundreds of years of stories based on thousands of years of stories told by hundreds, thousands, perhaps even millions, of tellers” (1). And while this passage is specifically discussing fairy tales, it describes the nature of myths and folklore as well. It is this very retelling of tales by so many different individuals throughout time that fascinates Byatt. In her essay “Old Tales, New Forms” found within the collection *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, Byatt writes: “I want to look at some of the ways in which these old tales and forms have had a continued, metamorphic life” (124). And indeed Byatt herself contributes to the “metamorphic life” of various fairy tales throughout *Possession*. Time and time again, fairy tale allusions and imagery appear throughout the novel, along with complete tales to be read that appear as the work of the character Christabel LaMotte.

In addition to being interested in the “metamorphic life” of fairy tales, Byatt clearly uses the tales as a way to draw attention to, and discuss issues of, female identity. Jeffrey K. Gibson says it well in his essay “And the Princess, Telling the Story” A.S. Byatt’s Self-Reflexive Fairy Stories”: “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). As we shall see, Byatt

does indeed “challenge and, ultimately, rectify” the extremely restrictive representation of females in fairy tales.

One such fairy tale that Byatt uses within *Possession* to discuss issues of female identity is *Rapunzel*, a tale most popularly known in the form presented by the Brothers Grimm in their collection of fairy tales. The line “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair” (Grimm 75) is well-known in Western pop culture. Although never directly mentioned, the tale’s presence cannot be missed as it is alluded to numerous times within *Possession*. In summary, within the tale *Rapunzel* a desperate husband makes a deal with a wicked enchantress to give her his first born child to raise as her own. The deal is honored and the enchantress names the baby Rapunzel. Once Rapunzel is 12 years old, the enchantress locks her in a tower with no stairs and no door. When the wicked lady wants to visit Rapunzel she calls to her and Rapunzel lets her long, golden hair down for use as a ladder. One day a prince overhears Rapunzel singing and instantly falls in love. Overhearing the enchantress call for Rapunzel’s hair, he one night calls in the same fashion and climbs into the tower. Although scared at first, Rapunzel falls in love and accepts his marriage proposal. Upon finding out about this affair, the enchantress chops off Rapunzel’s hair and abandons her in a desert where we later find out she delivers twins (presumably the prince’s, but no mention of a sexual encounter is ever directly made). When the prince next climbs the tower and finds the wicked enchantress instead of his love, he is devastated and jumps out of the tower, blinding himself and then roaming the countryside for years. Eventually the prince and Rapunzel reunite, Rapunzel heals the prince’s blindness with her tears, and they live happily ever-after in his kingdom. (Grimm 73-76)

When contemplating the Grimm’s *Rapunzel*, it is important to note that Rapunzel is only known for her beautiful hair and her beautiful voice. And as “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your

hair” is the famous line that has stood the test of time, it is safe to say that the character’s hair is the most memorable quality about her. As her hair is a physical characteristic of feminine beauty, I see it as symbolizing Rapunzel’s sexuality. This reading is strengthened by the fact that the enchantress locks Rapunzel in the tower at the age of 12 years old, a common age for female puberty. The wicked lady seems to lock Rapunzel in the tower in a perverse attempt to safeguard the young girl’s virginity. But as is evident by the prince’s marriage proposal and then the birthing of twins by Rapunzel, her virginity and sexuality cannot be forever locked away. It is this symbolism, that of Rapunzel’s hair as metaphor for female sexuality, that Byatt integrates into *Possession*. Throughout the novel there is an ongoing motif to do with Maud Bailey’s hair. Maud is the main female contemporary character in the novel, a feminist literary scholar working in England and specializing in the works of Christabel LaMotte (the main female Victorian character in the novel).

When first introduced to Maud Bailey, Byatt writes that the character Roland “could not see her hair, which was wound tightly into a turban of peacock-feathered painted silk, low on her brow” (44). A reader may easily dismiss this descriptive fact about Maud initially. But only two pages later, when the two characters have left the outside weather and entered into Maud’s office, Byatt writes that Maud “had not taken off the headdress” (46). Here it becomes apparent that something is amiss. Generally speaking, it would be expected that during a professional meeting held indoors headgear of any sorts would be removed. I found myself wondering what Maud is trying to hide about her hair and why. Additionally, in reference to where Maud’s office is located Byatt writes that “she lived at the top of Tennyson Tower” (45), just as Rapunzel lived at the top of a tower.

With these allusions in mind, it is thrilling when Byatt gives some background information concerning what is going on here. Byatt informs us through the text that Maud has “yellow hair” and when looking in the mirror contemplates that “the doll-mask she saw had nothing to do with her, nothing. The feminists had divined that, who once, when she rose to speak at a meeting, had hissed and cat-called, assuming her crowning glory to be the seductive and marketable product of an inhumanely tested bottle” (64). It turns out that Maud is not only an intellectual but a beautiful blonde as well; a blonde whose “crowning glory” has caused others to judge her by this feature, just as Rapunzel too is viewed based upon her hair. Fearing such a simplistic, fairy tale like appraisal, Maud had in the past chopped off most of her hair until she began dating Fergus who dared her to grow it out. She did grow her hair out, and upon their breaking up she was too proud to cut it but “instead wore it always inside some sort of covering” (Byatt 65).

This struggle of Maud’s concerning her hair is symbolic of the female tension between passion and intellect that Byatt is investigating with this novel. When with Fergus, Maud gives in to her sexual, passionate nature and grows her hair out even in light of ridicule from her academic contemporaries, yet as soon as the relationship is over she covers passion up, symbolic in the covering of her hair, and maintains a cool, intellectual disposition only. She cannot seem to be both “passionate woman” and “intellectual” at once. Yet, this time she simply covers passion up, symbolic in the covering of her hair, versus attempting to completely rid her life of passion, symbolic in the cutting of her hair in the past. So while Byatt is revealing a tension between passion and intellect in Maud, she is also revealing a sense of progress; current Maud is more accepting of her sexual nature than past Maud.

Byatt continues to describe Maud with her hair hidden until, along with Roland, the reader gets an accidental glimpse when Maud comes out of the shower at Seal Court: “It was down, he saw, the hair, running all over her shoulders and neck, swinging across her face...” (162-163). And later, in a shop in Whitby harbor, upon being asked by an old woman to view the brooch that was holding Maud’s scarf on, Maud takes the scarf off and the text reads: “The pale, pale hair in fine braids was wound round and round her head, startling white in this light that took colour out of things and only caught gleams and glancings. She looked almost shockingly naked...” (Byatt 282). The idea that Maud “looked almost shockingly naked” simply because her hair is showing only emphasizes how strictly she usually adheres to keeping her blonde tresses hidden, and likewise how much she fears being valued, similar to Rapunzel, strictly for her hair, or in other words, her sexuality. Maud fears being viewed solely as a sexual being, solely for her passionate side, and not as an intellectual being as well.

Near the middle of the novel, Roland finally asks Maud, “Why do you always cover your hair?” (Byatt 295). With her explanation about the feminists at the conference and about Fergus, she ends up removing her headpiece and revealing segments of blonde hair plaited and “glossy with constricted life” (Byatt 295). And after further conversation about her “constricted” hair, Maud “began slowly to undo, with unweaving fingers, the long thick braids...she put down her head and shook it from side to side, and the heavy hair flew up, and the air got into it” (Byatt 296). It is a beautiful scene where Maud is finally comfortable enough with another person to reveal her hair and not feel threatened of being misrepresented by it. Byatt has used the *Rapunzel* allusions to concretely establish Maud’s fear of being judged in an oversimplified manner, as if she were only a princess in a fairy tale, and not the intellectual being that she is. Equally, the

Rapunzel allusions do an excellent job of portraying the tension between passion and intellect in women that Byatt is analyzing throughout the novel.

Byatt also uses the fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen as a key tool in the development of characters and the investigation into the dichotomy of passion and intellect in females. *The Little Mermaid* is directly mentioned and alluded to several times in *Possession*. In the original version of *The Little Mermaid* that Andersen wrote, the story is one of disappointment, loss, and ultimately the hopeful chance of redemption. The youngest daughter of the sea king (who is never given a name and is simply referred to as the Little Mermaid) falls in love with a human prince and desires to be his wife. She also longs for the prince to give her a soul as mer people do not have an immortal soul and the only way to get one is by the following means...

“Only if a human being loved you so much that you meant more to him than his father or mother – and only if all his thoughts and feelings were devoted to you and he let the pastor put his right hand in yours with the promise of faithfulness now and for all eternity. Then his soul would flow into your body, and you two could share human happiness. He would give you a soul and still keep his own.” (Andersen 91)

Being desperately in love with the prince and wanting to earn an immortal soul for herself, the Little Mermaid goes to the sea witch for help. The sea witch cuts out the mermaid’s tongue, making the young girl mute, and gives her a potion that turns her fins into legs. She walks and dances gracefully but nevertheless every step that she takes is like being stabbed with knives. A further catch is that if the Little Mermaid should not succeed in winning the prince over, and he should marry another woman, on the morning after the wedding the Little Mermaid will die and turn into sea foam. Sadly, this is the case. And while the Little Mermaid has the opportunity to

kill the prince in order to save herself, out of love she cannot do it and accepts her destiny with the sea. Yet, upon turning into sea foam she is raised up and joins the “daughters of the air” (Andersen 101) in a quest for an immortal soul, which can be earned by performing good deeds and helping people for 300 years. (Andersen 78-104)

Within this tale the Little Mermaid is made literally mute by the sea witch’s cruel demand for her tongue as a form of payment. And while it is unlikely that Andersen ever intended such a reading, I view the loss of the Little Mermaid’s voice to represent the loss of her intellect. She can no longer verbally communicate with her love. She only has body language left to try and seduce the prince with; she cannot have an intellectual conversation with him and share her knowledge of a world the prince is unaware of, the world of the sea. The Little Mermaid can only try to look pretty and dance for him and, unbeknownst to him, is left completely at the mercy of his judgment. And as body language does not prove to be enough to win the prince over, the mermaid suffers greatly both for her love of the prince and for her desire to gain an immortal soul.

In several ways two of the female characters, Ellen and Maud, should be read with this tale in mind. Byatt directly associates Ellen with a mermaid in an excerpt from the character Mortimer Cropper’s work *The Great Ventriloquist*: “Randolph, in a charming gesture, lifted his new wife and carried her across the water, to perch her, like a presiding mermaid, or water-goddess, on a throne-like white stone, dividing the stream” (121). One cannot help but to have the image of *The Little Mermaid* statue in Copenhagen harbor come to mind, a statue that “has become as famous as the story itself” (Frank 78). And in fact, later in the novel, there is again an allusion to this statue. When Maud takes off her scarf in Whitby harbor to show the old lady her brooch (as previously mentioned) Byatt reveals that the brooch is a family heirloom that Maud

chose to keep “because it reminded [her] of the Little Mermaid” (283). Not surprisingly, this brooch resembles the famous Copenhagen statue: “Maud’s brooch, which depicted indeed a little mermaid seated on a rock, her glossy black shoulders twisted towards the surface, modestly obviating any need to carve her little breasts. Her hair snaked down her back, and her tail snaked down the rock” (Byatt 283). While the brooch does not exactly mimic *The Little Mermaid* statue, nonetheless a correlation can be made and clearly Byatt wants the reader to consider *The Little Mermaid* fairy tale in their reading. The tale is one that addresses the tension between intellect and passion, and shows how for the Little Mermaid the loss of intellect, and therefore the gaining of a life of passion alone, has dire consequences. As I’ve shown through the literary analysis of Maud’s hair, at different times in her life Maud attempts to rid her life of passion and focus solely on intellect. This is the exact opposite of the Little Mermaid’s situation, but they both represent the problematic nature of such singularity.

Additionally, there are further connections between Ellen, the wife of the famous Victorian author Randolph Henry Ash, and the Little Mermaid. While Maud attempts to rid her life of passion, Ellen actually succeeds in doing so. As the Little Mermaid is made literally mute by the sea witch, Ellen is made symbolically mute by her sexual fears. Through Ellen’s musings about her honeymoon, Byatt reveals that Ellen and her husband have never consummated their relationship. Ellen is so terrified of the act of having sex that she repeatedly refuses Randolph: “the approach, the locked gateway, the panic, the whimpering flight. Not once, but over and over and over” (Byatt 498). This shunning leads her to live a life of guilt and repression in which she constantly tries to make up for her denials: “The eagerness, the terrible love, with which she had made it up to him, his abstinence, making him a thousand small comforts, cakes and tidbits. She became his slave. Quivering at every word. *He had accepted her love.*” (Byatt 499). And

although “he had accepted her love” even in light of abstinence, Ellen is unable to speak of the situation at all. She is so consumed by her sexual fears that concerning her honeymoon: “She did not remember it in words. There were no words attached to it, that was part of the horror. She had never spoken of it to anyone, not even Randolph, precisely not to Randolph” (Byatt 498). Here is a female character who cannot handle the tension between passion and intellect, who completely removes sexual passion from her life altogether, and who then is so traumatized by the situation that “there were no words attached to it.” And since Ellen lives a life of guilt because of this decision, and her husband engages in a sexual relationship with another woman, it seems apparent that Byatt is writing this character as a warning against such singularity. Alluding to a connection between Ellen and the Little Mermaid, who also suffers mutely and has her love likewise give attention to another woman, only strengthens this warning from Byatt. She is investigating the need for both passion and intellect, that even though there can be a tension between the two, abandoning one will not be rewarding.

While Christabel is never directly referred to as the Little Mermaid, Byatt does make a connection between her and the fairy tale. Christabel’s cousin, Sabine, writes in her journal that Christabel “spoke of the fishtail and asked me if I knew Hans Andersen’s story of the Little Mermaid who had her fishtail cleft to please her Prince, and became dumb, and was not moreover wanted by him. ‘The fishtail was her freedom,’ she said. ‘She felt, with her legs, that she was walking on knives’” (Byatt 404). As previously mentioned, I read *The Little Mermaid* tale to symbolize the loss of the Little Mermaid’s intellect via the loss of her voice. However, here Byatt indicates that Christabel reads the tale to symbolize the loss of the Little Mermaid’s freedom or independence via the loss of “the fishtail.” Such a reading is not contradictory to my point, but actually adds more depth to it. Not only has the Little Mermaid given up her voice and

intellect, but she has given up her independence too. In every way the mermaid has sacrificed intellect for passion, something that Christabel is very frightened of.

Christabel fiercely clings to her intellectual side and this is highlighted more through Byatt's incorporation of selkie myth than from allusions to *The Little Mermaid* fairy tale. Within *Possession* Christabel is referred to as a selkie several times. Selkies are "sea-like men and women, are associated with the folklore of the Orkneys, the Western Isles, Ireland, and the north and western coasts of Scotland" (Eason 1). Selkie legends claim that selkies are able to remove their sealskins and dance on land. But if they lose their sealskins they are unable to return to seal form; they have to remain in human form. A human man would often woo a female selkie-in-human form, marry her, and then hide her sealskin and hold her captive as his spouse. Eventually the selkie would find her sealskin, or have it brought to her by one of her children, and return to the sea. In the legends the roles were sometimes reversed, having a human female trick a selkie male, but this occurs much less often. (Eason 1-2).

The first mention of selkies in *Possession* comes about during Christabel and Randolph's Yorkshire trip. Christabel asks Randolph if there are any selkies in Yorkshire and he replies: "Seals? I think not. Further north, yes. And many legends, of seal-wives, seal-women, on the Northumberland coast, and in Scotland. Women from the sea, who come for a time and then must leave" (Byatt 305). With the mention of these "women from the sea," Randolph associates Christabel herself with the selkies: "He could not say to her, you will not leave me, like the seal-wives. Because she could and must" (Byatt 305). As a married man, Randolph knows that this affair with Christabel cannot last, and so in a way he has caused her to resemble a selkie who will return to the sea. At one point in Yorkshire he even directly calls her a selkie, saying: "My selkie, my white lady, Christabel" (Byatt 309).

Furthermore, Randolph is not the only one who associates Christabel with a selkie. Christabel's cousin, Sabine, writes in her journal in reference to Christabel the following: "What is strange is that she seems to have no life anywhere but here. It is as though she had walked in out of that storm like some selkie or undine, streaming wet and seeking shelter" (Byatt 381). So why does Byatt associate Christabel with a selkie? Obviously the selkie legend has its connections with *The Little Mermaid* in that they both have to do with water women of myth. But the selkie myth examines the tension between passion and intellect in a differing way than *The Little Mermaid* does. Within the legend a selkie woman is viewed by a man only by her passionate nature: as a lover, wife, and mother. The man's trickery is an insult to the selkie's intellect in the fact that he dismisses it out of selfishness; he does not acknowledge the woman's independence. As the selkie always eventually retrieves her sealskin and returns to the sea it is clear that such a situation will not work. The importance of women being acknowledged as both passionate and intelligent is highlighted. And while Randolph obviously does not dismiss Christabel's intellect, she nevertheless has become a mistress; a role historically associated with sex and dependence and not too often with independence. Even though Christabel and Randolph share a love for one another, she cannot permanently remain in the role of mistress, and will eventually have to leave just as the selkies do.

In addition to mermaids and selkies, Byatt writes of other water women of myth such as Medusa and Melusine. In Greek mythology Medusa was once a beautiful woman, but...

"Unfortunately, this mortal enchantress caught the attention of Poseidon, the god who ruled the sea. He raped her in the temple of Athena, the goddess of war. The virgin goddess did not take kindly to this desecration of her sacred home, and she made certain that men would not court Medusa again by transforming her into a repulsive Gorgon with snakes for hair and a

gaze that would turn men to stone. She had sharp teeth, brass claws, and wings, and her body was covered in scales.” (Peterson 1)

Once beautiful, Medusa was transformed into a half-snake, half-woman creature; similar to a mermaid but with great fear and terror associated with it. Medusa’s hideous appearance, in addition to her being a Gorgon whose gaze will turn any man to stone, make her a terrifying being. Yet, there has long been a fascination with her. She has captured the imagination of layman and scholar alike for many years and has repeatedly played a role in popular culture.

Within *Possession* Byatt mentions Medusa several times: once in reference to Mnemosyne on Professor Cropper’s slippers (104), twice in reference to sea creatures (269, 271), and once in an academic conversation between Maud Bailey and Leonora Stern (342). Byatt also has Christabel write of Medusa within the poem “The Fairy Melusine.” The lines mentioned go as follows:

“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...”

(317)

While power is usually hailed and respected in males, when Byatt writes “But let the Power take a female form / And ‘tis the Power is punished” she draws attention to the fact that

within Greek mythology many of the females in power are portrayed as hideous and destructive (think of Sirens, Gorgons, and of course Medusa). These females are extremely powerful and thereby developed into beings that should be feared and demonized. They symbolize male fear of female power and Medusa is possibly the most famous of these symbols. Commenting on the above passage from *Possession*, Monica Flegel explains Christabel's intentions in her writing in the essay "Enchanted Readings and Fairy Tale Endings in A.S. Byatt's 'Possession':"

"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)

Byatt is clearly developing an association between Christabel and Medusa through this examination of "the beliefs of her Victorian society." As Robert B. Heilman reports in his essay "A.S. Byatt's 'Possession' Observed:" 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" (609). The association between Christabel and Medusa is also clear in the sympathetic word-choice that Christabel uses such as "weeps" and "hollowing" in the above poetic passage. Such words arouse a sense of sympathy for Medusa who typically is not presented in a way to evoke such an emotion.

As before mentioned, Christabel LaMotte is the main Victorian female character in *Possession*, and arguably the most important character in the whole novel. When researching

Randolph Henry Ash, Roland discovers a possible connection between Randolph and Christabel and so he begins an investigation into her. We first learn about who she is from Fergus Wolff. Fergus gives Roland the basic information about her and about the famous poem “The Fairy Melusine” and then he tells Roland to go to Maud Bailey for further details, as she is the expert. In short, this is how the detective work and love affair of Roland and Maud begins. Throughout their adventure, the Victorian flashbacks, and especially from reading the correspondence of Randolph and Christabel, we learn that Christabel LaMotte was an extremely intelligent woman who highly valued her independence; as mentioned, she typically favored intellect over passion. These traits make Christabel refuse to live as the gender stereotype of the time would have expected her to, as a wife and mother only. She is aware that her intelligence makes her frightful to many men, as intelligence can equal power, and so she relates to Medusa’s plight.

Likewise, Christabel relates greatly to Melusine’s plight. Byatt uses Melusine the most out of any of the water myth women to investigate the tension in women between passion and intellect. As Gillian M.E. Alban astutely claims in “Into the Garden, Melusine! The Tale in Byatt’s *Possession*.” “[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. 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 39). This reference is clearly made so that we will think of the poem “The Fairy Melusine” and Christabel in light of Virginia Woolf’s theory of the “androgyny of the creative mind.” Woolf argues that a creative mind needs to be androgynous in order to successfully create. When discussing the art of

writing fiction, Woolf tells us that “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 is a writer of fiction, I argue that referencing Woolf is Byatt’s way of both revealing to her readers that Christabel also believes in the importance of the “androgyny of the creative mind” and asking readers to understand this belief in their reading of the poem “The Fairy Melusine.”

Furthermore, in reference to the passage about Woolf in *Possession*, in her essay “‘I Am My Own Riddle’ – A.S Byatt’s Christabel LaMotte: Emily Dickinson And Melusina” 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). The fact that Melusine “appears androgynous” is no doubt a huge part of what drew Christabel to write about the mythical being in the first place. Additionally, a key point to Woolf’s text is that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write” (1229). In other words, a woman must have some privacy and independence “if she is to write” and be creative. Melusine serves as the perfect metaphor for both Christabel’s desired creative androgyny and the need for “a room of one’s own.”

There have been many different versions of the Melusine myth over time. Jacques Le Goff proves to be one of the experts concerning the history of the myth. In his work “Melusine: Mother and Pioneer” a thorough history of Melusine is given. The myth 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 to never 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. 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 is furious and punishes her daughters all in different ways; Melusine is turned into a serpent every Saturday and will be eternally punished unless a man marries her. Upon this marriage she will become mortal. However, if this 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 to never view her on Saturday, and brings him great prosperity in the form of heirs as well as castles and property. Eventually Raimondin betrays her privacy and sees her in her mermaid form. Later, when one of their sons performs wicked deeds, Raimondin blames Melusine for the sons actions saying "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" (Le Goff 209). Melusine thus flies away as a winged serpent and only returns at night to nurse her two youngest children. (Le Goff 205-210)

Twice in this myth the female's trust is betrayed and dire consequences occur. The need for privacy and independence are highlighted in these occurrences. For example, Melusine needs to have her privacy respected every Saturday. As long as this need for solitude is met, Melusine is very creative, represented by her creation of wealth and male heirs. But once this privacy is betrayed, once Melusine no longer has "a room of her own" every Saturday, the creativity ends. Byatt represents this connection between Woolf's text and Melusine through the Bethany project. The Bethany project is a symbol of Christabel and Blanche's attempt to create "a room of one's own." Christabel writes: "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 204-205). Her “dear Companion” is referring to her friend and probable lover Blanche Glover. The two women established their residence in the Bethany cottage and spent time painting, writing, reading, and enjoying one another’s company with little interaction from the outside world. Within this household, the women create for themselves the luxury of solitude known by male writers but denied female writers of the time. As part of a Victorian family, women would not be granted the solitude needed in order to best create, as they would be expected to function as wife and mother only. The Bethany project is Christabel’s attempt at independent artistry but Randolph invades the sanctity of her creative space just as Raimondin invaded Melusine’s.

The need for privacy and the theory of the “androgyny of the creative mind” that Melusine symbolizes, speak loudly of the intellectual tension felt by Christabel. As a Victorian woman Christabel often feels stifled intellectually. Her fascination with the physically androgynous Melusine reveals Christabel’s desire to be viewed genderless when it comes to her independence and artistry. When discussing her writing with Randolph, 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 197). Christabel does not want her writing to be seen as only “excellently done—for a woman” but simply as “excellently done.” She 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; a luxury that seems impossible for Victorian women to possess.

The correspondence between Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash, where we first learn of how the Melusine project begins, further develops the role of Melusine in the characterization of Christabel. Christabel discloses the personal information that as a child her father told her the

Melusine tale over and over again. It is a tale that she has grown up with. She also writes that “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 191). The idea of dual natures and of the likely tension between the two natures directly correlates with Byatt’s investigation of the tension between passion and intellect. As “an Unnatural Monster” Melusine symbolizes female power and independence associated with intellect, likewise symbolized by Medusa. As “a most proud and loving and handy woman” Melusine symbolizes the passionate nature of a helpful wife and mother.

This second aspect is one that has been wrestled with overtime. In Medieval days authors of the myth 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” (Le Goff 217). Le Goff even goes as far as to say that the husband is in fact the hero of the story, yet sympathy for Melusine, from these same Medieval authors, cannot go unnoticed:

“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 to be a symbol of the fear female power can evoke, then such “tenderness toward a demonic woman” can be accounted as a latent sympathy, even admiration, of this very 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, this

woman brought prosperity to her husband in the form of many male heirs and remains loyal to the youngest children even after she has been rebuked.

Randolph Ash comments on the dual nature of the myth, 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 193)

Christabel greatly appreciates Randolph’s insight and via her response we see that Randolph has indeed understood Christabel’s take on 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).” (Byatt 196)

Through this correspondence and the discussion of Melusine, Byatt simultaneously teaches her readers about the nature of Melusine and develops 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 an intellectual, independent woman who demands privacy and a passionate, comforting woman who fulfills the roles of mother and wife. These traits at first appear to be conflicting, and 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.”

Within *Possession*, Byatt has Christabel’s cousin Sabine write: “She [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” (Byatt 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?” (Byatt 404). This exchange really gets to the heart of the tension between intellect and passion that Byatt is interrogating throughout the novel. If men view women as “double beings” that are either “enchantresses and demons or innocent angels” then no wonder women suffer a tension between intellect and passion. If always seen by others as one extreme or the other, women will obviously struggle to reconcile such conflicting views. Through Christabel, Byatt is saying that the literary form Romance is where these “two natures can be reconciled,” something she has openly stated not being able to do in her personal life.

Lastly, in connection to Melusine, the topics of solitude and motherhood must be further addressed as they play a huge role in the character development of Christabel and further the investigation between passion and intellect. Throughout the novel, Christabel is established as an intellectual artist who highly prizes her solitude for many reasons. Near the beginning of her correspondence with Randolph Ash, 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 152)

Again, this belief is further backed up by the Bethany project. Christabel meeting Randolph, and the relationship that pursues, puts an end to Christabel and Blanche’s cherished female friendship and puts an end to Christabel’s beloved solitude, not only from Randolph’s presence but from Christabel’s pregnancy.

Once pregnant, Christabel can technically never be alone as she is now carrying a child inside of her. And 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 (Byatt 542-543). Christabel’s privacy has been violated, reminiscent of Melusine’s privacy being violated by her husband viewing her on a Saturday. Yet this violation of privacy seems to propel Christabel into some of her best writing, and then ironically put an end to her literary career. Nancy Chinn astutely points out that “motherhood inspires LaMotte’s best poetry but also ends her life as a creative writer” (181). When Chinn refers to LaMotte’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). Motherhood thus plays a critical role in fully developing her epic poem “The Fairy Melusine.”

For better or for worse, with her solitude forever violated, motherhood even seems to propel 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. For example, during Christabel's pregnancy Sabine describes her 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 396). Sabine actually views Christabel as "some sort of serpent." Furthermore, near the end of the novel it is revealed in Christabel's own writing that she has seen herself as Melusine. She 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." (Byatt 544)

Not only is Christabel revealed here as a version of Melusine, but also as a "sorcière" and "a spinster in a fairy tale." After deliberately alluding to many fairy tales throughout *Possession*, Byatt here turns one of the main characters into a character that belongs in folklore. Christabel's connection with Melusine especially speaks loudly of the tension between passion and intellect that Byatt has been investigating. Chinn writes: "By connecting LaMotte to Melusina, Byatt evokes the difficulty of being both artist and mother" (181). This "difficulty" of being an artist of intellect who values her independence and simultaneously a mother who passionately loves her child proves to be a struggle that Christabel cannot win. While initially inspired by motherhood into completing her epic poem, upon its completion the Victorian poet slips into the cracks of anonymity until recent contemporary feminists within *Possession* revive her.

In addition to *Rapunzel* and the water women myths, there are further fairy tales and myths to discuss within *Possession*. And these tales will further investigate the tension between passion and intellect. The presence of the fairy tales *Snow White* and *The Glass Coffin* cannot go unnoticed. Both tales are found within the Grimm Brothers' collection and Byatt makes both tales have a large presence within *Possession*.

In the Grimm Brothers' version of *Snow White*, to summarize, Snow White's mother dies from childbirth and after the passing of one year Snow White's father, the king, remarries. Snow White is a beautiful young girl with snowy white skin, red lips, and black hair. The new Queen is jealous of Snow White's beauty and goes into an envious rage when one day her magical looking-glass tells her that Snow White is the fairest in the land. The wicked stepmother decides that Snow White must die and orders a hunter to take her into the forest and kill her. Fortunately, the hunter takes pity on the beautiful child and lets her go free. After a day of traveling in the woods, Snow White reaches the cottage of the seven dwarfs. The dwarfs allow her to remain living with them and provide her food and shelter in exchange for her keeping house. Eventually, when the evil Queen realizes that Snow White still lives, she takes matters into her own hands. On her third attempt to murder Snow White the Queen succeeds in killing her by means of a poisonous apple. The dwarfs entomb Snow White in a glass coffin and place it on a mountaintop. One day a Prince comes by and immediately falls in love with Snow White. He talks the dwarfs into giving him the coffin and as the Prince's servants carry the coffin away they trip upon a tree stump and a piece of the poisonous apple is dislodged from Snow White's throat. She comes alive, the Prince proposes to her, and she becomes a queen. The tale ends by the evil Queen being punished at Snow White and the Prince's wedding; the stepmother is made to dance in red-hot iron slippers until it brings her death. (Grimm 249-258)

This tale is the ultimate endorsement of the idyllic vision of marriage as the cause of perfect happiness for women. Neither herself, Snow White's family nor the seven dwarves were able to keep Snow White happy and safe, it is only her husband-to-be, the Prince, that rescues her. Therefore, it is only via marriage that Snow White can truly be happy. The Prince is a perfect stranger to Snow White, but somehow he supplies the happily-ever-after ending especially popular in contemporary fairy tales. Within Grimm's tale, the couple exchange several sentences and that is all it takes for a proposal to be made and accepted.

Byatt uses *Snow White* particularly in the development of the characters Ellen Ash and Maud Bailey. As discussed earlier in this paper, in relation to the *Little Mermaid*, Ellen was so fearful of her own sexuality that her and her husband Randolph maintained an abstinent marriage. This failure as a lover and wife haunts Ellen throughout the marriage and Byatt reveals this largely through Ellen's own journal; she has many days of depression and headaches seemingly caused by her latent guilt in addition to the stresses of managing a household and staff (Byatt 242-253). Ellen suffers migraine headaches so badly that she writes: "The headache introduces one to a curious twilight deathly world in which life and death seem no great matter" (Byatt 250). This "twilight deathly world" represents a place between life and death, between day and night. It is reminiscent of Snow White's state in the glass coffin where she is dead to the world yet still has the potential to live.

In her next 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 251). In her medicated state, Ellen is captured by "the Bliss of sleep" and is content to lie "motionlessly" thus evoking 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. 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” (252). Ellen lies in her room as if she lies in “the glass casket” of Snow White. She is alive but, due to her headaches, she is suspended in a death-like state. And while this is because of the headaches, it should also be read as a response to Ellen’s personal life. 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. 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” (499). Out of an extreme sense of Victorian morality and guilt, Ellen’s fear of sex has caused her to live a lie, one she cannot even share with her family. And it is a combination of this guilt, fear, and shame for living a lie that make Ellen give in to depression and sleep and appear as a Snow White.

Ellen is imprisoned by her guilt as Snow White was imprisoned by glass, but as Flegel points out, Ellen’s prince, Randolph, “is unable to rescue her.” By using the *Snow White* fairy tale, in addition to the *Little Mermaid* 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 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 suffers greatly. Randolph and marriage do not lead to the happily-ever-after that Ellen had expected and *Snow White* demands. Byatt has complicated the idyllic vision of marriage as the cause of perfect happiness that's presented by many fairy tales, including *Snow White*. This reversal of expected outcomes draws even more attention to the devastating results of Ellen's dismissal of her passionate side. The simple act of getting married is not enough to give Ellen perfect happiness.

As for Maud Bailey, Flegel writes: "One could obviously make a connection between Maud's humiliating experience at the hands of the feminists, and the treatment of a Snow White, a Cinderella, or a Beauty at the hands of her jealous stepmother/stepsisters" (21). The "humiliating experience" Flegel makes reference to is, of course, the conference where feminists taunted Maud for her blonde hair. Such behavior is easily associated with the cruelty of "jealous stepmother/sisters" of fairy tales. In this way Maud can be compared to Snow White.

Furthermore, Byatt associates Maud with the color white continually throughout the novel. For example, when we are first introduced to Maud we read that she was 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 had "milky skin" (Byatt 44) reminiscent of Snow White's pale complexion. Maud also surrounds herself with white. Her living room is described as "bright white, paint, lamps and diningtable; the carpet was a Berber off-white (Byatt 45) and there is a "white divan" and a "white down quilt" (Byatt 62).

Additionally, 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 an ex-lover: "Her mind was full of an image of a huge, unmade, stained and rumpiled 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” (Byatt 63). And this image of a bed looking like “whipped egg-white” occurs again on page 241 and page 257. But then on page 291 Byatt reveals that Maud’s desire (as well as Roland’s) is ironically to have no desire and that this is symbolized in the image of an empty white bed. After Roland confesses his longing for an empty white bed, 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.” (Byatt 290-291). “To desire nothing,” in my opinion, is impossible, and so Maud’s hope is akin to a fairy tale. In a way Maud yearns to be in a sedated, dream-like state just as Snow White was in her poisoned slumber and Ellen was in her medicated state.

Jennifer M. Jeffers refers to the lines referenced directly above in her essay “The White Bed of Desire in A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*.” “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). Here again is a struggle with passion, a struggle with sexuality, which we have discussed concerning Ellen. It is important to note that here this struggle is not one solely felt by a woman; Roland has the same longing for uncomplicated, sexual abstinence. By including Roland in this struggle Byatt is showing that, although she sees the tension between passion and intellect as a tension particularly endured by women, men too can be affected by such issues. Roland has struggles of his own brought on by his gender and gender stereotypes, but that is for another paper altogether.

And so Byatt associates the fairy tale *Snow White* with Maud in order to make a correlation between Snow White’s persecuted beauty and Maud’s. Maud’s reaction to such

persecution, the hiding of her natural beauty – a trait that would attract a potential lover, highlights Maud’s struggle with her passionate side. Byatt then uses white imagery, which is obviously connected with the imagery in *Snow White*, to further discuss this tension by revealing Maud’s longing for a lack of all desire, symbolized by the empty white bed.

In the Grimm Brothers’ classic version of *The Glass Coffin*, in summary, an apprentice tailor is lost in the woods and comes upon a hut in the night that belongs to a little old man. He sleeps there and in the morning awakes from a loud fight between a stag and a bull. The stag beats the bull and then carries the tailor to a door in a large rock that opens to a secret hall. The tailor enters the hall and within it finds a small castle and a lady within a glass coffin. As the tailor looks upon the glass coffin, the lady suddenly opens her eyes and directs the tailor as to how to open the coffin. Upon the ladies release from the coffin, she exclaims that the tailor is her heaven-sent deliverer and chosen husband. She then tells him the story of how she came to be in the coffin. The lady and her brother had a love so strong that the two of them had made vows to never marry and to always live together in sibling love. One day a black artist arrived at their castle and initially appeared friendly in order to win over the brother’s confidence. In short, the black artist offered his hand in marriage to the lady, she refused, so he then turned her brother into a stag, shrunk her castle, turned her people into smoke and confined them in a bottle, and shut her up in a glass coffin in which she had fallen into a deep sleep. Upon the completion of her story, the lady and the tailor opened up the vessels that were containing the castle and her people and everything returned to its natural state. Even her brother was now in human form. He was the stag at the beginning of the tale that killed the bull who was in actuality the black artist in disguise. The tale concludes with the marriage of the lady and the tailor. (Grimm 672-678).

Within this tale, the lady's lack of agency is troubling. The black artist literally makes her unable to be in action or exert any power, as represented by her entombment in the glass coffin. And once she is released from this spell it is only by the hand of someone else, the little tailor, and has happened due to "Divine Providence" (Grimm 675), which in effect puts the action into the hands of God and therefore removes agency from the characters all together, even the tailor at this point. Yet, the lady still intends to marry this perfect stranger as she tells him that "you are the husband chosen for me by Heaven" (Grimm 676). Again, any sense of agency is removed from the lady as it is not she who chooses the little tailor as her husband; it is "Heaven."

This fairy tale is alluded to throughout *Possession* and is predominantly associated with Maud and Christabel. Similarities between *The Glass Coffin* and *Snow White* are obvious, particularly the use of a glass coffin. Byatt uses glass imagery especially when developing the character Maud; such imagery thus has its connections with both fairy tales. Maud seems to be surrounded by glass in her day to day settings. It is as if she is herself entombed in a 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 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 dingy 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." (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. Additionally, comparing Maud's library with "Never-Never-Land" functions as a way to represent the library as a world outside of reality; Maud appears to hide behind academia, in an attempt to live the simple life represented by the empty white bed, and 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 as she is looking at the woods around her through the glass windows, Byatt writes: "Maud was inside, and the outside was alive and separate" (151). Here the car serves as the metaphorical glass coffin separating Maud from "the outside," just as the library does in the previous passage.

Maud is not only surrounded by glass when it comes to her professional life. Once Roland and Maud go to Maud's home we see that not only is Maud surrounded by white as I have discussed, but she is surrounded by glass here as well. Byatt writes that, within Maud's living room, "alcoves beside the fireplace held a collection of spotlit glass, bottles, flasks, paperweights" (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" (Byatt 63). Thus Maud is surrounded by glass at work and at home. Byatt has clearly made this association on purpose. Surrounding Maud with glass forces comparisons between Maud and the females trapped in

glass coffins in both fairy tales *Snow White* and *The Glass Coffin*. Maud is metaphorically trapped by her longing to have no desires, her longing for an empty white bed. This is only reinforced by Byatt having Maud surround herself with glass, seen by her choice of employment and her personal decorating style.

What's more, it is in Maud's home that Roland reads Christabel LaMotte's version of *The Glass Coffin* and it is this text that chiefly highlights the lack of agency in fairy tale characters, particularly female fairy tale characters, which the Grimms' version so strongly represents. Byatt has a tale of the same name, written by Christabel, on pages 65-76. The fairy tale within *Possession* is very similar to that of the Grimm Brothers, with some very important differences. In Christabel's version, the tailor visits an old man in the woods who lives with many animals including a "great gray dog" (Byatt 66) named Otto who is the brother transformed into a dog rather than a stag. As the tailor proves to be helpful and kind to the household, the old man offers him three gifts in which a "little glass key" (Byatt 67) is the one the tailor chooses. The key proves to be "the key to an adventure" (Byatt 67) in which the tailor is carried by the West Wind to a huge gray stone which opens up and allows the tailor to go underground.

And it is underground that the tailor comes upon a lady in a glass coffin. He unlocks the coffin with his glass key and "the little tailor, because he knew this was what he *must* do, bent and kissed the perfect cheek [emphasis mine]" and then the released woman says, "'You *must* be the one,' ... 'you *must* be the one I have been waiting for, who *must* release me from enchantment. You *must* be the Prince.' [emphasis mine]" (Byatt 71). The repetition of the word "must" in this context draws attention to the fixed situation that the fairy tale characters find themselves in. They are bound by the genre and form of fairy tale to behave in a certain manner. The female character especially feels bound by the genre as she says "must" four of the five

times. In having Christabel write this exchange into the fairy tale, Byatt also draws attention to the way in which, as a Victorian woman, Christabel too feels bound by social conventions and expectations of women, a struggle that unfortunately Maud deals with as well during contemporary times.

Christabel's story continues much the same as Grimm's, with the lady telling the tailor the history of how she got trapped in the glass coffin and how she and her brother at one time were happy and "swore an oath never to marry but to live forever peacefully in the castle" (Byatt 72). She then inquires whether or not the tailor will have her offered hand in marriage as his right for rescuing her. And while in the Grimm's version the tailor accepted the lady as his bride without hesitation, in Christabel'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.'" (Byatt 74)

This difference found in Christabel's version of the tale is crucial. It adds a whole new way of looking at the characters in fairy tales. Suddenly, through the eyes of the tailor, a story in which the female has no autonomy, in which her choices are made based upon expectation and not necessarily free will, seems rather foolish. In response to this passage, Gibson writes:

"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.

For example, the maiden in Christabel's reworking of the Grimm's "Glass Coffin" assumes she must wed her rescuer according to convention, although even he questions this determination...." (94)

Byatt is obviously using the author Christabel to draw attention to the absurdity of social conventions that disavow female independence, both in Victorian and modern times.

The tale, within *Possession*, continues with the tailor killing the black artist with a shard of broken glass from the coffin. Then the kingdom and all within it return back to its original size. And in conclusion the tailor and the lady do get married, and upon the brother's request, remain living in the castle: "And the young man said that the tailor had offered him kindness, and should live with them both in the castle and be happy ever after" (Byatt 76). The reasoning for having the tale end in marriage is debatable and worth mention. As is common with Byatt's writing, I believe there are numerous readings meant to be taken from this one passage. While diverting from the conventions of a traditional fairy tale, Byatt still wants to stay mostly true to the form and thus ends it in the expected marriage, but with the twist of remaining with the brother. Equally, I would argue that the lady does truly choose to marry the tailor of free will and not out of a sense of generic duty; she is won over by him saving her twice - by releasing her from the coffin and then killing the black artist. Joyful once the dark spells are broken, the lady says of her own accord that "the tailor had now twice saved her, and was in every way worthy of her hand" (Byatt 75). The act of marriage does not cancel out the important message this text has been investigating since the lady exerts agency in choosing to marry the tailor, versus having the tailor chosen for her. Here the necessity of female intellect is unmistakable. When the lady has no agency or independence, as in Grimms' version, the conclusion is lacking and unacceptable, yet when Christabel alters this in her version, marriage by choice is an acceptable ending.

A further explanation of the ending to Christabel's "The Glass Coffin" is offered by Helen E. Mundler in her study "'Intratextual Passages': 'The Glass Coffin' in the work of A.S. Byatt." Mundler points out the correlation between the sleeping lady and Christabel, the brother and Christabel's female companion Blanche Glover, and both the black artist and the tailor and Randolph Ash (11-12). Mundler contends that the story represents Christabel's desired living situation: "it can be seen that an ideal solution for Christabel would be to continue her affair with Ash – here regularized by marriage – while not disturbing the stability and privacy of her relationship with Blanche..." (12). This "ideal solution" hypothesized by Mundler and based upon Christabel's writing within the novel, is a metaphorical representation of a hope to be free of the tension between passion and intellect that the text is interrogating. Within this reading of Christabel's "The Glass Coffin," living with Blanche in Bethany House represents Christabel's intellectual side: Christabel as artist, intellectual, and independent. On the other hand, living with Randolph represents Christabel's passionate side: Christabel as wife, lover, and mother.

Yet, within the actual text of *Possession*, circumstances are a bit less clear cut than that. Throughout the novel, Byatt reveals that Christabel does in fact attempt to merge her passionate and intellectual sides within both her relationship with Blanche and her relationship with Randolph. Christabel does not desire to have the two sides of her always divided, but her attempts at uniting intellect and passion repeatedly fail. For example, Byatt hints at a probable lesbian relationship between Christabel and Blanche (309-310) which would represent the merging of intellect and passion in Christabel's life within the context of the Bethany House. This does not prove to be a solution to the tension though, as evident in her pursuing a relationship with Ash. The fact that Christabel is written within the Victorian period also plays a part in why a relationship with Blanche may not have been enough, as such a relationship would

be seen as highly immoral. Byatt also shows Christabel attempting to unite her intellectual side with her passionate side within her relationship with Randolph. The relationship is highly founded on her intellectual side as it is formed around discussions of academia, philosophy, and poetry. Nonetheless, with the introduction of passion into the relationship everything slowly begins to fall apart, as Randolph will never leave his wife Ellen. Even though the marriage of Ellen and Randolph is not what either of them wants it to be, Victorian morals will not allow a separation. Thus, for Christabel, the hope of uniting her passionate and intellectual sides proves to be nothing more than a fantasy. Christabel makes attempts at unification, but they are failed attempts nevertheless. The Victorian sociocultural setting in which she lives deters such a development in the female character.

Indeed, both Victorian female characters, Christabel and Ellen, suffer greatly from the tension between passion and intellect, a tension that manifests itself in many different scenarios throughout *Possession*. Maud too, over 100 years later, suffers from this same tension. Through the use of myth and fairy tale, Byatt investigates this very real female struggle. The fairy tales *Rapunzel*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Snow White*, and *The Glass Coffin*, along with the myths of selkies, Medusa, and Melusine, all serve crucial functions in the investigation into the tension between passion and intellect and the development of the characters Christabel, Ellen, and Maud.

Byatt eloquently summarizes the struggle women feel between passion and intellect when she has Ellen write in her journal that “I meant to be a Poet and a Poem” (134). Ellen declares that she had intended to be both an intellectual woman and a passionate woman, both “a Poet and a Poem.” Sadly, as the word “meant” is past tense, for Ellen this intention never became reality. As seen in both Ellen and Christabel, the tension between passion and intellect is inescapable.

Undeniably, the tension is inescapable for Maud too; nevertheless, I contend that Byatt writes Maud as a symbol of hope, a symbol that the tension may be slackening.

Over and over again, as I have shown, Byatt affirms the tension between passion and intellect, yet warns against a singularity that would fully deny one aspect and fully embrace the other. Acknowledging both passion and intellect is presented as the ideal circumstance for women. None of the three female characters ever fully achieve this ideal, yet Maud appears closer than either Christabel or Ellen ever were. Again, the fact that Maud went from cutting her hair in order to hide her sexual, passionate nature, to simply covering her hair up is a sign of Maud getting a step closer to accepting her passionate side along with her intellectual side. Even more progress is revealed the couple times Maud allows Roland to see her hair exposed.

But it is the end of the novel that speaks the loudest of Maud's hopeful uniting of her two sides. After longing for sexual abstinence in order to avoid the pain that can come from relationships, at the end of the novel Maud finally realizes that she is in love with Roland and the two of them have sex for the first time. Maud is clearly nervous about being hurt, even her proclamation of love is guarded: "“Oh no. Oh no. I love you. I think I'd rather I didn't”" (Byatt 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”" (Byatt 550). Not only is Byatt discussing the way in which Maud's body is physically "warm against him," but she is symbolizing the melting of Maud's "coolness" or the survival strategy that led the character to cling so singularly to her intellectual side.

The novel ends with an uncertainty about whether or not Roland or Maud will make it as a couple. They may attempt a long term relationship if Roland takes a distant professorship or he

may stay in England and work on his writing; Byatt doesn't tell. As *Possession* has made clear, love is complicated, can be heartbreaking, and is greatly jeopardized if the woman is constantly struggling with the tension between passion and intellect that society has instilled in her. And while Byatt is realistic enough not to end *Possession* with a typical fairy tale happily-ever-after ending, she does end the novel with the hope that Maud's tension between passion and intellect 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" (551). I argue that the "smell of death and destruction" is symbolic of the end of Maud's struggle between passion and intellect and thus a representation of hope on Byatt's behalf, hope that this particularly feminine struggle is lessening as society progresses toward equality between the sexes. The Victorian women were not able to come to terms with these two aspects of themselves, Maud is beginning to get there, and hopefully women of the future will be able to reconcile passion and intellect without suffering social consequences.

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