

READING WIDDERSHINS: A STUDY OF ROMANCE AND
A. S. BYATT 'S *POSSESSION: A ROMANCE*

by

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Abstract

In this study I consider A. S. Byatt's *Possession: a Romance* as both an example of and a commentary on its genre. In the first chapter, I explore some reviews of Byatt's romance, with an emphasis on critical approaches to the book's genre, and introduce the critical material, including studies of fairy tales, which informs my discussion of romance. In Chapter 2, I analyse the assertion that "Romance is a proper form for women" (*Possession* 404) and suggest that the form of romance may promote new kinds of social organization by liberating the imagination of writers and readers alike. I build on the theme of romance as a subversive genre in Chapter 3 with a discussion of animal transformation and a comparison of Byatt's version of "The Glass Coffin" with Grimm's more traditional version of the same tale. Chapter 4 includes a discussion of different styles of reading; I concentrate on the relationship between curiosity and faith in *Possession* in order to suggest some of the implications of this relationship for readers and critics of romance.

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**Romance, Reviewers, and *Possession*:
 “And then there is the whole question of what kind of Truth
 may be conveyed in a wonder-tale” (*Possession* 181).**

When I first read *Possession: a Romance*, by A. S. Byatt, I lived in a basement like Roland and Val's. I read quickly, looking for revelations and resolutions. I found Roland frustrating but endearing, and Cropper frightening. I identified with Maud and felt certain that she was not actually cold, but seemed that way because she was afraid of being trapped by other people's stereotypes. I identified with Beatrice and admired her refusal to produce an edition of Ellen Ash: “I wasn't sure it was right. If she would have liked what I was doing” (241). I wept with Ellen when Randolph was dead. I felt great relief when Maud and Roland finally became lovers. I wept at the end of the book because the experience of reading it for the first time was over and because Christabel never knew that Maia and Randolph met. I marvel at Byatt's ability to involve readers in such an intimate way with her story.

Since *Possession* first appeared in 1990, a number of reviewers have discussed it, but apart from these book reviews, critical responses to the novel are not widely available in print. I consulted a range of book reviews in periodicals from Britain, Canada and the United States, and found reviewers apparently divided over *Possession*. In one review, Anne Smith (*Listener*) links Byatt's romance to a scathing description of “campus novelists...writing fiction for deconstruction by their own seminar groups.” In her view, reading *Possession* is like “reading the second draft of a PhD thesis. ‘Knowledge’ (i.e. research) is paraded for its own sake.” She refers to Byatt, indirectly, as an exponent of “pre-quantum theory intellectualism. It still regards the emotions as a minor intrusion which comes between himself [the intellectual] and the pure truth or the ultimate perception of a logical mega-pattern of being. It is superior in its detachment, smug in its ignorance, a highly refined stupidity.” She implies that such predominance of analysis over ‘story’ makes *Possession* a failed example of the romance genre; “*Possession* falls with a leaden thump as a romance; it succeeds as an

exposition of...post-doctoral malaise.” The terms of her criticism point to a conflict between romance and academic writing and suggest that these two genres are incompatible, at least in *Possession*. As you have seen, her response to the book differs strikingly from my own.

Other reviewers, however, express opinions which are closer to mine: “romance and fairy-tale [sic] motifs are intertwined with contemporary academic and sexual politics” in Byatt’s “depiction of the small world of literary criticism” (Karlin 17) as well as in her depiction of the world of nineteenth-century poetry. Robert Sandiford (*Montreal Gazette* review of *PM*) sees *Possession* as “preoccupied with how art and literature are not merely possessed by us all – they also possess the intellect and imagination as can few other forces in our lives, and bring people together.” He believes that Byatt “follows her art...with body, heart, mind and soul.” His comments point to the kind of interweaving and blurring of boundaries that I associate with *Possession* itself. Smith argues that romance and literary criticism are incompatible genres and blames Byatt for juxtaposing them; Karlin and Sandiford credit her with bringing elements of literary criticism into her romance in an effective way.

Several other reviews contain similarly conflicting matter. Christina Koning claims that Byatt warns of the dangers of theoretical dogma: “Byatt has a great deal of fun at the expense of assorted Freudians, feminists and deconstructionists, and points up the danger of imposing doctrinaire readings on multi-levelled and elusive texts.” Michael Dirda seems to agree:

Byatt, a former British academic as well as a novelist, aims to show how some literary professionals, obsessed with textual questions, Lacanian psychology or deconstruction, may blind themselves to the sheerly human, the actual feelings, in poems: They get the meaning and miss the poetry. Sometimes they even miss the meaning. (C7)

Judith Thurman (*New Yorker*), on the other hand, sees Byatt herself as a deconstructionist: “the modern politics of knowledge forces academic writers to develop strategies for placing

themselves beyond criticism. The trick, apparently, is to deconstruct one's own text defensively rather than surrender any fertile passage to an invading analyst." For Smith, romance and literary criticism do not belong together, and for Thurman, "the artist and the didact within Byatt seem to compete for possession of her work" (155). Both of these reviewers suggest that Byatt fails to observe boundaries between her separate roles as fiction writer and literary critic. Karlin, Sandiford, and Dirda, by contrast suggest that *Possession* argues for the dissolution of these same boundaries or for the value of story as well as criticism. I admire *Possession* precisely because Byatt's romance seems to encourage a reader not to become "an invading analyst"; she frees readers to respond on a range of different levels.

Some reviewers accuse *Possession* of being didactic or pedantic, yet others admire Byatt's method of conveying scholarly details and exploring how readers and critics look at literature. Anita Brookner may suggest reasons for this apparent contradiction: "*Possession* is inordinate, but not indiscriminate; it is unfashionable; it is generous, teeming with more ideas than a year's worth of ordinary novels. An occasional unpruned sentence cannot diminish the high style of the whole." Her choice of words like "inordinate," "generous," "unpruned," and "teeming" supports the idea that *Possession* does overflow boundaries, perhaps including the distinctions between romance and literary criticism, practice and theory which some reviewers seek to defend.

In an interview with Juliet Dusinberre (published in *Women Writers Talking* 1983), Byatt expresses her point of view about the relationship between literature and criticism:

I need to write a theoretical book at the same time as I write a novel. The gap between creative writers and critics has closed markedly in the last ten or twenty years, partly through the influence of structuralism. There are now academic theorists, novelists who are academics, and critics like Harold Bloom who think criticism is a form of creative writing. I don't. I think critical writing is a way of

finding out how to write well. I had to throw off the burden of Leavis¹ who thought that to write any book of criticism, however second-rate, was better than to write a second-rate novel. I always put novel writing higher. (Todd 193)

Although Byatt sees a clear distinction between writing criticism and writing literature she says that the gap between them is closing, and also suggests that criticism is ancillary to creative writing, a means by which to learn a “higher” form. Although she examines different critical methods in *Possession*, she argues for the primacy of story.²

Throughout her oeuvre, Byatt seems concerned with concepts which are traditionally defined as ‘opposites’ such as body and soul (*Angels and Insects*), heart and mind (*Passions of the Mind*), one person’s space and another’s (*Virgin in the Garden*), reality and fiction (*The Game*), creation and criticism (*The Shadow of The Sun*), form and content (*Possession*). She shows that the boundaries between the elements of these pairs are often permeable, shifting, uncertain. According to Bytt, “*Possession* actually began with the word ‘possession.’ It’s when two or three things that are separate appear to be a part of the same thing” (Canton 8). In her romance, she interweaves many apparently antithetical elements, and thus explores the interstices between supposedly clearly-defined realms, the tensions and complexities of in-between places. In addition to those listed above (all of which figure in *Possession*), these are some of the pairs in which I am interested: constraint/freedom, wild/civilised, men/women, imaginary/factual, ordinary/unusual, faith/questioning, confusion/order, critics/writers, metaphoric/literal, human/animal, theory/practice, education/delight, innovation/convention.

If Byatt does examine the relationship between literary criticism and literature in *Possession* by incorporating the one into the other, then I am inclined to read her romance as both an example of and a commentary on its genre. Before I undertake such a reading, however, I will consider some of the other definitions of romance which inform my discussion.

In *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel*, Ian Duncan delineates the full breadth of the term ‘romance’:

In the last fifty years it has signified a courtly or chivalric fiction of the late Middle Ages, a fanciful or erotic or sentimental enhancement of a situation or event, any unlikely story, a love affair, highly conventionalized mass-marketed novels read by women, a narrative with a quest in it, four of the last plays of Shakespeare, the American novels of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, and a super-genre containing all fictional forms and figures that is ultimately the form and figure of a transcendental human imagination. (10)

Possession offers examples of most, if not all, of these kinds of romance. Roland’s name, for example carries associations with *The Song of Roland*, a medieval French romance, as well as with Childe Roland, son of King Arthur and the subject of a poem by Robert Browning whose title comes from *King Lear*: “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.” In a critical essay, Byatt expresses a predilection for “fanciful or erotic or sentimental enhancement”: “I’d rather have cloth-of-gold wedding dresses, quotations from *Urne Buriall* and tigerish passion in crime writers acquitted of murder, than brown frocks, knitted socks in clerical grey, and cauliflower cheese” (*Passions of the Mind* 270). Roland and Maud’s discovery of letters connecting two famous poets is an “unlikely story,” as many historical scholars can attest. There are plenty of love affairs in *Possession*, such as those between Christabel and Randolph, Roland and Maud. In common with popular mass-market romances, a third-person narrator in *Possession* tells of a socially and economically challenged protagonist (Roland) falling in love with an attractive but cold and unattainable colleague (Maud); the two survive numerous misunderstandings and ultimately confess mutual love.³ The narrator of *Possession* states outright that the romance plot includes a “Quest” (460). Like Shakespearean romances such as *The Tempest* or *The Winter’s Tale*, *Possession* features false death and rebirth, mistaken

identities, ocean voyages, escapes to the wilderness, long-lost relatives. A quotation from Hawthorne serves as an epigraph to *Possession*. These selected examples help to illustrate that Byatt's romance covers a range of romance conventions comparable in their breadth to the range of meanings which Duncan attributes to the word 'romance.'

The Oxford Companion to the English Language says of 'romance' that "the history of this word provides a striking example of semantic change from specific to general reference and from one to many senses" (McArthur 872). Perhaps because such semantic change implies great breadth and complexity of meaning, many books about romance concentrate on specific authors or periods in the history of the genre (ie. *Medieval Romances*). Many critics, including Northrop Frye (AC 33), include fairy tales in the category of romance; some works which deal with fairy tales alone (see Estés, King, Zipes) have enhanced my understanding of *Possession* and contributed to my study of Byatt's romance.

Gillian Beer,⁴ in *The Romance*, states that "because romance shows us the ideal it is implicitly instructive as well as escapist. By removing the restraints of rationalism it can reach straight to those levels of our experience which are also re-created in myth and fairy-tale" (9). Her comment suggests that critics identify with the genre of romance a 'reconciling' capacity which I identify with *Possession* in particular; while some critics may label works of literature as either 'instructive' or 'escapist,' others see that romance can be both at once. This general pattern coincides with the specific case of some reviewers seeing *Possession* as the site of a conflict between Byatt's didactic and artistic voices, while others see that such voices can sing together. Criticism of fairy tales, much of which examines their role in the lives of children, often recognizes the complementary relationship between education and delight.

Our views of the purpose of literature have a significant impact on what kinds of literature we choose to study, as well as on what we write about our reading. I have claimed that Byatt examines and questions dichotomies in her fiction, and now I want to suggest that

critical responses to her work may vary according to the critics' attitudes towards romance. Frye uses dichotomy as a "large simplifying device" in an effort to "give us some perspective on the shape of a big subject"; he suggests that critics fall into two broad categories: "interest in literature tends to center either in the area of tragedy, realism, and irony, or in the area of comedy and romance." He argues that such a distinction is "implied in the traditional view of the function of literature as twofold: to delight and to instruct" (NP 1). His own implication is that romance is identified with delight rather than instruction. According to him, critics interested in comedy and romance are a "furtive and anonymous group who have not much of a theory, implicit or explicit, to hold them together. It is much more difficult to say what this approach to literature does when it becomes serious: when, so to speak, it stops reading detective stories and gets out of bed" (NP 2-3). His own solution is a theory of comedy and romance based on genre. Perhaps *Possession* is Byatt's solution, a book which is concerned with serious theories about literature yet suitable to read in bed. She finds ways of approaching romance literature from within the genre itself.

Byatt's use of a subtitle for *Possession: a Romance* clearly invites readers to approach the book as an example of its genre. Although the designation 'romance' may guide readers's expectations in some directions and not others, it does not tell us precisely where to go; the range of meanings for the word (see above) suggests that Byatt's subtitle may invite an equally broad range of critical approaches. As though in anticipation of the questions her subtitle raises, Byatt uses a quotation about romance from Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* as an epigraph. This passage suggests that a writer's right "to claim a certain latitude" distinguishes "a Romance" from "a Novel." If anything, such latitude frees the writer from the strictures of simple generic definition. Hawthorne says, "the point of view in which this tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us" (Hawthorne vii). Byatt's use of Hawthorne's

words not only establishes a connection between *Possession*, in the present, and *The House of the Seven Gables*, a romance from the past, but also connects Byatt's book with the many critical books (including *The Romance* and *The American Novel and its Tradition*) which quote Hawthorne's preface in their definitions of romance. One distinction here between romance and criticism is that Byatt need not explain how Hawthorne's definition informs her own version of romance; this responsibility falls to the readers of her work. Hawthorne insists, as Byatt does by quoting him, that readers take into account the writer's intentions with respect to genre.

Since an understanding of genre emerges as one of the keys to reading romance, I plan now to consider how some reviewers of *Possession* approach this topic. Most reviewers differ from each other in their definitions of romance; almost all propose some generic label to describe *Possession*. In *London Review of Books*, Danny Karlin writes: "the book's genre is hard to pin down – teasingly so, I imagine" (17). Given that the subtitle does, in a sense, "pin down" the genre of *Possession* I think that Karlin may share my sense that romance is somehow inherently undefined, as well as my impression that Byatt's kind of romance invites readers to be aware of the qualities of its genre.

Thomas D'Evelyn (*Christian Science Monitor*) is one of many reviewers who see *Possession* as a composite of several genres, including mystery, historical novel, and academic satire (see also Dirda C1; Stafford 452). According to him, the "novel combines Shakespearean romance... detective novel suspense... satire on academic fashions...and a pastiche of styles." He believes that "this postmodern romance tells us much about why we read romances," and his definition implies that romance is but one of several generic labels applicable to *Possession*, not an encompassing designation (such as Duncan's "super-genre") which includes all of these elements. Other reviewers also suggest some variation on the mixture of genres Karlin proposes. Claire Harrison (*Globe and Mail*), for example, sees *Possession* as "a delightful

mixture of literary mystery, Victorian tragedy, vaudeville farce and plain old romance.” Most of these descriptions are consistent with my hypothesis that Byatt’s particular kind of romance includes a mixture of different voices, such as those of critic and story teller. In *The Resources of Kind: Genre-theory in the Renaissance*, Rosalie Colie suggests that “the imitation of formal models...was in spite of its inbuilt conservatism a factor for literary change and imaginative experiment” (8). She proposes that “literary and generic experimentation by mixing kinds” leads writers towards “new areas of expression” (76). Perhaps Byatt experiments with combining “conservatism” and “change” in her combination of romance with other genres. She mixes “old-fashioned” story-telling techniques with current literary theories to create a romance which some readers see as a tribute to Victorian values and others see as a challenge to current academic practices. Critics who write about romance are themselves divided over whether writers in this genre intend to reinforce or to subvert the status quo; critical conclusions, however, depend upon context-specific versions of what that status quo is.

Not surprisingly, reviewers vary significantly in their beliefs about Byatt’s intentions and use of genre, and by extension, the success of her experiment. Christina Koning (*Observer*), for example, considers irony as outside the romance genre: “while appearing to write a faithful imitation of a romance...the author in fact subverts the form. The reader is simultaneously beguiled by traditional narrative expectations and made aware of the author’s deconstruction of them.” In the course of my study of *Possession*, I plan to consider how Byatt does both beguile her readers and make us aware of the process, but instead of a conflict of “tradition” and “deconstruction,” I see *Possession* as an expression of the subversive potential that romance always has, but does not always realise. Anita Brookner attributes the reversals of expectations that she experienced in reading *Possession* to the relationship between writer and reader which romance often creates:

the subtitle is...ambiguous. This is not a romantic novel, or not primarily a

romantic novel: it is a Romance, in the original sense of the word, i.e. something fictive. The concept is applied to the conclusion, which I found flurried and almost impertinently unconvincing. Here the canny author reminds the dazed reader that a Romance is what it says it is, and need not necessarily be bound by the familiar laws of logic.

Once again, Brookner's words suggest that Byatt's romance transcends boundaries. "The familiar laws of logic" to which she refers echo Beer's reference to "the restraints of rationalism" and perhaps freedom from such bonds is the basis of Hawthorne's "latitude." Many critics point out that "the romance has always flourished in periods of rapid change" (Beer 78) or that the romance is "naturally a more revolutionary form than the novel" (Frye AC 305). Byatt certainly strikes me as concerned with this aspect of her chosen genre, but she also contends with the opposing view of romance in *Possession*.

Some critics believe that popular romance novels, to their discredit, uphold the norms of patriarchal society. In a study of formula fiction, John G. Cawelti claims "there seems little doubt that most modern romance formulas are essentially affirmations of the ideals of monogamous marriage and feminine domesticity" (42). His comment matches many common objections to fairy tales. Marcia K. Lieberman, in "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale," writes that fairy tales "serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles" (185) and in "Feminism and Fairy Tales," Karen Rowe agrees "even in modern society where romance co-habits uncomfortably with women's liberation, barely disguised forms of fairy tales transmit romantic conventions through the medium of popular literature" (209).

What these critics fail to take into account is that they are themselves readers of fairy tales and romance. These forms inspire such critics to question the roles of women in literature and society. For example, Lieberman writes:

The Princess on the Glass Hill is the prototype of female passivity. The whole

story is in the title; the Princess has been perched somehow on top of a glass hill, and thus made virtually inaccessible. There she sits, a waiting prize for whatever man can ride a horse up the glassy slope. So many of the heroines of fairy stories, including the well-known Rapunzel, are locked up in towers, locked into a magic sleep, imprisoned by giants, or otherwise enslaved, and waiting to be rescued by a passing prince, that the helpless, imprisoned maiden is the quintessential heroine of the fairy tale. (192)

In fairy tales, Lieberman finds depictions of a society in which female oppression is a central and obvious problem. She chooses to value the supposed “activity” of the prince over the “passivity” of the maiden, and therefore to condemn the tale as itself a tool of patriarchal oppression. Yet I see any story which vividly depicts oppression and thus invites a range of interpretations and arguments as potentially subversive; the story has sufficient emotional impact to provoke discussion about the roles of the characters and the values of the society in which they live. Such provocation stirs readers from their “magic sleep” into activities such as writing academic essays or imagining worlds of freedom for the prince and princess alike.

The “universal” significance of fairy tales stems not from their promotion of a set of supposedly universal values, but from their openness to interpretation, their capacity to support not one meaning, but many. Lieberman uses fairy tales in order to give shape to her discussion of her own time, culture, and personal agenda. Bruno Bettelheim, a commentator on fairy tales with another point of view, discusses similar stories in the context of a very different argument. According to him, “on an overt level fairy tales teach little about the specific conditions of life in modern mass society....more can be learned from them about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society” (*The Uses of Enchantment* 5). The juxtaposition of these varied claims on behalf of fairy tales does not suggest who is right and who is wrong, but rather implies that the meaning of such tales depends upon who interprets them. The form of romance allows, and perhaps encourages,

interpreters to find a meaning that will serve their purposes.

I do believe, however, that romance is fundamentally concerned with gender politics. Although Caroline Lucas describes the male author of an Elizabethan prose romance as “appropriating women’s discourse and attempting to use it to oppress other women” (94), she advocates “‘reading against the grain’,” an active process in which readers defy overt authorial intentions in order to enjoy what latitude these romances do seem to offer women (4). Critics like Lieberman and Rowe decry models of female passivity in fairy tales, yet assume that comparable passivity infects all women (except themselves) who read them. I do not believe that literature can “transmit” meaning to readers; instead, readers actively participate in creating their own understandings of what they read. Even readers who do not have a self-consciously critical approach to texts (young children, for example) are not passive receivers of meaning; our understandings of literature and of language itself are based on who we are and what we know and feel.

Possession offers many instances of proof for this assertion. In her journal, Sabine de Kercoz records an argument about interpretation that she has with Raoul (her father) and Christabel. She explains her anger with Christabel for asking the meaning of Raoul’s tale of Merlin and Vivian: “we do not talk of meanings in this pedantic nineteenth-century way, on the Black Nights, we simply tell and hear and believe.” But Raoul interprets the tale for Christabel:

It is one of many tales that speak of fear of Woman, I believe. Of a male terror of the subjection of passion, maybe – of the sleep of reason under the rule of – what shall I call it – desire, intuition, imagination. But it is older than that – in its reconciling aspect, it is homage to the old female deities of the earth, who were displaced by the coming of Christianity. (384)

Dashes and qualifications draw attention to his search for a way to articulate his interpretation. Christabel reads the tale differently: “As a tale of female emulation of male power – she wanted not him but his magic – until she found that magic served only to enslave *him* – and then,

where was she, with all her skills?" Sabine objects to their argument and interjects:

I said, "Too much meaning is bad at Toussaint."

"Reason must sleep," said Christabel.

"The stories come before the meanings," I said.

"As I said, reason must sleep," she said again.

I do not believe all these *explanations*. They diminish. The idea of Woman is less than brilliant Vivian, and the idea of Merlin will not allegorise into male wisdom. He is Merlin. (384)

Christabel's words ("reason must sleep") echo Raoul's ("the sleep of reason"); she makes a connection between his interpretation of the story and Sabine's rejection of interpretation. Sabine wants to believe in the story without diminishing it with explanations; she wants imagination to take precedence over reason. Raoul interprets the story and in so doing points out that patriarchy fears the power of imagination over reason. Christabel uses language to draw attention to the overlap in their comments. She disagrees with Raoul, or perhaps simply reads the gender implications of the tale from her own female point of view. In this section of *Possession*, Byatt draws attention to Raoul and Christabel's search for meanings and makes their interpretations of the story relevant to a discussion about whether or not to interpret it. I recognize that my belief that reason "must sleep" is inextricably linked with my rational search for a way to read romance. Metafictional awareness and "desire, intuition, imagination" go hand in hand. Passages such as this are part of the story of *Possession*, but they may also contribute to the way in which readers choose to read Byatt's romance.

The argument quoted above may take place in the nineteenth century, but the effects of different kinds of interpretation on literature, as some of the reviews of *Possession* that I have already cited can attest, are an issue of present concern to Byatt (see Dirda and Todd). Betsy Hearne, "a former storyteller and librarian" and current faculty member at the University of

Chicago, seems to echo Sabine: “In this introspective era, the study of a story’s meaning sometimes overshadows the story itself. We must remember that the story is fundamental and irrepressible, the meaning secondary and chameleon in that it shifts with time and culture” (Hearne xiv). The conventional narrative structure of romance is in keeping with this sense that story is primary:

The romance writer’s mediating presence allows us to accept what he shows. He will intervene to comment and interpret, controlling the tone in such a way that he seems to bestow upon us a certain grace and dexterity of response and absolve us from the need to make full-scale ‘interpretations’. The matter of the romances [sic] is open: its system of values is set before us within the poems themselves; its mythic levels of suggestion require no arcane knowledge. The central delight offered us is that of being told a story. (Beer 17)

Some critics of *Possession* associate Byatt’s “mediating presence” with literary critical methods such as deconstruction (see Smith and Thurman). Yet Byatt subsumes such methods into the conventions of romance; story is primary because it includes models for interpretation and exceeds them. Interpretations are limited by their exclusiveness, whereas romance is defined by its inclusiveness. In her treatment of Sabine’s argument with Raoul and Christabel, Byatt does not exclude interpretation; she demonstrates that interpretations are part of the story from which they derive.

One of the delights of the story of *Possession* is that it includes a critical awareness of the ways in which readers make interpretations. A belief in the power of art to transform society complements an awareness of fiction as fiction in Byatt’s romance, and the narrator encourages active participation, critical as well as credulous, from readers. For example:

[Novels] do not habitually elaborate on the...intense pleasure of reading. There are obvious reasons for this, the most obvious being the regressive nature of the

pleasure, a *mise-en-abîme* even, where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so *ad infinitum*, thus making the imagination experience something papery and dry, narcissistic and yet disagreeably distanced, without the immediacy of sexual moisture or the scented garnet glow of good burgundy. And yet, natures such as Roland's are at their most alert and heady when reading is violently yet steadily alive. (What an amazing word "heady" is, *en passant*, suggesting both acute sensuous alertness and its opposite, the pleasure of the brain as opposed to the viscera – though each is implicated in the other, as we know very well, with both, when they are working.) (511)

This passage is both learned (three languages, abstract ideas) and, in a sense, didactic (notes on the connotations of "heady"). The narrator reflects on the process of reading – a process in which we are likely to be engaged with *Possession* – in terms suitable for literary criticism. Yet, at the same time, she evokes sensual details and encourages readers to recognize our own awareness of the bond between thought and feeling. Throughout *Possession*, passages like this one interweave with stories and poems. Education and delight, like thought and feeling, are not separate aspects of Byatt's romance, but rather "each is implicated in the other." Critics of romance often deride the genre's inclusion of sensual and emotional experience (of characters and readers), but this "heady" balance is one of the vital features of Byatt's romance. Much criticism is based on a thinking approach to literature, whereas romance often takes feeling into account as well. Byatt combines critical and narrative strategies in order to examine some of the ways in which both thought and feeling contribute to the processes of writing and reading. She interweaves metafiction with fairy-tale motifs and thus encourages readers to think about literature, as well as to feel the strength of stories.

1. In *Possession*, “Leavis did to Blackadder what he did to serious students: he showed him the terrible, the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature and simultaneously deprived him of any confidence in his own capacity to contribute to or change it” (32). Byatt studied with Leavis, and I see the following comment as related to the quotation above. In an interview with Jeffery Canton, Byatt said “the whole of my life, the most important thing to me has been reading and I think I’m trying to sort out whether I’m a freak or whether there actually is such depth in reading that it can, in fact, change the world” (6).

2. In an interview with Jeffrey Canton, Byatt asserts:

I feel that modern literary theory and the modern academic study of English has in many ways moved away from reading and writing into...social and political theory. And the basic structure of why one reads and why one writes has got somehow lost. (6)

3. In popular romances, the protagonist is almost invariably female. Byatt subverts this traditional structure. Maud is taller, older, wealthier, and higher in social standing than Roland.

4. *The Romance* (Critical Idiom) by Gillian Beer brought home to me how many of the characteristics of romance seemed to be in keeping with my own version of feminism. Beer organizes her analysis chronologically, and her comments about romance through the ages often fit very well with my sense of Byatt’s use of the genre in the present. Byatt seems to draw on romance conventions from throughout the breadth of the genre. Recently, I discovered that Byatt and Beer know each other; Byatt thanks Beer on the acknowledgments page of *Angels and Insects* for making “crucial suggestions for reading” (292).

Romance, Women, and Confusion:
“We need...to do this together. I know his work,
and you know hers.... This is all madness.” (*Possession* 258)

Critics of romance often insist on creating a dichotomy between romance and reality in their discussions of the genre (see Tompkins 102). In *Possession*, Byatt examines the close relationship between the two; she shows that romance and real life are interconnected rather than separated by a fixed boundary. Fairy tale and romance patterns both shape and are shaped by the lives of the characters. In this chapter, I will explore some of the implications of this assertion. First, I will cite some references to the word “romance” in *Possession* and suggest ways in which these references may guide readers of Byatt’s romance. Second, I will analyze in detail Christabel’s proposal that “Romance is a proper form for women.” Finally, I will look at confusion as a necessary and desirable aspect of the romance reading experience. These three topics may seem unconnected at first, but I urge readers to be aware of how they are integrated in *Possession* and in this chapter of my thesis; one of my goals is to “consider problems obliquely” (King 160).

In *Possession*, the narrator describes Roland’s images of Maud and his conclusions:

All *that* was the plot of a Romance. He was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously; a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or another.

He supposed the Romance must give way to social realism, even if the aesthetic temper of the time was against it.

In any case, since Blackadder and Leonora and Cropper had come, it had changed from Quest, a good romantic form, into Chase and Race, two other equally valid ones. (460)

On one level, this passage draws attention to the writer’s own use of genre, and on another, it

demonstrates how an individual (Roland) uses generic patterns in order to make sense of the social world,¹ and claims that “almost everyone in the Western world” feels the influence of these patterns.

Byatt uses the word ‘romance’ throughout *Possession* to reinforce the idea that romance is not only a literary genre, but also a way to describe life. The word occurs in several descriptions of nature: “‘Leonora would be very shocked at the state of this graveyard,’ said Maud. ‘She would not find it romantic. I think it’s all right. A slow return to nature and oblivion’”(80). Cropper describes a fountain which Randolph visited as “a sight awesome and sublime enough to satisfy even the most romantic traveller” (120-1).² Roland sees Seal Court as “romantic,” whereas Lady Bailey calls it “dark and damp” (83). These examples reveal some of the physical characteristics associated with “romantic” landscapes, and also refer to subjective assessments of a given environment (Leonora might be shocked; romantic travellers might be satisfied; Roland sees an imaginatively enhanced version of Lady Bailey’s home). Each example suggests that different people define romance in different ways, or see varying degrees of romance in their surroundings.

The widely recognizable vocabulary of fairy tales, like the word ‘romance,’ draws attention to generic conventions in everyday discourse. As I pointed out in the introductory chapter, fairy tales and romance are open to a range of interpretations. Throughout *Possession*, Byatt creates a pattern of fairy-tale images which connects nineteenth- and twentieth-century characters to one another; common images from fairy tales form indirect links among many of the layers of Byatt’s romance. In her diary, Ellen Ash interprets herself at eighteen as “a princess” (500). Randolph remembers Christabel as “distant and closed away, a princess in a tower” (301) and thinks of the princess and the pea when he sees the bed that they will share (307). Similarly, Roland thinks of an unattainable Maud as “the Princess on her glass hill” (459). He sees

an incapable sleeper somewhere in his mind, a sleeper bruised and tossing on heaped feather mattresses, the Real Princess, suffering the muffled pea.

Blanche Glover called Christabel the Princess. Maud Bailey was a thin-skinned Princess. (65)

His thoughts move from a specific story (“The Princess and the Pea”) to a general fairy-tale archetype (the princess) which readers have undoubtedly met outside *Possession*; the pattern of his thoughts encourages readers to shift their awareness from specific characters to general character types. Randolph and Roland are connected by their shared image of the princess and the pea. Byatt shows how fairy tales offer her characters a vocabulary with which to interpret their surroundings, both literary and actual, and creates an opportunity for readers to consider our own methods of finding patterns in literature.

The instances in the paragraph above also demonstrate how fairy-tale images allow characters to project their expectations onto others, just as we have seen these characters project romantic expectations onto their surroundings: Maud does not define herself as a princess, but Roland’s image of her influences her behaviour (549). Through Roland, Byatt draws attention to her own repetition of fairy-tale motifs, and thus reminds readers that our own expectations of romance affect our responses to her story. The narrator does endow Maud with some of the characteristics of a fairy-tale princess: she has golden hair and lives “at the top of Tennyson Tower” (45). Yet Byatt’s portrayal of Maud is fraught with complexity and subtlety; the tower Maud inhabits is a university building, an “ivory tower,” and she seems able to enter and exit this tower at will. In her essay on “Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale,” Lieberman condemns the simple stereotype of the princess in the tower as an inappropriate role-model for young women (see Chapter 1).³ In *Possession*, Byatt explores some of the implications of “type” – stereotype, archetype, prototype, typecasting – and in so doing suggests that in life as in art, “the expectations of Romance control almost everyone.”⁴

Byatt draws on each reader's pre-existing associations with fairy tales and romance, but also creates patterns of association that are specific to *Possession*. Women in her romance are not only princesses but also witches. Beatrice Nest uses the following image to articulate her feeling of being excluded from academic society, trapped by the perceptions of others: "There is an age at which, I profoundly believe, one becomes a *witch*...through simple ageing – as always happened in history – and there are *witch-hunts*" (241). The traditional stories which reflect this history do not always encourage readers to see things from the witch's point of view, but Byatt does. Thus she uses romance conventions in order to suggest the emotional impact on individuals of archetypal patterns of oppression. Christabel, like Beatrice, defines herself as a fairy-tale character: "*an old witch in a turret*" (543). She says:

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 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. And if my eye glittered with tears she saw them not. (544)

Christabel's language of metaphor suggests that she identifies strongly with the mythical Melusina that she has helped to create. Romance motifs, in this instance, create a system of metaphors which operates on several different levels. The image of Christabel as a witch expresses the mother's awareness of her child's feelings, the horror of being old enough and wise enough to experience the pain of their separation. Christabel sees her child as the heroine in the tale of Sleeping Beauty, innocent but trapped by dread. "Adult truth" is both "brute sleep" and the wakefulness of Melusina who flies at night instead of sleeping.

What I find most striking in these examples is the depth of emotion they may evoke.

My own eyes “glitter with tears” whenever I read these words. Gillian Beer claims that the genre of romance invites unconscious responses from readers, since “romance writers draw upon archetypal patterns which meet an understanding in the reader without necessarily formalizing into consciousness. In this aspect the romance is akin to fairy-tale” (19). Byatt not only evokes empathy for those who suffer, but uses images to do so which affect readers on a profound personal level.

Now that I have examined some of the ways in which Byatt deals with the concept of romance within her own example of the genre, I would like to move on to a discussion of the particular value of romance to some of Byatt’s female characters. The examples above emphasize the value of emotion, intuition, and personal response in the romance world. Creativity, especially female creativity, is a related theme in references to romance in *Possession*. In the letter quoted above, Christabel refers to herself as “a romancer” (544) who arranged “*a lie more appropriate to a Romance than to ...[her] previous quiet life*” (543). Although she creates her own romance, she sees herself as a character within the story as well. She writes, “*women in childbirth cry out exceedingly against the author as they see it of their misfortunes*” (543). Although she is a mother, a creator, she views Randolph as the male author of her situation. In the unsent letter from Randolph to Christabel which Ellen finds and burns after his death, the poet expresses his torment with an allusion to romance:

I feel I stand accused...by your actions, of having loved you at all, as though my love was an act of brutal forcing, as though I were a heartless ravisher out of some trumpery Romance, from whom you had to flee, despoiled and ruined.
(495)

In his guarded declaration of love he seems again to want to avoid being cast in romance: “*I loved you entirely then; I will not say now, I love you, for that would indeed be romance, and a matter at best of hope*” (495). He resists the treatment that he attributes to the perception that he

is a romance villain, yet Christabel feels that she must treat him thus in order to give herself authority over her own life story: "*I found a place to go... where I should make no one but myself responsible for our fate – hers and mine*" (543). Christabel uses romance conventions to describe herself, and these conventions seem related to the social conventions which define her position in the world. She sees her choice of roles as severely limited; she takes on a role from romance for the sake of freedom, then lives the sad life that this role entails. Social conventions do not constrain Randolph in the ways that they do Christabel, and for him romance offers not freedom but uncertainty.

In Ellen Ash's diary there is an explicit reference to the inter-relationship of art and life, and a discussion of the different effects of this relationship on male and female definitions of creativity. She writes:

My recent reading has caused me for some reason to remember myself as I was when a young girl, reading high Romances and seeing myself simultaneously as the object of all knights' devotion – an unspotted Guenevere – and as the author of the Tale. I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem, and now am neither....

It may be that this is the desire of all reading women, as opposed to reading men, who wish to be poets and heroes, but might see the inditing of poetry in our peaceful age, as a sufficiently heroic act. No one wishes a man to be a Poem. (135-6)

Her reading releases memories of how reading in the past affected her desires. She identifies her wish to be (like Christabel) both creator and created image as an issue of gender: her comments imply that to be a heroine is to be an image created by men, and that her own wish to be a poem is externally imposed (by whomever does not wish men to be poems). She stifles her thoughts about such topics with an image of Randolph, huge and powerful, mocking her perceptions. The image of a woman as either a poem or a poet has broad significance in the

context of Byatt's discussion throughout *Possession* of gender and genre. As Christabel does, Ellen sees Randolph as the author, the man of authority who controls not only her self-definition but her ability to define the world through expressions of her own creativity. Romance emerges as the setting in which Christabel and Ellen feel their potential to plot their own stories, and Randolph feels uncomfortable.

The connection between reading literature and reading the world⁵ that is implied in the examples above is for Rosalie Colie a rationale for a study of literary genre. Systems of generic organization are a means of describing the patterns of our lives, as well as the patterns that we may identify in literature. She says:

patterns, kinds, mental sets organize for us the lives we individually lead, much as these kinds, sets, patterns organized the vast body of literature. Experience can be seen as searching for its own form, after all: the kinds may act as myth or metaphor for a man's new vision of literary truth. (30)

The structure of Colie's comments emphasizes the connection between experience and literature. In the letter quoted above, Byatt depicts Christabel as a woman who uses images from romance as metaphors for her life experience.

Christabel proposes that "Romance is the proper form for women." Byatt comments in the content of *Possession* on its form. In the following passage from Sabine's journal, Christabel alludes to many of the qualities of romance, including its implications for gender, which Byatt explores in her own example of the genre. Perhaps for both Byatt and her character, romance is conducive to symbolic liberation. Sabine writes:

[Christabel] talked of *Melusina* and the nature of epic. She wants to write a Fairy Epic, she says, not grounded in historical truth, but in poetic and imaginative truth – like Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, or Ariosto, where the soul is free of the restraints of history and fact. She says Romance is a proper form for

women. She says Romance is a land where women can be free to express their true natures, as in the Ile de Sein or Síd, though not in this world. (404)

Christabel makes a distinction here between “historical truth” and “poetic and imaginative truth,” and sets up a parallel between “the soul” – “free of the restraints of history and fact” – and women – “free to express their true natures” – in romance. Her words seem to echo Hawthorne’s mention of “latitude” for writers of romance, “the right to present ...[the truth of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation” (vii). Thus, through Christabel, Byatt suggests that the creative freedom which the form of romance offers to writers is similar to the freedom of expression that the land of romance offers to women. In a sense, romance liberates women as both poets and poems. In both instances, romance allows participants to move beyond the boundaries of “this world” or “the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” (*The House of the Seven Gables* vii).

The reader’s freedom to move beyond reality into a world created with different values contributes to the subversive potential of *Possession*. James Roy King⁶ explores some of the ways in which journeys to the paradoxical “bright-shadow world” of fairy tales are of value to present readers. According to him, fairy tales evoke

a world where knowing depends upon one’s ability to think in metaphors, consider problems obliquely, exercise one’s imagination, enter boldly into the most bizarre view points. All this adds up to an experience of knowing that is radically different from what our world offers us, a way of knowing that often moves people far from their starting places, their normal assumptions, and thus promises to enrich their lives in all sorts of surprising ways. (160)⁷

As I have already suggested, romance is one system of metaphors which characters in *Possession* use to think about their world. Byatt includes this system in her creation of a mixture of genres; her emphasis on the connections between story and interpretation, feeling

and thought, challenges the common critical assumptions that literature and criticism are separate genres, that any given interpretation can be the 'right' one, that a reader's thoughts are worthy of consideration and feelings are not. At the same time, she suggests that both men and women create themselves and each other according to paradigms (such as romance) which also influence and derive from art. A romance paradigm can challenge normal assumptions and the social structures which these assumptions support; in romance, characters leave their familiar surroundings and journey into the unknown.

In my discussion of Christabel's view of romance, I suggested that the genre offers similar freedom to women and to writers. In the following passage (the continuation of Christabel's comments on women cited above), I see a related connection between readers and men:

She said in Romance, women's two natures can be reconciled. I asked, which two natures, and she said, men saw women as double beings, enchantresses and demons or innocent angels.

"Are all women double?" I asked her.

"I did not say that," she said. "I said all men see women as double.

Who knows what Melusina was in her freedom with no eyes on her?" (404)

Through Sabine's misunderstanding, Byatt stresses the assertion that "men see women as double." According to Christabel, this male perception constrains women by diminishing their freedom to define themselves. The dichotomy of demon/angel does not express the complexities of "women's natures." The potential of romance to reconcile this duality, on the other hand, helps to liberate women from a system of interpretation which defines them as either demons or angels. Similarly, readers (such as some of the reviewers of *Possession* already cited) who see Byatt's romance as "double," an unacceptable juxtaposition of literary and critical writing styles, or a battle between delight and instruction, may be imposing a system of dichotomies onto a form which strives for the freedom to abolish such distinctions

and bring about reconciliation and change.

Physical images of division reinforce the impact of Christabel's complaint against men and society. Sabine continues:

She 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." (404)

I see Christabel's depiction of the mermaid "who had her fishtail cleft to please her Prince" as a physical representation of the division of something whole, an act carried out in an attempt to adhere to the demands of a cleaving patriarchy. The mermaid's sensation of walking on knives, outside her element, expresses the pain that rigidly dichotomous thinking entails for women (and for men also) within a patriarchal culture. The mermaid's inability to speak contributes to her loss of freedom.

Thus far, I have suggested that romance provides readers of *Possession*, as well as characters within the novel, with a useful system of metaphors with which to organize their literary or actual experiences. At the same time, however, I want to propose that the loose definition of the form of romance allows for freedom for the creators of, and participants in, romance, and that this genre can accommodate alternatives to rigid structures of organization such as patriarchy. We may experience such freedom as a kind of chaos or confusion, since the same patterns that help us to make sense of the fictional world may not have a single, clearly-defined meaning. Because romance traditionally involves a departure from reality, this genre emphasizes the gap between symbols and what they represent. The symbols themselves may also be confusing because their meanings are not fixed. Such confusion, however disturbing it may be, liberates us to create our own interpretations.

The interpretation above is just one of many possible ways of understanding the significance of Christabel's allusions to the story of the Little Mermaid. Christabel talks to

Sabine “of the pains of Melusina and the Little Mermaid; and of her own pain to come, nothing.” Sabine wonders if by reference to these fairy stories, Christabel tells “of the pains of womanhood” but also remarks that “at the time it did not feel so.” She speculates that Christabel might simply be “fabricating a pretty pattern” (404). Christabel’s indirect comments confuse and frustrate Sabine, but challenge her to work hard in order to imagine what “poetic and imaginative truths” Christabel may seek to convey. Some of these truths may not be accessible on a conscious level. I see Sabine’s search for understanding as a useful example for readers of romance. The nature of romance truth is not easy to pin down, and I believe that an active search for meaning is often more valuable than the results of the search.

Confusion is one of the features of the paradoxical “bright-shadow” world that King describes. Romance may offer patterns for interpreting the world, but these patterns sometimes create confusion for readers and characters alike. Within the organization of Byatt’s romance, readers can find examples of ways in which the reading process becomes confusing for the protagonists. Roland reads only Randolph’s side of the correspondence:

his mind could leap ahead and hear the rhythm of the unread as though he were the writer, hearing in his brain the ghost-rhythms of the as yet unwritten.

But with this reading, after a time – a very short time – the habitual pleasures of recognition and foresight gave way to a mounting sense of stress. This was primarily because the writer of the letters was himself under stress, confused by the object and recipient of his attentions. He found it difficult to fix this creature in his scheme of things. He asked for clarification and was answered, it appeared, with riddles. (144-5)

This quotation suggests that Roland’s “habitual pleasures of recognition,” his “normal assumptions,” give way to confusion; a reader, he begins to share the emotions of the writer. The rest of the scene creates an impression that his confusion is not only empathetic but also personal. Part of his problem is that he lacks Christabel’s side of the correspondence and

Maud's point of view. He can see only part of the pattern. Like Randolph, he wants "to fix" the letter "in his scheme of things." Roland's confusion causes him to reevaluate his method for understanding the world. His discovery that the mysteries of Randolph's life extend beyond the bounds of academic enquiry disposes him towards a new way of looking at things and thus enhances his wisdom.

For Randolph, Christabel is a riddling creature; her appearance as a feature of Randolph's life requires Roland to question many of his assumptions; she is the character in *Possession* whose fairy tales we get to read; her discussion with Sabine about the form of romance is the central reference to genre within the book. Maud and Roland disagree or are confused about how to approach her stories. It is therefore appropriate to consider one of her fairy tales in the context of this discussion of romance, women, and confusion.

Just as Randolph asks for clarification and is met with riddles, readers of *Possession* may expect to find "The Correspondence" where instead we meet "The Threshold," the chapter marking the threshold between Roland's dream world and the world of Randolph and Christabel's letters. This story seems designed to form a bridge from one section of Byatt's narrative to the next. Within the story, the narrator urges readers to see parallels between the world of the story and their own, and I cannot help reading the following passage as a description of my process of writing about *Possession*:

There was not one way but many, all athwart each other like the cracks on a crazy jug, and he followed first one and then the other, choosing the straightest and stoniest and finding himself always under the hot-sun at another crossing just like the one he had just left. After a time he decided to go with the sun behind him always – at least this led to consistency of proceeding – though it must be told that when he decided this he had only the haziest idea, dear readers, of where the sun had been at the beginning of the venture. So it often is

in this life. We become consistent and orderly too late, on insufficient grounds, and perhaps in the wrong direction. (167)

The fairy-tale character goes on an actual physical journey, but it is tempting to read beyond this level of meaning; stony paths and hot suns occur in numerous literary instances (as well as in nature) where they lend themselves to metaphoric interpretation. Since the boundary between story and criticism is confused in *Possession*, I tend to read “The Threshold” as a commentary on reading romance. Perhaps, like the Childe, writers and readers must trust that even if their journeys lead them “to the known world’s end” (172), their efforts are not in vain.

When the three ladies instruct the Childe about how to interpret them, I once again apply the story to my own experience and see the ladies as a text, asking for a certain kind of response from readers:

“As for ourselves,” said they, “you must take us as you find us, and judge of us as you see us, what we are, or what we may be to you, as all men must, who have a high courage and a clear vision.” (169)

The Childe chooses an adventure based on intuition rather than rationality: “then said he, not knowing before he spoke that he had made up his mind to venture, but as if some voice spoke through him, ‘I will assay’” (169). Roland makes a similar choice when he breaks the rules of the London Library in order to steal Ash’s letters, “seized by a strange and uncharacteristic impulse of his own” (10). These examples suggest to me that in order to cross the thresholds on which a romantic quest depends, one must be willing to trust forces (like the whiteladies – like intuition – like romance) about which there may be “much superstition and misbelief” (169), as well as to be able to move outside of one’s usual critical constraints.

Christabel’s story is based on recognizable folk-tale conventions. Just like Portia’s suitors in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Childe must choose one of three caskets: gold, silver or lead. As in Shakespeare’s comedy, the right choice for the right person is a foregone conclusion. The narrator of “The Threshold” attributes this sense of inevitability to the story’s

genre:

And you know, and I know, do we not, dear children, that he must always choose this last, and the leaden casket, for wisdom in all tales tells us this, and the last sister is always the true choice, is she not? But let us have a moment's true sorrow....

And one day we will write it otherwise, that he would not come, that he stayed, or chose the sparkling ones, or went out again onto the moors to live free of fate, if such can be. But you must know now, that it turned out as it must turn out, must you not? Such is the power of necessity in tales. (171-2)⁸

Christabel's tale of "The Threshold" prepares readers for things "never seen or dreamed of."

The narrator of the story points out that she is "your chronicler, bound to recount to you, what?" The rules of genre may constrain her, but an exhortation to readers to

"Imagine....Imagine" (172) reveals the path towards freedom. When the "dim last" (171) sister draws the Childe "over and under the threshold of the standing stones," (171) the two descend into another realm. An ellipsis at the end of the story draws readers of *Possession* into the next chapter, "The Correspondence."

1. For some other examples (including references to nature) see *Possession*: 80, 121, 135-6, 144, 159, 164, 232, 272, 290, 306, 356, 458, 459, 495, 543, 544.

2. Cropper also sees in Randolph “a kind of Romanticism reborn - gemmated, so to speak, from the old stock of Romanticism - but intertwined with the new mechanistic analysis and the new optimism not about the individual soul, but about the eternal divine harmony of the universe” (272).

3. Christabel’s view of her tower contrasts strikingly with Lieberman’s depiction:

Oh, Sir, you must not kindly seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude. It is a thing we women are taught to dread – oh the terrible tower, oh the thickets round it – no companionable Nest – but a donjon.

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 freedom to range the world, do not need to imagine.....my Solitude is my Treasure, the best thing I have. (152)

3. Christabel’s version of Rapunzel introduces the chapter in which Maud first speaks. Like many of the allusions to fairy-tales in *Possession*, this poem expresses intense emotions. Christabel’s Rapunzel portrays both the suffering of the confined princess and the empathy for her pain and confinement of a sensitive prince: “Silent he watches/ The humped One rise/ With tears of anguish/ In his own eyes” (40). Roland’s ability to identify with a princess - “bruised and tossing ...suffering” seems like a similar sign of compassion; his feeling for the “constricted life” of Maud’s hair connects him with Rapunzel’s prince: “Roland was moved -

not exactly with desire, but with an obscure emotion that was partly pity, for the rigorous constriction all that mass had undergone, to be so structured into repeating patterns” (295). The “repeating patterns” which structure Maud’s hair constrict its life; they also remind me that Byatt’s repeating patterns of fairy-tale motifs have a life beyond their structure: their emotional vitality stems in part from the associations that they hold for readers. Byatt’s treatment of romance motifs in *Possession* focuses on the relationship between perceived and imagined worlds.

5. In *Old Tales and New Truths: Charting the Bright-Shadow World*, King devotes a whole chapter to the subject of “reading the world.” I do not think I stole this phrase from him - but he certainly has interesting things to say on the subject.

6. King is “a retired Professor of English at Wittenberg University” (book jacket).

7. His words echo Colie’s (we think in metaphors) and Brookner’s (we are not necessarily bound by the familiar laws of logic and can experience knowing in a way radically different from what the ‘real’ world offers). As I have suggested with the help of Duncan, Frye, and various reviewers, even the generic classification ‘romance’ challenges “normal assumptions.”

8. In a letter to Christabel, Randolph seems to express a similar sense of being constrained by a plot: “*the plot which holds us, the conventions which bind us, declare that I must...acquiesce...and hope that Fate, or the plotter who watches over our steps...*” (211).

**Crossing the Line from Convention to Innovation:
“Animals and insubordination” in Byatt’s Romance.**

In this chapter, as in the last one, I intend to forge some connections among apparently disparate features of *Possession* in order to suggest some of the distinctive features of Byatt’s romance. In my introductory chapter, I discussed the possibility of reconciling romance with literary critical writing. In chapter 2, I expanded this discussion to suggest some of the ways in which the form of romance may promote new kinds of social organization by liberating the imagination of writers and readers. The structure of the present chapter mirrors that of chapter 2: I will begin with a brief discussion of thresholds and boundaries as a theme in *Possession*; next I will draw attention to a pattern of images linking people with animals, and finally I will compare “The Glass Coffin,” a tale of animal transformation which Byatt attributes to Christabel, with Grimm’s version of the same story.

As I have already suggested, there are instances throughout *Possession* of a complementary relationship between concrete things and abstract ideas. Christabel wrote the story of “The Threshold” and Maud, who writes about Christabel, specializes in the subject of boundaries: she delineates her field of study as “liminality. Thresholds. Bastions. Fortresses” (549). At Roland’s first meeting with Maud, her apparent remoteness and competent movement in physical space reflect her academic interests:

They went up in a paternoster lift that cranked regularly past its otherwise vacant portals. These doorless lifts unnerved Roland; she stepped in precisely and was lifted above him before he dared follow, so that he was already clambering onto the pedestal she occupied when he lunged forward and up, almost too late. She did not remark on this....Out again she came precisely; he tripped on this threshold too, the floor lifting beneath him. (45)

Maud’s material reality and her mental world are connected; “the actual and the imaginary

intermingle,” as Richard Chase, in a study of the role of romance in the development of the American novel, suggests they tend to do in romance (45). Byatt’s choice of words and physical details creates a comic scene which in retrospect looks like a metaphoric representation of the difficulties that Roland and Maud have in working together and falling in love. In the early stages of Roland’s quest, Maud’s thresholds and boundaries are “unnerving” and likely to trip him up. Ultimately, Byatt expresses the consummation of their relationship as a dissolution of boundaries:

And very slowly and with infinite gentle delays and delicate diversions and variations of indirect assault Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries. (550)

It is this kind of physical union (often between lovers, man and woman) towards which many romance narratives strive. One version of *Tristan and Isolt*, ¹ for example, concludes with the lovers buried “on either side of the chapel”:

And by the tomb of Tristan... [King Mark] bade them plant a rose tree, and by that of Isolt a vine, and the two reached toward each other across the chapel, and wove branches and root so closely together that no man hereafter might separate them. (Loomis 232)

This weaving together of rose and vine compensates for the physical separation of the lovers’ bodies even after their death. Nature achieves the kind of union that society made impossible for these lovers. The weaving together of actual and imaginary, past and present, in romance suggests that these concepts are not antithetical, but closely related. In *Possession*, Byatt demonstrates that language itself, the language of definition, creates boundaries, and with each boundary thresholds, places where the boundary may be traversed: “Vocabularies are crossing circles and loops. We are defined by the lines we choose to cross or to be confined by” (467).

Romance can be defined, to some extent, by descriptive elements which recur in many discussions of the genre. Many critics portray romance as inclusive, unrestrained, or preoccupied with transcending boundaries. Chase, basing his conclusions on Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, claims:

Romance is, as we see, a kind of "border" fiction, whether the field of action is in the neutral territory between civilization and the wilderness, as in the adventure tales of Cooper and Simms, or whether, as in Hawthorne and later romancers, the field of action is conceived not so much as a place as a state of mind – the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle. Romance does not plant itself, like the novel, solidly in the midst of the actual. Nor when it is memorable, does it escape into the purely imaginary. (19)

According to Chase, the form of romance allows writers to challenge the boundaries between civilization and wilderness, actual and imaginary. Within *Possession*, Randolph describes Christabel's Melusina story in terms similar to those Chase uses to discuss romance:

What is so peculiarly marvellous about the Melusina 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. (193)

Randolph and Chase seem to agree that the physical grounding of a story complements its departures from the known world.²

When romance and reality are intertwined, the boundaries between actual and imaginary, physical and metaphoric characteristics become permeable. Based on an awareness of this permeability of boundaries, I want to move on to an examination of characters in

Possession who share characteristics with some of the wild creatures from tales. In the world of fairy tales, there is no clear division between human beings and animals: frogs turn into princes, princesses turn into birds, foxes and hens can talk. A mermaid's body suggests the closeness of human and animal forms. Christabel echoes Randolph in her reference to her Melusine as "*a combination of the orderly and humane with the unnatural and the Wild*" (196). Throughout *Possession*, Byatt achieves a similar combination in her own characters. In the Ash factory flits "pale Paola, her long colourless hair bound in a rubber band, her huge glasses mothlike, her finger-tips dusty grey pads" (31). The language of the narrator's description of Paola interweaves her human and animal features. Characters use similar language to describe one another: Roland has "black fur" (45) and Val calls him "old Mole" (24). Beatrice Nest's colleagues assign her a range of metaphoric identities:

Cropper...thought of her in terms of Carroll's obstructive white sheep.
 Blackadder, in bad moods, thought of her as one of those puffed white spiders,
 bleached by the dark, feeling along the threads of her trap from her central lair.
 The feminists...saw her as some kind of guardian octopus, an ocean Fafnir,
 curled torpidly round her hoard, putting up opaque screens of ink or watery
 smoke to obscure her whereabouts. (125-6)

The list of images cited above shows clearly how different people understand the world through different metaphors. Although her colleagues portray Beatrice as annoying or threatening, the descriptions they choose confer upon her a certain ease of transformation; many of her human, physical limitations disappear in the world of imagination. These images of Beatrice reinforce her connections with Christabel, who sees herself as a spider (97), and with the many mer-creatures of *Possession* who inhabit the watery realm. Beatrice puts up "opaque screens of ink or watery smoke," and Roland and Maud also "put up smoke-screens" (259). Like the patterns of fairy-tale imagery discussed in chapter 2, shared animal

characteristics create indirect connections among many of the characters in *Possession*. Shared animal traits suggest underlying similarities among characters whose ages, professions, social classes, sexes, and personalities may vary greatly. Therefore, an identification of people with animals may disrupt some traditional hierarchies, point to common bonds among all living creatures, or draw attention to complex imbalances of power in relationships.

Recurring images of wolves link a striking range of characters in *Possession*, where the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” often lurks in the background. Fergus Wolff, “a devourer” (550), has a “voracious smile...and a long mouth terribly full of strong white teeth” (37). A civil servant has “a vulpine smile and slight snarl” (431) similar to Cropper’s “darkly vulpine smile” (349). Blanche writes of Randolph as a wolf at the door (54). Christabel may be a princess, but she is also a wolf: Sabine describes her variously as “some sort of serpent” with “huge teeth like Baba Yaga or the wolf in the English tale who pretended to be a grandmother” (396).³ Most of these wolf-people represent perceived threats to the security of others and, significantly, not all of them are male. Just as Roland can be a princess, Christabel can be a wolf – this is the kind of liberty that Byatt takes with the traditional material on which she bases her romance, an example of the freedom from strict hierarchies that romance offers.

Animals in fairy tales may talk, but people who become animals in such tales often cannot. If the human capacity for speech is what separates us from our wild counterparts, then animal images can express feelings that are beyond language. Ellen Ash remembers her honeymoon fear in images, not words:

A thin white animal, herself, trembling.

A complex thing, the naked male, curly hairs and shining wet, at once bovine
and dolphin-like, its scent feral and overwhelming. (498)

Her metaphoric language blurs some of the distinctions between animal and human creatures in a way that is characteristic of romance. Byatt’s choice of descriptive details evokes the sensual,

physical aspects of humanity, and can accordingly evoke powerful emotional responses in readers.

Animal imagery in romance often both emphasizes that humanity belongs to the physical world of nature and suggests that human and animal beings alike are subject to mysterious transforming powers. References to mythical beasts in *Possession* underline the connection between image and reality – Christabel sees Randolph as a “dragon” (545) and he sees her, among other beasts, as a “selkie” (308)⁴. The two poets define each other in mythical terms even as they experience an actual, physical relationship. Animal imagery also facilitates an exploration of the interaction of wilderness and civilisation. Christabel appears to Randolph as

a bird...chained to a stand, some bright-plumed creature of tropical forests,
some gold-eyed hawk from northern crags, wearing its jesses with what dignity
it could muster, enduring man's presence with a still-savage hauteur, ruffling its
feathers from time to time, to show both that it tended itself with respect, and
that it was not quite comfortable. (303-304)⁵

Like Beatrice, Christabel can assume a range of metaphoric identities in the minds of others. Like other references to animals in *Possession*, this example underlines our human willingness to oppress animals, to dominate and confine them. When human beings become animals in fairy tales and lose their power for speech, they become vulnerable just as the little mermaid does when she loses her tongue.

Christabel's tale of “The Glass Coffin” is a vivid example of the way in which Byatt incorporates themes of transformation and the power of self-expression into her romance. In *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*, Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher present and discuss stories by the real colleagues of the romance character Christabel. Their references to “wild magic” and “license” echo Christabel's comments on the

freedom that romance offers women:

Fairy tales and romances were grounded in an oral narrative tradition that may well have been initiated by women. The antiquity of fairy tales, their anonymous origins, had the feel (and perhaps the fact) of a lost, distinctively female tradition. Moreover, the wild magic of fairy tales, so guardedly approached even by the finest of the didacticists who dominated earlier juvenile literature, now seemed to license a new generation of writers as well as readers to be deviant, angry, even violent or satirical. (3)

Christabel LaMotte seems to represent this tradition in *Possession*; she is the writer of *Tales for Innocents* “which, Maud said, were mostly rather frightening tales derived from Grimm and Tieck, with an emphasis on animals and insubordination” (59). Here is the clue to expect “wild magic” such as Auerbach and Knoepfmacher describe above. Maud’s words suggest a connection between “animals and insubordination.”

Moreover, Maud tells Roland, “I think you can understand things about Christabel from the way she wrote her version,” which indicates that the critics in *Possession* believe that they can learn about Christabel by reading her version of “The Glass Coffin.” Because Maud’s assumption that Christabel “disliked children – the way many maiden aunts must have done in those days” (59) - proves to be false, her comment is a reminder that we base our interpretations on knowledge which is necessarily individual and incomplete. Byatt not only draws attention to the relationship between the tale and its author, but also emphasizes the role of readers and their interpretations.

Although some critics do point out “universal” themes in fairy tales, as striking as their “universality” is what such tales reveal about the cultures and times in which they originate and in which they are written down. Byatt’s treatment of fairy tales in *Possession* supports this point; she presents tales as part of a story about writers, social contexts and interpreters. The

'lessons' attached to the traditional tales that she tells vary with each new setting and with each new reader. In a study of "Beauty and the Beast," Betsy Hearne⁶ notes: "each teller/interpreter recreates the tale anew. Every listener/reader hears a different story, according to his or her life experience" (xiv). In *Possession*, Christabel's reported advice to Sabine accords with what Hearne says:

All old stories, my cousin, will bear telling and telling again in different ways.
What is required is to keep alive, to polish, the simple clean forms of the tale
which *must* be there....And yet to add something of yours, of the writer, which
makes all these things seem new and first seen, without having been
appropriated for private or personal ends. (379)

This belief seems to inform Byatt's approach to romance. She polishes "the simple clean forms" of the genre, and adds a great deal that belongs to her contemporary writing context. In my discussion of fairy-tale motifs in *Possession*, I suggested that Byatt sometimes challenges traditional interpretations of fairy tales. Now I want to turn to a specific example of her technique for balancing convention with innovation: a comparison of Byatt's version of "The Glass Coffin" with Ralph Manheim's translation of Grimm's version of the story.

One striking difference between the two tales is that Grimm's most often appears as a separate story in a collection of fairy tales, whereas Byatt's appears as a story-within-a-story, an integral part of the romance. "The Glass Coffin" is set off from the rest of *Possession* in such a way that even though Roland 'reads' with us, we experience the story as a self-contained narrative. Maud and Roland do not discuss their interpretations of this particular story; as a result, readers of *Possession* are free to experience it independently. The story invites readers into a realm (King's "bright-shadow" world) where direct correspondences and clear meanings are less beguiling than the strong, mysterious feeling of travelling into the dark forest, where magic happens and the rules of tales prevail. This response is perhaps not

“critical,” but is certainly in keeping with how wonder tales invite readers to respond.

Manheim’s translation opens with an explicit moral: “Don’t ever say a poor tailor can’t rise in the world and win great honors. All he has to do is get to the right place at the right time and, most important of all, have good luck” (507). The narrator stresses that the tailor was not in control of his situation: “he didn’t know the way” (507), was “scared half out of his wits” (507), would “have had no thought of getting up if he hadn’t been startled by a loud noise”(508) and “was utterly bewildered and couldn’t imagine how he would ever escape from this wilderness and get back to the world of men” (509). In the midst of his confusion, the tailor learns “unaccustomed courage” (508), but his most decisive action is to obey an order from a mysterious “voice from inside the cliff” (509). Remember the “curiosity” (509) that leads him to discover a sleeping maiden when we reach chapter 4. While he is looking at her, she wakes up, tells him what to do, explains her situation, puts things to rights, then gives “the lucky tailor her hand at the altar” (512). Thus a “young tailor’s apprentice”(507) attains a royal bride and, by being in the right place at the right time and trusting to luck, proves the moral of the tale. This tale has many of the characteristics which make fairy tales appealing and potentially liberating: magical transformations, confusion, wildness, mystery, social mobility, an active female protagonist.

Byatt uses these conventions as a basis for innovation; she adds something of herself and of Christabel to the tale, and thus makes it “seem new and first seen” (379). In order to stress the connection between writer and tale, I will refer to the version in *Possession* as Christabel’s, although I remain aware of Byatt’s direction in the background. In Christabel’s version, the tale has no stated moral message. The tailor, although “a good and unremarkable man,” is “a fine craftsman” and “an incurable optimist.” He travels into the dark forest in order to “come across someone who would want his skills” and finds “the little house that was waiting for him” (65). Not accident, but a certain sense of narrative necessity, seems to guide his journey, and commitment to his craft guides his conduct.

Unlike his counterpart in Manheim's translation, this tailor helps "with cooking and cleaning and what must be prepared" (66) in the house. Estés writes of such tasks: "in the development of women, all these motions of 'home-keeping,' the cooking, the washing, the sweeping, quantify something beyond the ordinary. All these metaphors offer ways to think about, to measure, feed, nourish, straighten, cleanse, order the soul-life" (97). In her letters, Christabel describes herself and Blanche making "*a life in which drudgery was Artful*," and vowing "*to renounce the outside World...in exchange for ...Art – a daily duty of crafting*" (205). The tailor decorates his pie with "pastry leaves and flowers" (66), while Christabel includes "*biscuits with sugar roses*" (205) in her list of sacred crafts (204). Others (like Blanche) may see her as a princess, but she defines herself as a craftsperson. She explains in a letter to Randolph: "*I live...not like a Princess in a thicket...but more like a very fat and self-satisfied Spider in the centre of her shining Web....an honest craftswoman*" (97; see also 373). Like Estés, Christabel seems to make a connection between such tasks and the work of the soul. In Christabel's fairy tale, this connection is implied rather than explicit. The craftsman's participation in traditional 'women's work' proves him worthy of the gift of an adventure.

Another significant difference between Christabel's version of "The Glass Coffin" and Manheim's translation is the story of the maiden. In the traditional story, the female protagonist has no opportunity to warn her brother of the stranger's evil intentions because as soon as she discovers the truth she falls asleep, and when she wakes up, her brother is gone. Soon the magician turns him into a stag. Christabel's version transforms a lack of opportunity into a graphic scene of a man using his magic arts to silence a woman. The princess explains:

Next day I tried to warn my brother, and it was as the black artist had said.

When I opened my mouth to speak on this topic it was as though my lips were sewn together with great stitches in the flesh, and my tongue would not move in my mouth. Yet I might ask to have the salt passed, or discourse of the evil

weather, and so my brother, to my great chagrin, noticed nothing, but set out blithely to go hunting with his new friend, leaving me at home to sit by the hearth, and to feel silent anguish at what might ensue. (73)

This description of a princess with lips “sewn together with great stitches in the flesh” echoes the story of “The Little Mermaid,” in which the protagonist has her tongue cut out. In “The Glass Coffin,” Christabel depicts a woman trapped at the level of mundane discourse, aware of her situation but unable to say what matters. When the craftsman found her sleeping in the glass coffin “he wondered...what her voice would be like” (71).

Although the basic plots of both versions of this story are similar, and both draw attention to the princess’s thwarted communication with her brother, Christabel’s choice of detail creates a story which suggests that women’s freedom of expression may be controlled in unexpected ways and that their oppression is inscribed on their bodies (as in the example in chapter 2 of Randolph as the author of Christabel’s misery). Readers of *Possession* may relate such physical oppression to Christabel’s struggles to defend her own freedom to write or Maud’s cherishing of her autonomy. Even Roland, who can identify himself with a princess (see chapter 2) has to learn liberation from Ash’s hold on his life and creativity: he looks at portraits of Randolph which he “had once seen...as parts of himself...[now] he saw them as wholly distant and separate” (507) and “he could hear, or feel, or even almost see, the patterns made by a voice he didn’t yet know, but which was his own” (515). Independent expression emerges as an important theme in Byatt’s treatment of “The Glass Coffin,” as well as a major reason (certainly according to Christabel) for writing in the form of romance.

Christabel and Manheim handle the human/animal transformations at the heart of the tale in significantly different ways. In Manheim’s version, the brother of the princess is a stag who slays the magician (in the form of a bull), then picks the helpless tailor up on his antlers and carries him to the threshold of the hidden world where the princess is held captive. This brother simply reappears in human form later in the story. In Christabel’s version, the tailor

seeks shelter from the owner of a little house and once inside he meets “a great grey dog....And at first this beast had made a low girning, growling sound, but now he hushed his threatening, and waved his tail slowly, and the little grey man said, ‘Otto is of the opinion that you are honest’” (66). Later, the little man sees that the tailor cares “for all the creatures in this place” (67). Clearly the dog and the man can communicate non-verbally, and both of them are impressed by the tailor’s compassion for all creatures. The tailor learns the dog’s true identity when the princess tells her story. She describes her refusal to submit to the magician and says: “When I spoke great tears fell from the eyes of the grey hound....And I knew in some sort, I think, that the animal was my brother, in this meek and helpless form” (73). Christabel’s tailor slays the magician himself, and the princess releases Otto from his spell: “she fell upon his grey hairy neck, weeping bright tears. And when her tears mixed with the salty tears that fell down the great beast’s cheek, the spell was released” (75). In this version of the story, compassion and respect for animals and human beings alike bring about the transformations on which the moral order of Christabel’s fairy-tale society depends. Thus the fairy tale comments on the role of compassion in society; we may interpret the tale as descriptive, prescriptive, visionary, allegorical or something else entirely, depending on our own views of the organization of our societies.

Christabel’s version of “The Glass Coffin” also stresses the importance of the craftsman’s craft to his way of seeing the world and living within it. He chooses the glass key because it appeals to his imagination, although it is not an immediately practical item. Like his counterpart in the other version, he trusts irrational forces, but here these forces are internal and more clearly defined. He thinks:

a glass key I never saw or heard of and cannot imagine what use it might be; it would shiver in any lock. But he desired the little glass key, because he was a craftsman, and could see that it had taken masterly skill to blow all these delicate wards and barrel, and because he did not have any idea about what it was or

might do, and curiosity is a great power in men's lives. (67)

His willingness to trust forces he fears or does not understand allows him to proceed with his adventure (67-69). A number of examples in Christabel's fairy tale illustrate how intuitive understanding helps characters to operate in the fairy-tale world they inhabit. Sometimes they have intuitive knowledge which corresponds with traditional expectations of a fairy-tale narrative: "And he knew -- it is always so, after all -- that the true adventure was the release of this sleeper, who would then be his grateful bride" (71). The narrator has the craftsman's expectations mirror those of the readers, and thus creates an analogy between the act of engaging in a fairy-tale adventure and the act of reading romance. The craftsman's experiences within the story suggest to readers that total understanding and rational decision-making are not necessary for a worthwhile adventure. Readers may take this suggestion beyond Christabel's fairy tale and apply it to their readings of *Possession* as well.

The narrator in Christabel's story also surprises both characters and readers with ironic reversals of expectations which draw attention to the gap between fairy-tale magic and likely events:

And the sleeper opened her eyes, which were as blue as periwinkle, or the summer sky, and the little tailor, because he knew this was what he must do, bent and kissed the perfect cheek.

"You must be the one," said the young woman, "you must be the one I have been waiting for, who must release me from enchantment. You must be the Prince."

"Ah no," said our hero, "there you are mistaken. I am no more -- and indeed no less -- than a fine craftsman, a tailor, in search of work for my hands, honest work, to keep me alive." (71)

Tailor and princess politely dispute "the moral niceties of their interesting situation" (74), and do ultimately "live happily ever after" (76). Such irony seems more apparent in Christabel's

version of the tale than in Manheim's translation, where the princess kisses the tailor and says:

You are the savior I have longed for. God in His mercy has led you to me and put an end to my sufferings. On this same day your happiness shall begin. You are my heaven-sent husband, and you shall spend the rest of your life in unbroken joy, loved by me and showered with earthly possessions of every kind. (510)

The tailor does not speak another word, and the God-ordained marriage takes place at the end of the story. This version emphasizes the tailor's material gains (social mobility) and suggests that God has a role in bringing about a divine union between man and woman. The version in *Possession*, on the other hand, suggests that the characters' expectations and interpretations of their situation influence the course of their actions, and that they do not embark on the expected marriage without discussing their options first.⁷ With irony, the narrator draws attention to how the characters' expectations may reflect our own expectations of a fairy-tale plot. Rather than material "possessions," Christabel's protagonist gains an opportunity for a spiritual kind of possession, "the exercise of his craft" (76). Thus Byatt's innovations not only connect "The Glass Coffin" with some key themes in her frame narrative, but also turn a conventional fairy tale into a comment on the role of art in an artist's life and into an opportunity for readers to consider the ways in which art both reflects and enhances our interpretations of life. Rational considerations aside, this story also offers readers an opportunity to become engaged in an adventure based on feeling, imagination, and curiosity, perhaps in "the female world" which Leonora describes in her book on *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte*: "in-formed by illogic and structured by feeling and in-tuition" (266).

1. The version to which I refer is by Roger Sherman Loomis and Laura Hibbard Loomis. Theirs is an abridged version of Jessie L. Weston's 1899 translation of an unfinished medieval poem by Gottfried von Strassburg. R. S. Loomis points out in his forward that this poem "was supplied with two inferior conclusions, one by Heinrich von Freiberg, the other by Ulrich von Turheim" (92).

2. In *Possession*, Byatt juxtaposes "a sugar-pink winceyette nightdress and a rather splendid peacock-blue kimono embroidered with a Chinese dragon and a flock of butterflies in silver and gold" (160). Roland and Val have "patches of damp on their ...kitchen and bathroom ceilings, which, when touched with a finger, smelled unmistakably of cat-piss" (22), while Christabel writes of "a queenly crown of gold, a filigree turret of lambent sunny gleams and glistening wires above crisping gold curls as heavy with riches as the golden fleece itself" (169). 'Down-to-earth' details do not undercut the romance atmosphere, but show ideals in relation to reality. In one version of *Tristan and Iseult* (Bédier), for example, Tristan leaves his friends to drift aimlessly in a small boat because the smell of his unhealed wounds is so offensive to others. This detail enhances the impact of his miraculous recovery at the hands of Queen Iseult.

3. Byatt seems to place a great deal of emphasis in Sabine's journal on the place of wolves in the lives and stories of the folk of Brittany (367-8).

4. An exchange between Christabel and Randolph supports my discussion. (305)

5. Christabel wears a "crinoline cage" (310): clothes are the trappings of civilization and reveal some of the traps laid by socially determined roles. The whiteladies in "The Threshold" wear

“cages of light” (172).

6. A “former storyteller and librarian,” and currently a faculty member at the University of Chicago.

7. Note that Christabel’s heroine tells her story before agreeing to marry the tailor, whereas Manheim’s heroine announces that she will marry the tailor and then tells him her story. For another suggestion that romance expectations and interpretations influence action, see Roland’s thoughts:

Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable.

But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable. ‘Falling in love,’ characteristically, combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover’s history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot.

Roland was troubled by the idea that the opposite might be true. Finding themselves in a plot, they might suppose it appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot. And that would be to compromise some kind of integrity they had set out with. (456)

The Rewards and Perils of “Greedy Reading”
“The opposition is false. Body and soul are not separable”
(Possession 373)

In her adaptation of “The Glass Coffin,” Byatt engages us in reading a fairy-tale; in the romance frame around such stories, she invites readers to contemplate the complex emotional and intellectual experiences involved in the act of reading. In this chapter, I will concentrate on certain features of the reading experience with which *Possession* seems to be particularly concerned. First, I will contrast a passage of meta-fictional commentary with an engaging action sequence in order to point out the different ways in which Byatt seems to convey similar messages. In the second part of the chapter, I will explore the relationship between curiosity and faith in *Possession*, and suggest some of the implications of this relationship for readers and critics of Byatt’s romance.

The narrator in *Possession* examines some of the different ways in which readers may respond mentally and physically to what they read:

There are readings – of the same text – that are dutiful, readings that map and dissect, readings that hear a rustling of unheard sounds, that count grey little pronouns for pleasure or instruction and for a time do not hear golden or apples. There are personal readings, which snatch for personal meanings, I am full of love, or disgust, or fear, I scan for love, or disgust or fear. There are – believe it – impersonal readings –where the mind’s eye sees the lines move onwards and the mind’s ear hears them sing and sing.

Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark--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. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge. (511-512)¹

Important to me in this passage is Byatt's articulation of the depth of the reading experience which "runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how." I believe that romance asks readers to imagine, to build rather than dismantle, construct rather than deconstruct.

Discovering *Possession*, one hears the echoes of other stories, other writers' words and forms, as well as hearing Byatt's particular story for the first time. The recognizable 'generic' qualities of romance, and the recurring patterns of fairy tales invite readings from across the range of "impersonal readings," "personal readings," readings people feel with their bodies.

In chapter 3, I explored some instances of a permeable boundary between humans and animals in romance. The "non-existent pelt" image from the passage quoted above ties in with this theme; it recurs at several crucial moments in Maud and Roland's adventure. In one example, Maud recognizes a line from Randolph's *Ask to Embla* that also occurs in Christabel's *Melusina*, and asks Roland: "have you ever really felt your hackles rise? Because I just have. Prickles all down my spine and at the roots of my hair" (258). According to Estés, "piloerection – hair standing on end - occurs in response to things seen as well as to things sensed" (268) . She associates the pelt with "one's instinctive sight" (269)². Maud's reaction to the poetry expresses itself in her body, and perhaps "runs ahead of any capacity to say what" she knows or how.

As Maud and Roland combine their scholarly knowledge of the two poets, they begin to experience familiar literature in a new, more physical way. They are both learning that cooperation enhances their ability to make sense of their discoveries, and they have both

ventured beyond the borders of their habitual work places, the library and the resource centre, into Seal Court (one-time home of Christabel, the selkie princess). They have each had to relinquish some of their assumptions about the other and about the poets whom they study. In other words, they have begun to behave less like literary critics and more like heroes of romance. They see new patterns of significance in Randolph and Christabel's writings, and make discoveries which might "change the face of scholarship" (23). Their discoveries do not only concern the biographical facts of Randolph and Christabel's lives. Roland and Maud discover a "romance" between Randolph and Christabel. On a metaphoric level, they discover romance itself.

A reader's non-rational response (such as Maud's hackles rising) typifies the effect that some critics attribute to romance. James King tries to define how fairy tales educate readers:

Popular tales rarely offer something recognizably cognitive, something that can be learned...instead they seem to *incline* the personality in a certain direction, alerting it to possibilities, suggesting, activating, psychological/spiritual 'faculties' that might otherwise have been neglected. (37-8)

Maud and Roland learn to use some of these otherwise neglected faculties as they complement scholarly activities with more "romance-oriented" experiences. Byatt presents these characters in a form that may have a similar effect on readers. As they embark on a treasure hunt in an unexplored wing of Seal Court, Roland's "non-existent pelt" bristles: he "felt a strange pricking at the base of his neck" (90). The searchers moved through "dark shuttered places" and "up a winding wooden stair, cloudy with dark dust" (90): the terms of their journey suggest that they move into a realm far-removed from the clear light of reason, a place where instinct operates in conjunction with intellect. Soon they came upon "a sudden row of staring tiny white faces, one, two, three, propped against a pillow" (91). According to Estés, "dolls are one of the symbolic treasures of the instinctual nature" (88). Christabel's dolls possess a strange vitality: "They all stared with blue glassy eyes, filled with dust, but still glittering" (91).

Maud recognizes the power of the dolls without being able to explain it: “ ‘She wrote a series of poems about the dolls,’ said Maud, in a kind of dreadful whisper. ‘They were ostensibly for children, like the *Tales for Innocents*. But not really’ ” (91). Her words refer to her specific context, but also have more general application; stories for children (fairy tales) can provide a valuable resource for literary detectives because such stories, as King says, help “to incline” readers to use “neglected faculties” such as intuition. Roland “driven by some instinct of cunning reserve” (94) withholds the significance of their find from Sir George.

Like Maud, Roland appears to respond intuitively in the presence of the dolls. He had “a vague excited sense” (91) and felt a “violent emotion of curiosity” (92). Here curiosity is motivating Roland and Maud, as well as readers who may be caught up in their desire for a discovery which will advance the plot of *Possession*.

Estés discusses further attributes of dolls which seem to fit Byatt’s use of them: “for centuries humans have felt that dolls emanate both a holiness and...an awesome and compelling prescience which acts upon persons, changing them spiritually” (88). Byatt’s language emphasizes spiritual qualities in her description of the doll scene by using such words as “incantation” (92) and “learn...by heart” (93), and having Maud explain her find: “I didn’t know. I just thought of the poem, standing there, and then it seemed clear. It was sheer luck” (94). The same “luck” which in Christabel’s version of “The Glass Coffin,” emanates truly from the inner resources of the tailor protagonist. Estés says “dolls are believed to be infused with life by their makers” (88), and Sir George suggests something similar when he objects to the scholars reading letters found in the dolls’ bed: “I believe in letting dead bones lie still. Why stir up scandals about our silly fairy poetess? Poor old thing, let her sleep decently” (96).

Byatt’s rendering of dolls in romance coincides with Estés’s interpretation of dolls in fairy tales. The scene in *Possession* which features the dolls seems designed to involve readers in the emotions of the characters. Christabel’s poem, an artistic creation, in this context has a

powerful impact: the poet's words contribute to Maud and Roland's excitement and discovery. By setting the poem in this context, Byatt seems to create for readers an opportunity to recognize some of the intangible effects of reading; we may not literally find buried treasure (as Roland and Maud do in this scene), but the act of creating meaning from words on a page is a metaphoric search for buried treasure. Byatt seems to give "solid life" to Maud and Roland's intuitive reading process by associating it with dolls. As Sabine writes: "I have noticed that writing...things down does not exorcise them, only gives them solid life, as the witch's wax dolls take on vitality when she warms them into shape before pricking them" (402). The image of voodoo dolls provides a bridge from Maud and Roland's discovery of Christabel's dolls to the theme of spiritual possession which runs throughout *Possession*.

I hope to have shown above some parallels between a metafictional discussion of the act of reading, and a scene which compels characters, and perhaps readers, to respond viscerally as well as intellectually. In these two different scenes, the description of varieties of reading and the treasure hunt, Byatt analyzes and creates a range of reading experiences to which readers may respond intellectually, emotionally, intuitively, spiritually, even physically. *Possession* makes ample space for this kind of multi-level reading, and thus offers readers an opportunity to experience the kind of "possession" that influences Byatt's characters.

As in the treasure hunt discussed above, curiosity is a powerful motivating force for characters throughout *Possession*. For example, Roland "felt as though he was prying, and as though he was being uselessly urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity – not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge" (92). The "emotion" of curiosity seems to take over rational faculties; like other forces of nature, it is beyond human control. In her description of Roland, Byatt connects this kind of "fundamental" curiosity with primary physical urges such as hunger and sex. The discovery of Randolph's letters to Christabel seems to awaken this basic form of curiosity in Roland and, although it seems

“useless” and “violent,” his drive towards further discoveries seems to bestow new life upon the objects of his curiosity:

Roland considered Randolph Ash, who had always looked so self-possessed, so all-of-a-piece. The look of amusement Manet had captured now took on an almost teasing aspect, a challenge: “So you think you know me?” And the urgency of the unfinished letters gave a new energy to the solid dark body, as though it might after all be capable of violent movement. (21)³

Roland’s curiosity helps to restore life to the past. The recurring word “violent” conveys the force of the “shock” (9) that Roland experiences as new aspects of Randolph’s character come to life in his mind.

Conversely, Maud, who also experiences curiosity as “prying,” feels that her curiosity takes life away from the objects of her investigation: “this thickened forest, her own humming metal car, her prying curiosity about whatever had been Christabel’s life, seemed suddenly to be the ghostly things, feeding on, living through, the young vitality of the past” (150-151). Through apparently conflicting descriptions (such as those of Roland and Maud) Byatt suggests that curiosity has an ambivalent role; it seems both to enhance and to diminish vitality.

Randolph’s curiosity is complex (“I [Randolph] *should add that my poems do not, I think, spring from the Lyric Impulse – but from something restless and myriad-minded and partial and observing and analytic and curious*” [147]), as well as ethically ambiguous:

Now, I cannot believe, being no Manichee, that He, the Creator, if he exists, did not make us and our world that which we are. He made us curious, did he not? – he made us questioning – and the Scribe of Genesis did well to locate the source of all our misery in that greed for knowledge which has also been our greatest spur – in some sense – to good. To good and evil. (181)

This quotation makes explicit the connection Byatt explores throughout her romance between

curiosity and faith. While curiosity itself may have a range of sometimes contradictory effects, it is paired with faith, an equally complex disposition.

Scientific curiosity sometimes diminishes the vitality of the objects under investigation. In Randolph's poem "Swammerdam," the speaker seeks "to know the origins of life" (225), yet his instruments are an "armoury - / Skewers and swords, scalpels and teasing hooks" (226) and he seems surrounded by death. In the "cabinet of curiosities" where he was born

A mermaid swam in a hermetic jar
With bony fingers scraping her glass walls
And stiff hair streaming from her shrunken head.
Her dry brown breasts were like mahogany,
Her nether parts, coiled and confined, were dull,
Like ancient varnish, but her teeth were white. (223)

Byatt expresses the potentially destructive impact of scientific curiosity on the world through an image which is particularly horrifying in the context of *Possession*, where she brings mermaids to life and shows their struggles to be free. The streaming hair of Swammerdam's mermaid reinforces her connection with the princess in "The Glass Coffin": "under the surface of the thick glass lay a mass of long gold threads....Her gold hair lay around her like a mantle, but where its strands crossed her face they stirred a little with her breathing" (70-1). In Christabel's tale, curiosity leads to the rebirth of the Princess and her escape from the glass display case, while in Randolph's poem, curiosity turns Swammerdam into a man "Who saw Infinity through countless cracks / In the blank skin of things, and died of it" (222).

Similarly, in Cropper's biography of Ash "the fairy paradise has been violated...crushed under the rough paw of well-meaning idle-minded curiosity" (269); here curiosity appears to cause destruction and death. Cropper portrays Ash as similar to Ash's portrait of Swammerdam: "with his scalpel and killing-jar, dealing death to the creatures he found so beautiful, to the seashore whose pristine beauty he helped to wreck" (269). Maud

read the biography and judged that it “was as much about its author as its subject” (268). According to Cropper, “all were murdering to dissect, parting and slicing, scraping and piercing tough and delicate tissues in an attempt by all possible means to get at the elusive stuff of Life itself” (270). In addition to Victorian scientific practices, his words seem to describe his own “version of reverse hagiography” (272), the method which makes him such a successful scholar. The expression “reverse hagiography” casts science as an inversion of religion. The image of critic as scientist performing vivisection on a text is a cautionary one, yet without curious explorers - the craftsman in “The Glass Coffin,” Roland, Maud, Christabel, Randolph, Cropper, Byatt, readers of *Possession* – there would be no rescues, no discoveries, no stories, no life. Byatt uses expressions like “greed for knowledge” and “consumed with curiosity” to suggest that curiosity may feed on the lives of others, but is at the same time essential to life.

Peering into cracks in “the blank skin of things” may have killed Swammerdam, but King lists “noting and looking into the cracks in various structures no one else deems worthy of examination” (79) as one of the important manifestations of intelligence in the “bright-shadow” fairy-tale world. Just as intelligence must be balanced with feeling, curiosity must be balanced with faith.

The story of Melusina turns on Raimondin’s peering through a keyhole at the fairy in her bath and seeing her mermaid’s tail. Byatt weaves this story into *Possession*, and thus draws attention to some of the implications for gender of the sometimes conflicting relationship between curiosity and faith. Randolph believes of Christabel:

To show speculation, or even curiosity, would be to lose her. Then and there. He knew that, without thinking. It was like Melusina’s prohibition, and no narrative bound him, unlike the unfortunate Raimondin, to exhibit indiscreet curiosity. He liked to know everything he could – even this – but he knew better than to be curious, he told himself, about things he could not hope to know. (309-10)

Does Randolph stifle his curiosity about Christabel's sexuality because he has faith in her? In Christabel's poem, the hero to whom Randolph compares himself identifies a lack of faith as the cause of his "indiscreet curiosity": "Ah, Mélusine, I have betrayed your faith" (258). Randolph may be like "The monk, John," in Christabel's "Fairy Melusine," who "Humbly concludes the human soul should not / Use reason where it cannot stretch to work" (315). Randolph feels passion for Christabel, and this feeling tempers his curiosity. His use of the word "lose" suggests that he also stifles his curiosity in order to possess Christabel. Perhaps desire, rather than faith, inspires Randolph to avoid Raimondin's fate (with dubious success). Despite his stifled curiosity, Christabel suffers the same fate as Melusina (544; cited in Chapter 2).

Other versions of the story of Melusina demonstrate the impact of male curiosity on women. In Goethe's "New Melusina," the fairy wife privately shrinks into a tiny elf instead of sprouting a mermaid's tail. Unbeknownst to her husband, when she is tiny she lives in the wooden casket which he guards in her 'absence.' In the grip of curiosity and greed, he discovers her secret identity by peering (like Swammerdam) through a crack in the casket:

I fancied a carbuncle lying in the box and wished to make sure of it. Twisting myself around as well as I was able, I brought my eye in direct contact with the opening. But how great was my astonishment when I looked into a room....a young woman with a book in her hand approached from the other side of the room, and immediately I recognized her as my wife, although her figure had shrunk to the smallest proportions. (Goethe 108)

Melusina senses that he has learned her secret, and fears that her happiness will be "utterly destroyed" (Goethe 109), but he realises that the situation might be to his advantage: "Is it then such a great misfortune to possess a wife who from time to time becomes an elf, so that one can carry her around in a box? Would it not be far worse were she to become a giantess and clap her husband into the box?" (Goethe 109). This man, again like Swammerdam, keeps his

fairy (mermaid) confined in a box. One day he gets drunk and betrays her secret, then persuades her to take him with her when she has to return to the elf world. He feels diminished there, and finds a way to escape. Since he is the story's narrator, readers never learn what becomes of the fairy, Melusina. For him, the consequences of curiosity are moderate, but the knowledge he gains through lack of faith allows him to wield power over Melusina. His curiosity destroys the mystery which allows her to remain autonomous.

In a different version of the Melusina story by Sabine Baring-Gould, the moment of Melusina's exposure goes as follows:

one of his [Raymond's] brothers...whispered that strange gossiping tales were about relative to this sabbath seclusion, and that it behoved him to inquire into it and set the minds of the people at rest. Full of wrath and anxiety, the count rushed off to the private apartments of the countess, but found them empty. One door alone was locked, and that opened into a bath. He looked through the key-hole and to his dismay beheld her in the water, her lower extremities changed into the tail of a monstrous fish or serpent. (Baring-Gould 131-2)

Once again, Raymond's suspicion and lack of faith in Melusina lead to his curious peering, and he eventually condemns her to leave her children and fly "wailing over the ramparts" by breaking his promise to respect her privacy and interpreting her as an "odious serpent" (Baring-Gould 132). In this version of the story, as in Goethe's, the woman who is the object of curiosity suffers punishment.

In the myth of Cupid and Psyche the roles are reversed. Psyche tries to satisfy her curiosity about the identity of her mysterious serpentine husband, and she is the one who must do penance for her curiosity. Byatt refers to this myth in *Christabel's* proem to "The Fairy Melusine." The poet observes, "let the Power take a female form/ And 'tis the Power is punished" (317). How does this relate to a discussion of romance? In a study of sixteenth-century prose romances, Caroline Lucas writes that "one place where women might have

experienced themselves as powerful...[was] within the discourse of romantic fiction” (3). She argues that such fiction “has been dismissed or devalued precisely because of its association with women” (18). This argument recalls, once again, Christabel’s comments about the relationship between the form of romance and women’s freedom.

Christabel’s poem describes fairies in terms which might also apply to romances:

those rapid wanderers of the dark
Who in dreamlight, or twilight, or no light
Are lovely Mysteries and promise gifts –
Whiteladies, teasing dryads, shape-changers -
Like smiling clouds, or sparkling threads of streams
Bright monsters of the sea and of the sky
Who answer longing and who threaten not
But vanish in the light of rational day. (317-8)

There is a connection between a scientist or jealous husband peering through a crack and ruining a fairy’s life, and a reader peering into the cracks of a text and thereby ruining the life of a fairy tale or romance. Before she brings the statue of Hermione to life, Paulina warns her audience, “It is requir’d / You do awake your faith” (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.3.94-5), and her words seem to apply to Shakespeare’s audience as well. In response to Christabel’s inquiries about his belief in Lazarus, Randolph replies:

Do you know – the only life I am sure of is the life of the Imagination. Whatever the absolute Truth – or Untruth – of that old life-in-death – Poetry can make that man live for the length of the faith you or any other choose to give to him. (185)

Readers can give life to writers’ creations, or can destroy them with reckless scrutiny.

Curiosity seems to possess both Roland and Maud alike, however, and drives them on regardless of what impact it has on the life of the past. Maud says:

I want to – to – follow the – path. I feel taken over by this. I want to *know* what happened, and I want it to be me that finds out. I thought you were mad, when you came to Lincoln with your piece of stolen letter. Now I feel the same. It isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive."

"Narrative curiosity -"

"Partly." (258-9; see also 363)

As this exchange illustrates, curiosity, possession, and reading life as narrative are related themes in *Possession*; time and again characters feel caught up in a force which they do not understand rationally, but feel strongly. Their narrative curiosity mirrors a reader's desire to keep reading, perhaps even to skip poems or stories in order to find out what happens in the end, as well as describing "something more primitive," the desire to find out which motivates so much of human action. Byatt writes in a form which thrives on mystery and suspense, and thus helps readers to feel the kind of curiosity that her characters feel, as well as prompting us to think about some of the implications of this feeling and to be aware of some of the ambivalence involved in our own styles of reading.⁴

As *Possession* draws to a close, a poem of Randolph's shows connections between curiosity as a way of life and a way of reading:

We are driven
By endings as by hunger....
We feel our way
Along the links and we cannot let go
Of this bright chain of curiosity
Which is become our fetter. So it drags
Us through our time – "And *then*, and *then*, and *then*,"
Towards our figured consummation....

Although we know and must know, they're all one,

Finis, The End, the one consummate shock

That ends all shocks and us. (517)

Perhaps it is the process of searching rather than the finality of discovery that makes curiosity a life-enhancing rather than a life-diminishing force. Randolph's poem may not convince most readers to put *Possession* away without reading on to the conclusion, but it does serve as a reminder that the life of the story is in the process of reading it rather than in its ending, which may satisfy our curiosity but will not keep the story alive unless we return to the beginning.

1. Consider Frye's comments about Shakespearean romance in relation to those of the narrator in *Possession*. According to Frye, Shakespeare

arrived in his last period at the bedrock of drama, the romantic spectacle out of which all the more specialized forms of drama, such as tragedy and social comedy, have come, and to which they recurrently return....we have a feeling of converging significance, the feeling that here we are close to seeing what our whole literary experience has been about, the feeling that we have moved into the still center of the order of words. Criticism as knowledge, the criticism which is compelled to keep on talking about the subject, recognizes the fact that there *is* a center of the order of words. (AC 117-118)

Rather than *a* centre, I prefer to think of a complex pattern of different concentric shapes.

2. Estés' discussion of the pelt goes with a story of a young seal-woman such as those to which Byatt alludes on page 305.

3. This quotation comes from the American edition of *Possession*. In the British edition this passage has quite a different emphasis:

These pictures, Roland considered, seemed somehow more real as well as more austere, because they were photographs. Less full of life, the life of the paint, but more realistic, in the modern sense, according to modern expectations. They were a bit the worse for wear; the flat was not clean and was damp. But he had no money to renew them. (London: Vintage, 1991. 17)

4. For a passage which links curiosity, faith, and romance, see *Possession* 290.

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