A. S. Byatt:

Tradition and the Female Talent

by

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This thesis examines the novels of A. S. Byatt: The Shadow of the Sun, The Game, The Virgin in the Garden, Still Life, and Possession, to analyze the ways in which Byatt uses myth and the literary tradition to highlight and criticize representations of women. In her novels, Byatt re-fictionalizes past narrative representations of female power, chastity, desire, and plenitude to "de-doxify" notions of women's roles in our culture.

As a writer steeped in the British literary tradition, Byatt is keenly aware of the role of literature in transmitting culture. She also self-admittedly suffers from an "anxiety of influence" resulting from her academic inheritance of the Eliot / Leavis concept of tradition. Throughout her novels, Byatt overcomes her anxiety by using parody to inscribe the tradition into her own texts. In the process, she highlights the ways in which narrative representations of women devolve upon writers of the present, rewriting the past to posit new possibilities for women's roles at the same time as she bends and shapes a predominantly male literary tradition to accomplish her own particular female art.

For Richard

and

for Chris and Erica

with love and gratitude

. . . the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence . . .

T. S. Eliot "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

. . . myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made.

Roland Barthes "Myth Today"

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Introduction

A. S. Byatt commented in an interview with Juliet Dusinberre in 1983 that literature was her means of escape from "the limits of being female" (186). For other artists who are also women, art is seen as a way of escaping the restrictions imposed by the realities of their social and economic powerlessness (Spacks 206). Today, literary critical feminists would undoubtedly reverse Byatt's statement to show the role of literature in forming those very limits from which she and many other women feel the need to escape. While Byatt would, I think, agree with Gillian Beer's qualification in "Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past" that gender formation cannot be isolated from social and cultural forces, that there is no single source of oppression of women (68), her recognition of the role of narratives in at least partly determining the limits of being female is readily apparent in her 1990 Booker Prize-winning novel Possession.

Possession, a richly literary tour de force, takes Byatt in a direction substantially different from that followed in her previous novels. Byatt claims in an interview that she wrote Possession specifically "to be liked" and "partly to show off" (Stout 14). As opposed to her earlier novels, Possession is "all art" (Stout 14). When she mixes genres, ranging from the epistolary to the

literary critical, and uses parody and pastiche in her literary repetitions, Byatt departs drastically from her earlier attempts at what, in the introduction to a selection of her critical writings entitled Passions of the Mind (PM), she calls a "self-conscious realism" rooted deeply in language (xv). One is reminded of her description of the artistic efforts of her fictional playwright Alexander Wedderburn in The Virgin in the Garden (VG) whose play tends "towards pastiche and parody" despite his conscious aiming towards "a vigorous realism" (VG 17). The difference is, with Byatt, the change from realism to the artfulness of the parody and pastiche in the later romance is the culmination of her efforts to forge her own female art.

My thesis will focus on Byatt's novels in which she attempts to fashion her writer's art. While Byatt's published fiction includes a collection of short stories entitled Sugar and Other Stories, two novellas under the title Angels and Insects, and a very recent collection entitled The Matisse Stories, I have confined my thesis to the treatment of the novels, which effectively demonstrate the development of her view of the female artist. I will analyze the ways in which Byatt uses myth and the literary tradition to highlight and criticize representations of women, particularly as they relate to the female artist.

First I will examine Byatt's preoccupation with the myth of Cassandra and her notion of the female artist as seer in both The Shadow of the Sun and The Game. The following chapter will analyze Byatt's attempt to construct a

female mythology in The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life, and her presentation of the female artist split between a desire for worldly achievement and a desire for the traditional female world of the home. The subsequent chapter will be devoted to Possession, in which a multiplicity of female and male voices from the present and the past replaces the univocal authority of the earlier novels to provide differing perspectives on the female artist.

In her novels, Byatt refictionalizes conventional narratives of the female artist involving female power, chastity, desire, and plenitude from classical and Scandinavian mythology, folk and fairy tales, and their repetitions throughout the British literary tradition. The effect of Byatt's inscription of these narratives in her novels is to "de-doxify" notions of women's roles in our culture. "De-doxify" is a term used by Linda Hutcheon in The Politics of Postmodernism to refer to the process of subverting or undoing accepted opinion (3). When she coins the term "de-doxify," Hutcheon is extending Roland Barthes's use of the Greek doxa as "public opinion or the 'Voice of Nature' and consensus" (Politics 3). My thesis will focus on Byatt's consciously ironic use of myth and literary representations of women in her attempts to fashion her art, as well as on the way in which those traditional narratives have fashioned or textualized her view of the female artist.

Byatt's attitude toward the writer's use of myth can be traced to the influence of Iris Murdoch's 1961 essay "Against Dryness." Murdoch uses the term "dryness" to describe the "smallness, clearness, self-containedness" of the

symbol and myth used by writers like Paul Valéry and T.S. Eliot (19). In Murdoch's view, when a writer relies on myth and symbol, s/he reverts to the consolation of form and "fantasy" as opposed to recognizing and wrestling with a dangerous contingent reality, an act which necessarily requires the "imagination" (19). According to Murdoch, "[r]eal people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for imagination" (20). Byatt has acknowledged her debt to Murdoch as an early influence (PM xv), and has published a major critical study of Murdoch's novels.

Following the lead of Murdoch's essay, Byatt declines to use myth and the literary tradition in the modernist sense of T.S. Eliot's "mythical method" ("Ulysses" 202). Instead, she ironizes mythical and literary representations in the postmodernist parodic sense of what Linda Hutcheon defines as "imitation with critical ironic distance" (Hutcheon Parody 37). Whereas Eliot's echoes of the literary tradition became in The Waste Land "fragments [he has] shored against [his] ruins," postmodernist repetitions do not work as protection from the world but as attempts to engage critically with its historical reality. Byatt's attitude toward myth is indicative of the contemporary view of myth as a form of narrative based in language and possessing a history. The equation of folk and fairy tales and myths on the same narrative plane testifies to a changed perspective of myth. A brief overview of modern and postmodern attitudes towards myth from a literary critical perspective will clarify how the postmodernist attitude differs significantly from earlier views.

Enlightenment thought entailed a rising faith in the power of human reason to discover truth which resulted in a pejorative connotation being applied to myth as fiction (Wellek and Warren 191). The Romantics, however, with their fascination with the non-rational, and under the influence of the Italian historian Giambattista Vico and his cyclical view of history and thought, conceived of myth as embodying its own kind of truth. Schelling described mythology as "a phenomenon which 'in profundity, permanence, and universality is comparable only with Nature herself'" (Kerenyi 1). Myths were seen to contain their own essential truths which were universal and timeless, and poets of the later Romantic and early Modernist periods, such as Yeats and Eliot, developed their own symbolic systems to express and deepen the themes of their self-enclosed artistic worlds.

The Romantic preoccupation with symbolism and the non-rational bred a modernist interest in the primitive. Stanley E. Hyman calls 1912 a "watershed year" with the publication of Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough, Jane Harrison's Themis, Sigmund Freud's Totem and Taboo, and Carl Jung's Psychology of the Unconscious (Vickery Myth xi). These texts embodied the early twentieth century anthropological and psychological approaches to myth criticism in literature.

Frazer and the Cambridge School, including Jane Harrison and others, approaching myth under the rubric of Darwin's evolutionary theory, advanced the ritual theory of myth. They identified recurring actions and figures such as

the dying and reviving god, the scapegoat, the mother goddess, the sacred prostitute, and the sacrificial virgin. According to their anthropological perspective, these figures were the remains of primitive rituals whose actions had been lost over time. What ritual was in action, its associated myth was in words. Therefore, myth became a narrative divorced from its original significance, or, in poststructuralist terms, a signifier separated from its signified. This analogy also points to the aetiological aspect of the anthropological perspective on myth whereby myth explains something whose real origins and meaning have been lost.

The influence of Frazer's The Golden Bough on Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence and Joyce, as well as on other writers of the modernist period and later is difficult to overstate. When Frazer hypothesized that myths of dying and reviving gods such as Adonis, Attis, and Osiris paralleled the death and rebirth of vegetation, he focused on the concept of regeneration which implies a decline or falling off from a more potent origin (Vickery Impact 60). Frazer offered a way to recover access to lost origins.

John Vickery attributes the literary impact of Frazer's The Golden Bough not only to a need in modern society to escape its own cultural vacuity, but also to Frazer's combination of the rational and scientific with an appeal to interest in the primitive in a work whose literary force captured the imaginations of his contemporaries (Impact 3-37). For the modernists, myth served as an "energizing or ordering principle" (Righter 32). In an often cited

statement, Eliot praised Joyce's Ulysses for its importance in creating "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("Ulysses" 202). Eliot coined the term "mythical method," identifying Yeats as the first to employ the method, and thereby taking "a step towards making the modern world possible for art, towards . . . order and form" ("Ulysses" 202). Eliot's "mythical method" offered an escape from history, a reversion to the safety of the ancient, the familiar, and the tradition of a literary past which would provide impetus for the imagination (Righter 35).

Concurrent with the findings of the anthropological school, psychological theories of myth also influenced the path of myth criticism. Freud focuses on myth as mass repression; his reading of the Oedipus myth interprets the narrative as a manifestation of the incest taboo. Where Freud concentrates on the personal unconscious, Jung's notion of the collective unconscious posits an additional "common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us" (Jung 4). Archetypes are primordial, universal images, the content of the collective unconscious manifested in different ways in the individual consciousness, and appearing in myth, fairy tales, and esoteric teaching (5).

Jung concentrates on identifying and describing the archetypes that form part of the masculine psyche. The most important archetype for the masculine psyche is the anima, or "life-giving daemon" (27). While the anima is not the

soul in a dogmatic sense, it imparts a numinous quality to whatever it encounters (28). The anima is the feminine aspect, the "not-I" or "outside me" of the masculine psyche; therefore, the anima image is usually projected upon women (27). Since "[s]he is the serpent in the paradise of the harmless man with good resolutions and still better intentions" (28), the male's relation with the anima becomes a test of his courage and of the strength of his spiritual and moral forces (29). The nixie is one version of the anima in the form of the siren, melusina or mermaid, or wood-nymph who infatuates young men only to destroy them (25).

The great mother archetype is manifested in images of mythological goddesses and the Virgin Mary as well as in symbols invoking awe and devotion, symbols of fertility such as the cornucopia, the garden and the ploughed field, vessel-shaped images, and symbols of protection such as the magic circle or mandala (81). The significance of these images of the great mother archetype is three-fold. They can signify nurturing goodness, the passion of "orgiastic emotionality," and the darkness of the "Stygian depths" (94). The positive and negative aspects of the great mother archetype point to the intertwined relationship of the mother-complex and the anima archetype in male psychology (82).

Jung also identifies male archetypes, the wise old man and the child god or child hero, which form part of the masculine psyche. While Jung focuses on the male psyche, he does recognize "the existence of an autonomous female

psyche" which is the reverse of the male situation (177). Where the male must encounter his anima, the female faces her animus, the masculine projection of her unconscious (177).

Robert Eisner notes that Jung, prior to using the term archetype, first used other terms translated as "'primordial image'" in his writing (77). After World War I, Jung incorporated the term archetype into his lexicon from sources describing God as the archetypal light or seal (77). According to Eisner, Jung's affiliation of a religious or numinous quality with his notion of the primordial image was an act of rhetorical intent (Eisner 77). The etymology of the word archetype connects it with a beginning, an origin or arkhe, and a stamp or tupos. In other words, Jung's archetypes stem from an originary ordering principle or force preceding human experience. Their essential quality becomes a contentious issue in certain schools of psychological and literary critical thought. Robert Eisner cites the psychologist Jacques Lacan in his opposition to Jungian archetypes:

> 'It is of the utmost importance to realize in the experience of the unconscious Other in which Freud guides us that the question does not find its lineaments in protomorphic proliferations of the image, in vegetative intumescences, in animic halos irradiating from the palpitations of life.' (83)

The antithesis of Jung's concept of the collective unconscious with its essential archetypes is what Joan Webber refers to as "the collective conscious [which] has its life in print" (91). It is from this collective conscious that Northrop Frye's archetypes spring. Frye's immensely influential Anatomy of

Criticism, which posits a theory of archetypes or recurring images in literature, purports to be an inductive, empirical examination of the universe of western literature. Where Jung conceives of archetypes as psychic projections or manifestations of the collective unconscious, Frye identifies the modes and symbols of displaced myth originating in the literature of classical Greece and Christian culture.

In After the New Criticism, Frank Lentricchia disputes Frye's claims to scientific objectivity, describing them as "a hermeneutics of the innocent eye" (10), and concludes that Frye's system, rather than being scientific, is an arbitrary hierarchy based on the "desideratum" of freedom (22). Frye's literary world that precedes the poet, in effect, deconstructs the romantic subject, anticipating while ultimately rejecting Derrida's concept of the missing origin (13). Since he posits human desire as a centre or origin of this literary world, Frye's "metaphysics of desire" ultimately saves him as a humanist (15).

Frye's theory of archetypes, while a useful heuristic tool for western literary criticism, and, according to Lentricchia, arriving on the scene at a time that was ripe for a new system of critical thought (10), poses some major problems. Frye's insistence that literature is about literature accounts for recurring conventions and symbols; however, it denies literature a mimetic aspect in representing the world. It refuses to account for social, cultural, and historical forces outside literature (Lentricchia 16). Additionally, the emphasis is placed on the repetition of archetypes in literature; the theory does not

explain the "freshness of transformation" of each occurrence nor its individual expression (15). In addition, feminist criticism uncovers a problem with Frye's centre of human desire. In Frye's terms, myth describes the world we desire:

> The gods enjoy beautiful women, fight one another with prodigious strength, comfort and assist man, or else watch his miseries from the height of their immortal freedom. (Anatomy 136)

The human behind the desire is revealed, here as elsewhere, as a gendered, and usually specifically masculine, one (Hutcheon Politics 157).

When Hutcheon discusses the feminist project in The Politics of Postmodernism, she is completely correct in referring to 'feminisms' in the plural on the basis of a lack of consensus in feminist thought about the representation of women (141). For example, one school of feminist criticism, while disputing the essentiality and universality of Jung's archetypes, would revise rather than discard the notion of archetypes. The archetype, rather than being a fixed, essential image or product, would become a process, "a tendency to form and re-form images in relation to certain kinds of repeated experience" (Lauter and Rupprecht 13). For example, the archetype of the female mothering experience may be universal but not unchanging. This revisionary movement sees Jung's anima/animus distinction as early Jung, more tentative than absolute, and would replace his dichotomy with the notion of "animity" or "befriending the soul" (Lauter and Rupprecht 226-27). The feminist literary critic Annis Pratt also wants to salvage the archetype as a tool for examining the recurrence of specifically female archetypal images and patterns in

women's fiction. While she professes not to be a Jungian and agrees that archetypes are not transcendent, Pratt cautions against discarding "crucial archetypes along with the stereotypical images" (129). Of course, Pratt's stance introduces a new dilemma: which tupos or stamps are stereotypes and which are archetypes? Of the archetypes, who decides which ones are crucial? While, undeniably, female and male experiences and roles have undergone historical change, it is difficult to see either the legitimacy or the value of redefining the archetype as process. Why not accept instead that archetypes are human constructs created from our interpretations of narratives? They are neither essential nor crucial. The important process is not the preservation or revision of archetypes, but the telling and retelling of tales, revising and creating new narratives to reflect and to imagine a changing experience.

The structuralist theory of myth criticism proposed by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss diverted attention away from the archetypal aspects of myth and toward myth as system. Following Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic notions of langue and parole, Lévi-Strauss analyzed myths to determine the paradigmatic classes of their parts that combine to form syntagmatic mythemes, that is, particular myth narratives (Gould 101). Lévi-Strauss emphasized the importance of the underlying synchronic structure rather than the individual myths themselves. The structure of myth was a way of mediating between opposing binary opposites such as "raw/cooked, life/death, hunter/hunted, and nature/culture" to resolve social conflicts (Morford 8).

In contrast to Frye's literary world, Lévi-Strauss situates myth in the realm of social practice. Like Lévi-Strauss in following the linguistic theory of Saussure, Roland Barthes departs from Lévi-Strauss in his definition of what constitutes myth. In his seminal essay "Myth Today" in Mythologies, Barthes foregrounds myth's readiness to be "appropriated" (129). He shows myth to be a "second-order semiological system" (123) whose contingency and historical meaning have been impoverished to accommodate the ideological concepts of the hegemonic order (127). Myth, therefore, is "stolen language" that "transforms history into nature" (140-42). Whereas the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary in Saussure's linguistic theory, Barthes notes that mythical signification is "never arbitrary" but maintains some analogy (136). Therefore, Albert Camus's appropriation of the myth of Sisyphus to signify absurdity points to the "expressiveness of language" that makes it particularly susceptible to confiscation (143). More importantly, language never imposes full meaning, but rather an "open-work meaning" (143) which leaves a gap between signifier and signified that can be widened and exploited. Barthes stresses the way myth, as seen via semiology, justifies as natural a "historical intention," and transforms the contingent into the eternal (155). Therefore, myth is "depoliticized speech" (155). As part of his project, Barthes outlines his political agenda when he goes on to privilege left-wing myth as inessential and impoverished and therefore not to be feared over the ubiquitously powerful bourgeois myth of the right. Barthes's overt political stance does not, however,

invalidate the cogency of his argument for the appropriation of myth and the gap inherent in language between signifier and signified. His argument assumes a key role in poststructuralist thought which works to uncover the concepts behind the appropriation of the forms of myth. While Barthes's thesis is the basis of the semiological analysis of popular cultural myths, because his underlying hypothesis is linguistically based, it can also be applied, as I will do in the discussion to follow, to the narrative myths that represent women to show how those narratives have been appropriated for particular concepts.

Following the lead of poststructuralism, many feminist literary critics turn away from a search for archetypal patterns in literature to a critical examination of the representations of women in western literature, including representations of the female in myth, folk tales, and fairy tales. The whole issue of mimesis and representation becomes problematic following Jacques Derrida's critique of classical semiology (Lentricchia 170). Mimesis supposes a preexistent reality to be mirrored. However, for Derrida, mimesis "creates the illusion of a nonlinguistic object that is being mirrored, or in Derrida's terms, provisionally deferred" (Lentricchia 171). Derrida's deconstructive hypothesis is assimilated by postmodernist critics who start to investigate the ways in which meaning is produced (Hutcheon Politics 7). Culture becomes understood as the result rather than the source of representations (7). Representation and the construction of reality as a consequence of language replaces the notion of language as mirroring reality.

In Hutcheon's terms, however, postmodernism and feminisms necessarily differ: where postmodernism is critique, feminism, with its political impetus for changing the status of women in society, demands praxis (22). Postmodernism admits its own complicity in the power of western capitalism to "normalize (or 'doxify') signs and images" (Hutcheon Politics 7). Herein lies the paradox of postmodernist "complicitous critique" which aims to "'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import" (3), while simultaneously acknowledging their inescapability. Hutcheon makes a crucial point when she distinguishes between de-doxifying and praxis. Regardless of the necessity of laying bare the device prior to action, the process of de-doxification is not in itself action (22). However, when feminist writers deconstruct representations of women in past narratives, they often create new possibilities for women, opening the way for praxis.

In the introduction to a 1991 republication of The Shadow of the Sun, her first novel, partly written between 1954 and 1957 when she was a student at Cambridge, and first published in 1964, Byatt remarks that when she wrote her first novel, she could not find a model in female writing that she wanted to follow (SS x). She, therefore, had to develop her own art. She accomplished this by situating herself in the predominantly male literary tradition. Following T. S. Eliot's prescription, Byatt acquired the "historical sense" ("Tradition" 4) of the literary tradition, absorbing it and making it her own. But as Gayle Greene has argued in her discussion of feminist metafiction, women writers

(like Byatt's sister, Margaret Drabble) writing within the tradition are also writing against it, "finding it both constraining and enabling" (3). Byatt's relationship to the tradition is similarly complex. In the process of acquiring the tradition, she becomes a kind of Janus figure, looking to past narratives through which to express her female art, while at the same time, looking forward to writing narratives that express her own perspective. These narratives of the past include representations of women in classical mythology and their repetitions throughout the western literary tradition. Byatt's search highlights the lack of a satisfactory representation of the female artist in literature as well as the lack of a satisfactory model for her female art. At the same time, her search foregrounds the extent to which her own concept of the artist has been informed by the texts of the tradition she is attempting to inherit.

As a writer steeped in the tradition, Byatt is keenly aware of the role of narratives in transmitting culture. Her work meets the criteria Gayle Greene has established for what makes a novel feminist: its awareness of gender as a social construct, and therefore subject to change, plus an awareness of the role of narrative in effecting change (2). Feminist fiction becomes metafiction when it highlights its own structure, thereby highlighting the nature of the codes of human behaviour, their constructedness and capacity for change (2). When Byatt attempts to forge her female art in her novels, she consciously uses myth and literary allusions which foreground the narratives representing women. While Byatt, like Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing, has declined to become a

spokesperson for feminism, there is "implicit feminism . . . but no polemicism" in her treatment of female characters in her novels (Kenyon 73). This element in Byatt's writing acquires greater prominence in each successive novel, reflecting the changing thought of the times as the contemporary feminist movement gathered momentum and force from the early sixties through the present. While Byatt is not a dogmatic literary critical feminist, she is certainly a feminist in the sense of writing the female experience, and she cites Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique as an important influence on the women of her generation who had hesitated to combine careers and homemaking out of fear of damaging their families (Dusinberre 189).

In her attempts to create her own particular art, Byatt separates herself from the tradition of women writers and aligns herself with Eliot and Pound in their sense of an "order behind things," as well as with Henry James and Proust in their stylistic tendency to long sentences (Dusinberre 183-84). Without being facilely reductive, one might see how Eliot's concept of an "ideal order" in literature ("Tradition" 5) would appease Byatt's self-admitted fear of solipsism, while a stylistic density of language would assuage her anxiety about sceptical theories of language (PM 159). In situating herself in the line of Eliot, Pound, James, and Proust, she establishes a solidly patriarchal lineage of literary descent. This ancestry also includes a Romantic concept of the artist as a Platonic prophet or seer which is evident in her first two novels, The Shadow of the Sun (SS) and The Game (G).

The Shadow of the Sun is very much the portrait of the artist as a young woman, both desperate to accede to the realm of the visionary experience of her author-father and simultaneously struggling to escape his shadow. This early novel sets the themes of the female artist which Byatt will develop in later novels, and perhaps more importantly, situates her centre as both inheritor and rejector of the male literary tradition. Writing in retrospect, Byatt sees her literary vision as heliotropic, following the sun which is initially conceived as masculine (SS xiv). As Byatt develops her art over the course of her novels, the sun, a male Apollo in her first novel, becomes a Norse female sun goddess in Possession (SS xv). Like the budding female artist of her first novel, Byatt felt herself in the shadow of Leavis's great tradition; almost thirty years later, writing Possession, she can proclaim herself in the sun. She points out that since the sun has no shadow, you either "have to be the sun or nothing" (SS xiv).

Like her early heroine, Anna Severell, Byatt suffered from what Harold Bloom has termed the "anxiety of influence," a kind of Oedipal complex suffered by poets who inherit the tradition of their forebears. When Byatt repeats and alludes to literary and mythical representations of women, she paradoxically both inscribes and subverts the tradition, thereby being both conservative and revolutionary at the same time (Hutcheon Parody 77). Hutcheon further characterizes parody as "normative in its identification with the Other," but "contesting in its Oedipal need to distinguish itself from the

prior Other" (77). Byatt can both identify with and simultaneously challenge the male dominated tradition while she rewrites the female experience. The result is a revolutionary or at least revelatory de-doxification of the roles of women and of how representations of women in literature to a certain extent determine rather than reflect those very roles.

In The Game, Byatt's concept of the female artist as seer is focused in Cassandra Corbett, a medieval scholar whose self-imposed imprisonment inside her own tower of absolutism ultimately leads to her self-destruction. Cassandra sees herself in terms of certain texts that have preceded her, assuming the roles of the mythical Cassandra, prophetess of doom, and of Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, the female artist trapped in her tower able to experience the world only through its mirror image. Opposed to Cassandra in a deadly game of the imagination is her sister, Julia Eskelund, a successful writer of women's novels. Whereas Cassandra is the victim of an excess of fantasy, Julia is seen as the antithesis: too much fact without the transforming power of the imagination. Neither character provides a satisfactory model of the female art that Byatt seeks; together they act metaphorically as the opposite poles of the writer's imaginative task of achieving her art somewhere within the continuum of fact and fantasy. As we will see in a later discussion of these two novels, the notion of the female artist as seer has been problematic from its initial narratives in Greek mythology and continues to plague Byatt's contemporary female writers.

A related but different kind of split in the model of the female artist has been proposed by Patricia Meyer Spacks who has extended Eliot's concept of the "dissociated sensibility" to posit a division between the emotional and intellectual aspects of the female imagination (26). While this notion may lead into the trap of a false pre-lapsarian unified sensibility, and while the very concept of the imagination is under suspicion in contemporary theory, the representation of the split female artist has textual support in novels such as Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook as well as in Byatt's novels. Byatt's female artist is not only split as an artist in trying to forge a female art out of a male tradition, but in The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life, companion novels in a planned tetralogy, she is split as a woman between the seemingly incompatible demands of art and accomplishment in the world and a need for love and family, hearth and home. While one might argue that the artist is always split between the demands of the world and the demands of his or her art, Spacks argues that the split is a greater problem for the woman artist (213). Spacks presents the split as a function of woman's search for power; there are two routes: through love or through worldly accomplishments (206). As artist, the woman also experiences a conflict between a feminine narcissism, which is evident in her love for her own body and her desire to attract men, and an artistic narcissism, a love of creative power (213). According to Spacks, if the female artist is a dancer, singer, or actress, both needs can be satisfied. However, if she is a writer, sculptor, or other artist producing physical art

objects, the attention directed to the work might cause conflict (214). Spacks's argument brings into discussion at least two contentious issues. Is the female artist indeed split? The very concept, which implies an originary complete presence from which she is split, belies contemporary notions of the postmodern subject. The second issue of female narcissism is also problematic. Is the very concept of female narcissism a culturally constructed view of the female as mirrored by Milton's depiction of Eve in Paradise Lost? The question of nature versus culture is complex and relates to the central concerns of this thesis: the role of texts in producing representations of women.

Duplicating her use of two sisters, Cassandra Corbett and Julia Eskelund, as alternative aspects of art in The Game, Byatt presents another pair of sisters, Frederica and Stephanie Potter. Frederica is intent on pursuing power in the world, but at the same time is driven by a sexual curiosity. Notwithstanding Frederica's sexual quest, she is horrified at the prospect of her sister Stephanie's marriage with its attendant limitations of home and babies. On the other hand, Byatt's sympathetic portrayal of Stephanie in the novels is a refusal to simplify the conflict.

In The Virgin in the Garden, Byatt attempts to construct a female mythology of birth to replace the dominant male mythology of death (Dusinberre 193). Byatt's fascination with Renaissance use of neoplatonic myths finds a vehicle when she draws on the Renaissance thought of Elizabethan England as a backdrop for the England of the early nineteen-fifties

at the time of the coronation of the second Elizabeth. Byatt examines Elizabethan iconography of the virgin queen, including Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene. Frederica Potter, the seventeen-year-old heroine of the novel, is a parody of the young Elizabeth I she portrays in a 1953 masque celebrating the inauguration of a second Elizabethan age. Frederica is simultaneously an ironic Britomartis, at times witness to, and at times the agent of temptations in various North Yorkshire gardens. When Byatt parodies the excesses of Elizabethan iconography that represented the queen as Virgo Astraea, she is subverting the traditions of virginity, chastity, and plenitude associated with woman as virgin mother. However, the later discussion of both The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life will reveal the problematic split associated with this female mythology.

Patricia Waugh has cogently argued in Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern that while postmodernism is deconstructing the Cartesian concept of the liberal individual, feminism is doing the opposite: women writers are just starting to assemble a unified identity for a sense of "personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world" (6). Since women were positioned as the Other to the male self, they were never contained within the male concept of self in the first place (9). Feminist women writers are busy deconstructing the concept of the woman as other in masculine discourse, seeking instead "a coherent and unified feminine subject" (9). Waugh's argument supports the hypothesis of the split female artist. While Byatt has

labelled herself as the liberal individual (Dusinberre 186) which Waugh claims women's experience has been outside, the evidence of her novels tends to confirm both Waugh's and Patricia Meyer Spacks's cases for the split female artist. Despite her protests to the contrary, Byatt's writing does put her in the category of feminist writer. However, that does not mean that her writing need deal solely with women's issues. Any reader of Byatt's novels realizes the vast range of her intellectual interests and passions.

Nowhere is Byatt's amazing textual breadth more in evidence than in Possession, her most successful novel to date. Here, Byatt succeeds when she sets aside both her earlier search for a unified voice and her adherence to Murdoch's credo of realism. There is, in fact, a certain irony in the sense that Byatt's virtuosity has been achieved through the vehicle of ventriloquism. The pastiche and parody against which her earlier male artistic persona of The Virgin in the Garden, Alexander Wedderburn, struggled, has exploded into the letters, poetry, tales, journals, biography, and literary criticism (with footnotes) to create a textual pleasure dome, not simply to delight but also to critique. The Victorian poet Christabel LaMotte is the central female artist in Possession. Primarily through this character and her poetry and tales, Byatt examines the concept of female self-sufficiency as it applies to domestic, sexual, and artistic aspects of existence. She undercuts the myths and tales of the self-sufficient powerful female as monstrous by writing from the perspective of the monster. The fairy Melusine is seen not as a monster, but as a French equivalent of

Demeter, and Christabel's poem gives Melusine her own voice to tell her story. Of course, an immediate problem arises when the Melusine tale is interpreted in terms of another myth which is more congenial to the image that women might want to represent themselves. Is this not a version of Annis Pratt's argument proposing to save crucial archetypes? Can stereotypes be separated from archetypes? That is a good question, particularly in light of Byatt's substitution of an alternative Norse mythology in Possession to replace the unsatisfactory classical one in terms of the hierarchical relationship between male and female. While Byatt moves from a male Apollo to a female Norse sun god, she simply replaces one mythology with another. One could argue that the same rules used to subvert one could be used to subvert the other. This very important point will be discussed more fully in the conclusion. For the time being, I will concentrate on Byatt's critique of myths which define female power as monstrous as part of what Waugh had identified as the feminist project to deconstruct the notion of woman as Other.

As a model of the female artist, Christabel is presented not only as a type of Melusine, but also in terms of the figure of the Greek Arachne of classical myth. The role of women as spinners and weavers has a historical basis as well as a mythical one, and the metaphor of spinning and weaving has been extended to describe the art of female writing. This model is substantially different from the male Apollo of Greek myth, the prototypically Platonic seer whose poetry was divinely inspired with the help of the muses. In contrast,

Arachne was forced to spin her art from out of her own body, an image either grotesque or beautiful, depending on the perspective. Moreover, the image of the web to represent female art has a second and threatening significance as a means of entrapment. Woman as seducer of man in order to usurp his power is another aspect of a fearful female monstrosity examined in the novel.

Christabel Lamotte is not the only artist in Possession. Byatt's other poetic voice assumes the persona of the Browning-like Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash. While the female characters in her earlier novels can be read as aspects of the split female artist, Byatt saw her artistry or poetic imagination in terms of the male: Henry Severell in The Shadow of the Sun, Alexander Wedderburn in The Virgin in the Garden, Raphael Faber in Still Life. In contrast, Possession allows both male and female parts of her imagination to exist side by side (Le Vot 97). Interestingly, however, on the level of the romance, it is the contemporary male scholar Roland Michell who, after proving himself a worthy hero, is rewarded with the transforming experience of gaining access both literally and metaphorically to the garden of Andrew Marvell's poetic inspiration. Maud Bailey, the contemporary feminist scholar and biological descendant of both Randolph Ash and Christabel Lamotte, inherits the physical artifacts. The letters are the material remnants of her poetic ancestry, but Maud does not inherit their attendant imaginative magic. Moreover, at the conclusion of the romance, Maud is in a position anathema to modern feminists: she has a man taking care of her. Could it be that Roland is

rewarded because he is a textual scholar, working without the certainties of theory, while Maud is a sorry literary critical feminist from whom Byatt would like to distance herself as much as possible? Does Byatt see feminist critical theory as one more way to imprison women? Or is it that Byatt still sees her own art as male? When she looks in the mirror, does she still see the male artist of the Eliot / Leavis tradition? Is the mirror, which gives a false sense of unity but can also be an agent of oppression, to blame?

On the surface, Byatt would seem to epitomize the split female artist, textualized as Romantic, searching for the unitary self and yearning for a return to the very Romantic self-assertion that her questing hero Roland Michell of Possession claims he does not need (P 424). Yet, like Roland and Maud both, she is "theoretically knowing" (P 423). Is this yet another version of Eliot's "dissociated sensibility" which occasioned the seventeenth-century fall from a linguistic state of grace? Have we experienced a theoretical fall from the grace of the unitary, fully present individual to the wilderness of the post-lapsarian subject? While postmodernism recognizes the gap between the grammatical "I" and the existential "I", it also expresses, according to Patricia Waugh, a nostalgia for the unitary self, "a desire to close the gap and locate the 'self' in pure consciousness" (8). However, feminist women's writing which asks not "'Who am I?'" but "'What represents me?'" contradicts both the concept of the liberal individual and the postmodern subject of male discourse (Waugh 10). When Byatt inscribes traditional literary representations of women into her

texts, she asks the question that other feminist women writers are asking: "What represents me?"

When Byatt practises what Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern parody, also known as "ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality," she brings into view the entire process of representation, and shows how present representations are constructed from those of the past (Politics 93). I noted at the beginning of this introduction that Byatt has identified literature as her means of escape from "the limits of being female." Her writing makes clear that those limits, which are at least partly determined by conventional narrative representations of women, are being pushed back with help, however unwitting, from writers like herself.

The Female Seer

Byatt has acknowledged her fascination with the female as visionary poet; as an undergraduate, she was obsessed with the story of Cassandra, writing it repeatedly while at Cambridge (SS x). It is interesting to wonder how much Byatt's experience of D. H. Lawrence through Leavis had to do with her obsession. Leavis was largely responsible for a critical reappraisal of Lawrence and for establishing the legitimacy of his inclusion in the tradition, disputing T. S. Eliot's claims of Joyce's greatness (39). (From our vantage point, this line of debate takes on the pettiness of a schoolyard fight between two pugnacious boys.) Nonetheless, in The Great Tradition, Leavis quotes Lawrence's view of the mythical Cassandra as "one of the world's great figures," who represents

> that fundamental pathetic faculty for receiving the hidden waves that come from the depths of life, and for transferring them to the unreceptive world. It is something which happens below the consciousness, and below the range of the will--it is something which is unrecognizable and frustrated and destroyed.
>
> (Lawrence 298)

Lawrence is using the myth of Cassandra here to represent a sub-rational force that has been "raped and despoiled" by mankind (298). Since mankind has caused the force to degenerate from its once powerful origins, the writer has

difficulty recognizing or attending to it. Nonetheless, the implication is that the first rate writer will be able to heed and decipher for mankind its prophetic pronouncements. Since, for students of literature in the 1950's, Cambridge was Leavis, Lawrence's concept of the myth of Cassandra was perhaps, not surprisingly, indelibly etched into Byatt's mind. Byatt's interpretation of the myth, however, focused on Cassandra's predicament as a specifically female prophet rather than on the myth's metaphorical possibilities. In sum, the Cassandra of classical myth is the original representation of the female poet as mad seer. Apollo had given her the gift of prophecy in exchange for sexual favours. When Cassandra reneged on her part of the bargain, Apollo retaliated by levying a curse on her: her prophecies would be met with disbelief. When Byatt was writing and rewriting the myth of Cassandra while at Cambridge, she thought female visionaries to be "poor mad exploited sibyls and pythonesses," while male ones were "prophets and poets" (SS x).

The myth of Cassandra has been read as a representation of the dangers of solipsism. Cassandra possesses knowledge but is unable to communicate it. Apollo's curse turned Cassandra into an unwitting narcissist in the sense that the solipsistic self, while possessing knowledge beyond the self, is unable to communicate it (Eisner 143). Alternatively, if Cassandra is seen as the initiator of a female literary tradition, this tradition is cursed from the beginning by the male sun-god, Apollo.

Apollo, in addition to being the sun-god, was the god of poetry. The Muses, associated with Apollo, were possibly originally water spirits with the power of prophecy and inspiration, re-written into Greek mythology as the daughters of Zeus and the Titaness Mnemosyne; "allegorically Memory with divine help produces inspiration" (Morford 70). Consequently, divine inspiration resides in the power of the male Apollo. The prophetesses of Apollo were subject to frenzied, inspired, incoherent ranting that had to be transcribed by a priest or prophet (Morford 161). One interpretation might focus on the fact that while Cassandra, the most beautiful of the Trojan king Priam's daughters and a royal priestess, possessed a visionary power, her prophecies cannot be interpreted by a male reader; hence, she is not credible in the realm of male discourse. A feminist revisionary reading of the myth of Cassandra would focus on female madness as the negative term of a male sanity (cf. Felman; Kolodny). The question remains: is Cassandra a mad prophetess of doom, driven by "the anguish of prophetic vision" (Aeschylus 93), or is she a victim of patriarchal discourse unable to interpret her visionary experiences? In either case, the result is the same. Cassandra signifies a solipsism that cannot translate the imaginary experience into some form of artistic communication. She remains caught in the destructive interstice between fantasy and reality. Are her prophecies visions of truth or do they fulfil themselves, thereby creating truths?

Byatt's concern with the female artist and the visionary experience is evident in her first novel, The Shadow of the Sun, published in 1964. This novel is a Künstlerroman portraying the development of the seventeen-year-old Anna Severell, a discontented adolescent uncertain of who she is, self-consciously trying to work towards some unknown but anticipated "event" (SS 55) that will decide her future. The Künstlerroman, closely connected to the Bildungsroman or novel of education, was popular in Germany during the Romantic period when the concept of the artist as a genius was unassailed. The best-known example in English literature is undoubtedly James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. The surge of writing by women in the past three decades has produced a contemporary feminist version of the Künstlerroman. Gayle Greene has analyzed Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook, Margaret Drabble's The Waterfall, Margaret Laurence's The Diviners, and Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle in this vein (2). Of course, these novels are the products of a maturer art. Byatt's The Shadow of the Sun is her first novel with its concomitant limitations. While it does not follow the female character through to successful fulfilment of her art, there is, nonetheless, sufficient evidence to warrant the inclusion of Byatt's novel in this category.

Reflecting on her first novel years later, Byatt recalls her then Cambridge-inspired sophisticated disdain of the "'me-novel'" (SS viii). She retrospectively recognizes the dilemma of the first-time novelist looking for source material; she has as yet neither the experience nor the knowledge to

write anything but a "me-novel" (viii). Similarly, the fictional Anna Severell detests what she considers boring "adolescent novels" in which she sees herself as a character (93). Neither Anna nor Byatt needs to make excuses for this first novel which in its protagonist and in its writing shows the promise of an amazing mind at work.

The Shadow of the Sun offers intriguing insight not only into Byatt's individual artistic persona (which is significant in itself), but also into the female writer steeped in the British literary tradition of Leavis's Cambridge. When Leavis identified the great tradition of the English novel, he based his critical judgements on moral grounds as a reaction against what he saw as the sterility of the postwar critical institution (Greene 4). He set about to distinguish the very few really great novels which were significant because of their moral seriousness, their "awareness of the possibilities of life" (Leavis 10). The influence of Leavis on Byatt was manifold in determining her both as a writer and as a literary critic.

Anna sees herself at a crossroad in her journey towards some anticipated but unknown future. Like many adolescent female characters in fairy tales, Anna has been in a state of passive suspension during a hot and oppressive summer. Unlike the characters in fairy tales, Anna is consciously aware that her state of passivity is a prelude to some momentous event. But her place in the world will be greatly determined by the road she takes. Anna sees three ways to proceed. The first path would lead her into the role of helpmate

to the great male genius, following the path of her mother, Caroline, who organizes every detail of the Severell life to ensure the least disturbance to Henry's artistic work. While Caroline's efforts produce a domestic life of gracious living, at least superficially, Margaret Canning's complete reliance on the male eye of her husband, Oliver, and the male eye of women's fashion magazines for her sense of self is destructive (22,176-82). This traditional path of love, marriage, family, and home, as the wife of the male genius, is a way for the powerless female to gain access to power indirectly, through love (Spacks 206). For a young woman like Anna, who aspires to direct power in the world, the traditional path is a trap. It can also be a convenient way out of the necessity of coming to terms with her ambition, since as a woman she can always "just get married" (157).

The two paths to power in the world are presented in terms of the adult male characters in the novel: Anna's father, the successful writer Henry Severell, and his reader and critic, Oliver Canning. They symbolize Anna's possible futures as artist or literary critic. Oliver, as a symbol of Leavis, Cambridge, literary criticism, teaching, moral responsibility, and engagement with society, tries to convince Anna that this is the only right path for her to follow. However, Anna yearns to follow her father's "third way" (92) which she suspects, but is not entirely certain, is the right path for her. Anna's three paths highlight the divided self at this crossroads: the female split between love

and art; the artist split between a need for isolation and a need for society, complicated by a moral obligation to work towards a better society.

What Anna most wants is to follow her father's footsteps, literally. Anna anxiously aspires to the same kind of transforming experience that her father periodically undergoes when he fiercely charges off across fields "like an ancient bull" (57), disappearing for days, to return, Anna suspects, with "strange knowledge adhering to him, the shreds of another brighter world" (89). One of these Wordsworthian "attacks of vision" (SS 58) which are a "direct source of power" for him (59) is precipitated when Henry abandons work on his latest novel to resume work on a critical study of the English Romantics, in particular, the visionaries Blake and Coleridge. While Henry whips himself up into a kind of frenzy before he writes, his visionary power is prophetic, not incoherent Cassandra-like ranting. Henry's later novels are testament to that power. He admires but rejects for himself the Bloomsbury sensibility of novelists such as Woolf and Forster, finding it aesthetically pleasing but too far removed from the savagery of life (60). Henry's dismissal can be read as a fictional restatement of Byatt's own rejection of the female literary model of Virginia Woolf's novels (x).

Henry Severell is a giant, both physically and literarily. Like the sun which "draw[s] everything into its own Phaethon career across the heavens," (84), and like his study which occupies the centre of the Severell house, Henry is the centre of the Severell family around which their lives revolve. To Anna,

he seems, hyperbolically, "a cross between God, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Blake's Job, respectable, odd, and powerful all at once" (9). He is the patriarch.

Anna has a complex and contesting relationship with her father, learning at an early age to protect him from the vulture-like scrutinies of Oscar Canning, Henry's Leavisite critical reader (30, 88-9), wanting to understand and emulate his power and vision (52), yet afraid to read his novels more than superficially for fear of losing whatever artistic ability she herself possesses (55). Under the set of the novel's terms which posit "the paradox of Leavis preaching Lawrence when if the two had ever met they would have hated each other" (SS xi), Henry can be read in part as a fictional reincarnation of D. H. Lawrence whom Byatt has said that she "cannot escape and cannot love" (SS xii). But Henry Severell, whose literary greatness has a Lawrentian prophet-like (86) stature, is better understood as a conflation of the male literary giants that precede and father Anna. By extension, Byatt has been similarly fathered artistically in the sense that Zeus fathered and gave birth to Athena, classical goddess of wisdom, from his head.

Nevertheless, being the daughter of Henry Severell, while it has inspired and influenced Anna to desire to write novels, is also a "crushing" experience when it comes to her own writing attempts, for "[h]e presented a standard that it was already impossible for her to attain" (16). Anna fears the limitations of her sporadic literary ventures. Her initial efforts are "a series of flat mnemonics--phrases, 'light like knives', 'we are all alone' and half a poem"

(15-6). Like a baby's first steps, her written words are halting and reliant on others, yet at the same time, they are pleasurable and monumentally significant to her (16).

Anna's fears of her own literary limitations are fed by Oliver Canning, whose critical perusal of her juvenilia and sessions of tutoring Anna, while convincing him of her intelligence, also leave him with the conviction that she has not inherited her father's talent; she "would always be second rate" (55). Oliver is a type of Leavis figure in the novel. Byatt has talked about Leavis's influence on a prospective writer:

> He could show you the toughness of a sentence, the strength and the grace of it, the way another one failed and betrayed itself, but you paid a terrible price for this useful technical knowledge. It went without saying in his world . . . that anything you wrote yourself would fall so woefully short of the highest standards that it was better not to try. What writing was for was to be taught, in order to make the world better, more just, more discriminating. (SS x)

Byatt's sister Margaret Drabble, who attended Cambridge during the same period as Byatt and who admired Leavis and his concept of the great tradition, has also recognized how potentially destructive were his ideas of exclusivity on a beginning writer (Greene 4).

Oliver's path of social commitment will force Anna to come to terms with his version of reality, "a combination of one's own limitations and, in some form or other, the eternal kitchen sink" (135). Whereas Henry's forays into a transcendent realm represent the world that Anna desires, Oliver's route is a necessary detour into the social world both as a way of breaking away

from Henry's influence and as a way of gaining the experience of a world outside the protection of her home. Significantly, although Henry has been experiencing his visionary attacks since he was a boy, he does not write his most successful novels until after he has returned from service in the war. Successful writing, therefore, is not simply a question of imaginative power, but is a way of imaginatively ordering life events. The role of the imagination is an important recurring theme throughout Byatt's novels; it can be a destructive as well as a creative force. Anna, as a questing heroine, must leave her home to search for her identity. But she makes for a curious questing heroine. She "duly" sets off for Cambridge the following year (143). However, her time at Cambridge, in one sense, extends her period of passively waiting for her event.

Anna's seasoning at Cambridge gives her the opportunity to experience a world outside the oppressive influence of her father and an opportunity to immerse herself in reading. However, she dislikes the academic treatment of literature: "it's like a religion to them. They go to D. H. Lawrence like the Ten Commandments, to show them how to live" (157). She is asked at a party whether she is a "Lawrentian woman" (157), and notes that the posing of the question automatically gives the lie to the authenticity of the questioner's intent. The obsession with labelling is what Anna, her father (6-7), and, by extension, Byatt, see as a kind of deadening collector aspect of Leavis's (or perhaps any) literary criticism that attempts to turn literary figures into

assurances (84, 157). In keeping with her ambivalent attitude toward writing, the relationship to literary criticism is not uncomplicated. Oliver signifies the enterprise that uses literature in a utilitarian fashion, rather than enjoying it for its intrinsic value. Byatt here introduces the theme of the literary critic who attempts to possess the author s/he is studying which she will later develop so successfully in Possession. Oliver's attempts to label Henry's work are a negative, hateful way for him to "take possession" of Henry, and his sexual relationship with Anna is partially viewed as an extension of his obsession to possess Henry (217-18).

Despite Henry's assurances that she is like him, and despite his encouragement to journey even farther afield to Mexico, "into the sun" (200-02), Anna's inability to replicate his visionary experiences discourages her from taking the drastic step. She catches the edge of a vision, but soon realizes that

> . . . she had not been stirred out of herself, she had been moved only as far as a secondhand reflection, in a literary manner . . . . there would be no event, no transforming knowledge . . . . (238-39)

The defeatist Anna remains convinced that any writing that is not like Henry's is second-rate, and uses an unplanned pregnancy as an excuse to avoid confronting her artistic limitations, seeing her capitulation to a domestic life shared with Oliver as a "feared and expected end" (298). Anna's interim ending can be read not only as an avoidance of facing her possibilities and limitations as a writer, but also as a metaphorical marriage to literary criticism rather than to art.

Oliver's seduction of Anna (or Anna's seduction of Oliver) is both a metaphor for a move away from an imaginative, creative relationship with literature to an intellectually analytical one as well as a literal encounter of a young woman with her sexuality. Her first romantic encounter with a young neighbour named Michael whom she sees as "a gold St. George" (78) has left Anna with "a first tentative sense of power" (21). Anna makes an unconventional romantic heroine. At Cambridge, she plays at being a Lawrentian woman (159), greeting Peter Hughes-Winterton's exhortations of love with unsympathetic indifference (149). Byatt is, I think, attempting to present the inversion of the young woman at university searching for, not intellectual fulfilment, but for, as Caroline hopes for Anna, the suitable husband. Aside from engendering an initial surprise at Oliver's sexual energy and a satisfaction of her curiosity about sex, Anna's first sexual experience generates little response (164). She regrets more the loss of her curiosity than any loss of virginity, and is slightly disappointed that no transformation or revelation is to follow this supposedly momentous event (164). Again, Byatt is overturning the conventional young fictional heroine whose "deflowering" occasions momentous life changes, traditionally marriage, or at least, love. For Anna, it deserves not much more than a "well, that's that" (164). I am not sure whether Byatt's attitude toward female sexual desire is a deliberate subversion of the Lawrentian "blood consciousness" in his conception of the relationships between men and women. She posits the concept of curiosity as preceding

sexuality; Marcus Potter in Still Life wants to replace the concept of desire with "[p]lain curiosity" (SL 259). This aspect of Byatt's thought as it relates to the female artist will be developed in greater detail in the discussion of The Virgin in the Garden.

As the reader of the novel can see but Anna cannot, since the novel is written from the omniscient view of third person narration, Anna does at times undergo the same kind of visionary experiences as her father. During the storm which, in fitting literary fashion, climaxes both the hot, oppressive summer of Anna's discontent and the simmering sexual suggestiveness of Oliver's interest, Anna, like an early prototype of Possession's Melusine, seeks her "sunken secret world" of a seemingly enchanted bathroom wherein the play of light on glass stimulates a visionary state (133-34). The resulting feeling of balance and completion temporarily convinces her of her prophetic artistic power (134). However, Oliver, signifying the elements of sexuality and literary criticism which can, and in Anna's case, do, divert the female artist from her goal, interrupts her reverie.

As an example of the traditional Künstlerroman, the novel is incomplete since Anna turns away from writing. Of course, the very existence of the novel states that Byatt did achieve her goal, and she will revisit the theme of the young female artist in The Virgin in the Garden, Still Life, and Possession. What Byatt has established in her first novel is her artistic credo. She clearly establishes her desired position in a literary lineage of the Romantic seer, the

novelist as prophet. What she has not done is produce the kind of novel she, via her protagonist, says she wants to write. Like Anna Wulf, Doris Lessing's fictional writer, who fears that she is incapable of producing the only kind of novel she considers worthwhile (GN 76), Anna Severell still questions whether she can gain access to a male source of power. In other words, how can the curse of Cassandra be removed?

Byatt's next novel, The Game, published in 1967, deals with the truth-telling and the prophetic aspects of literature within the context of a fascinating and ultimately fatal game between two sisters, Cassandra Corbett and Julia (Corbett) Eskelund. Byatt has said that she wrote the novel partly out of her fear of the "woman's novel" as an "immoral devouring force" (SS xii), leaving no doubt of her desire to separate herself from its stigma.

Julia is a successful writer of the sort of woman's novel that Byatt detests. Just how strongly Byatt feels about this kind of novel is more than apparent in The Game where the Coleridgean concept of the serpentine imagination is presented in its destructive potential. While the serpent symbolized wisdom for the ancients (6), and operates as a complex symbol in the novel, the physical snakes that the biologist and childhood focus for Cassandra's romantic fantasies, Simon Moffitt, studies and considers beautiful are creatures that swallow frogs whole (76-7). In a similar way, the "irreducible social world" exists to provide a source of food for Julia's fiction (40). Julia is an emotionally self-indulgent woman, preoccupied with "little daily agonies"

and "minor moral indecisions" (37, 8), who has made a life out of what she calls "behav[ing] badly" (122) to create small personal crises that she can then work up into novels. She "steals" private family events for fodder for her writing (67), and collects the superficial details of people's expressions and habits (107-08, 127-28) in the same way that Simon collects his reptilian specimens and Cassandra collects catalogued information (105). Julia claims only to be an accurate recorder, with no pretensions to literary (or at least sub-literary) status (116). However, a review of her later novels (which she has committed to memory) regretting the disintegration of "'an element of romantic fantasy'" that had, however clumsily, added a liveliness to her earlier novels of domestic entrapment, disturbs her (47). It would seem that the element of fantasy had stemmed from the game that she and Cassandra had played during their childhood and early teens. Julia's first published story was a reworking of an episode from their game, what might loosely be called common property and not properly a theft. Nevertheless, in the eyes of Cassandra, Julia's action constituted a violation of the privacy that was the essence of the game (70-1). Importantly, Julia's story is quite good (71). Neither does Julia limit her appropriation to the shared imaginative material, but, partly excited by the taboo, sets out to take possession of Simon Moffitt for herself. Her determination to possess what she associates with Cassandra is a manifestation of her obsession to possess Cassandra herself in a futile attempt to overcome her feelings of inadequacy, her fears of being "nothing but a thought in

Cassandra's mind" (86). Julia's final move in the game with Cassandra, in which she writes A Sense of Glory, a novel fictionalizing Cassandra's fantasy about Simon and satirizing her Oxford colleagues, is intended to be, for Julia, however destructive its consequences to others, a cathartic exorcism of the demon of Cassandra (122-23).

Julia as a writer is the embodied serpent devouring whole the metaphorical frog of life to produce, in the words of Ivan, a television producer and Julia's erstwhile lover, a "finished product [which] is indistinguishable from the process. Undigested gobbets of bleeding, disgusting domestic suffering" (164-65). While she has the technical style of a good writer, she lacks the capacity to transform the gobbets of fact into an imaginative work that transcends the quotidian. Can this graphic description of Julia's latest novel be considered an apt definition of what Byatt calls the "woman's novel"? I think it can. Byatt has said elsewhere that she has known people who have been "wrecked or mutilated" by fictions (PM 15). The seriousness of Byatt's view of the novelist's moral obligation to avoid damaging others can be traced to the character of Cassandra.

Cassandra is a medieval scholar whose journal, once intended as raw material for some future artistic work, now supposedly serves as protection against solipsism (G 24). A thirty-eight year old Oxford don, she is a composite of both the mythical Cassandra and Tennyson's Lady of Shalott. Despite her resigned acceptance that the imaginative work will not be written

(218), Cassandra nonetheless signifies the reclusive, narcissistic, female artist, whose goal is to remain "virginally untouched by experience" while allowing her imaginative life free rein (Creighton 20). Cassandra is the female scholar who followed the belief of the Oxford scholar and critic Helen Gardner that a woman had to live like a dedicated nun to achieve any degree of scholarship (SS ix).

Cassandra had come to Oxford "hungry for the absolutely worked drama of Lancelot and Guenevere, Tristan and Iseult" (G 18). Like her creator, Cassandra is thoroughly steeped in the literature of Malory and Tennyson as well as that of Morris and Walter Scott; unlike her creator, she is trapped in those texts in the same way that she imprisons herself in her Oxford tower room. While Julia sees Cassandra from outside as an anachronistic oddity with her medieval dress and chains, Cassandra avoids looking at herself from outside (17). Like the Lady of Shalott, who is "multiply distanced from the world," mediated by her work, her mirror, and the window in the island castle tower (Jordan 57), Cassandra has walled herself up in her room as protection from worldly experience, substituting an imaginative world carried over from the Brontë-like game she had shared with Julia in childhood. Whereas Charlotte Brontë was conscious of using her imaginary world of Angria as a substitute for engagement with life, writing a "Farewell to Angria" at the age of twenty-three (Alexander 410), Cassandra continues to imagine a "carefully laid-out glass-house" (G 211) of her own making which recalls the inverted world of

Alice's Looking-glass House in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass (180). Like the Lady of Shalott, Cassandra "has woven a web of reflected images that has become her world" (Campbell 155).

Byatt does offer Cassandra a choice in the novel. While acknowledging that we are not completely free, she does propose that we are not completely determined subjects, but have a certain latitude of freedom within which to manoeuvre. Unlike her mythical analogues, Cassandra Corbett can choose to step outside her role. Cassandra is able to put aside her desire for the "romantic moment of recognition" with Simon and to "take what was offered" (G 204). "Painfully, deliberately, still terrified, Cassandra, for the first time in her life, rose to an occasion" (G 204). However, her temporary sojourn in a world devoid of the extreme expectations created in fantasy is destroyed by Julia's satiric novel A Sense of Glory which Cassandra views as a text that will determine and obstruct any potential relationship with Simon (225). She has finally managed to escape the determined prison of a textualized self only to become entrapped in yet another text. While Simon maintains that reality cannot be destroyed by a fiction, Cassandra holds an opposite view which she shares with him:

> 'It seems sufficiently clear--to me--that you can both destroy and create reality with fiction. Fictions--fictions are lies, yes, but we don't ever know the truth. We see the truth through the fictions--our own, other people's. . . . We feed off it. Our fictions feed on us.' (225)

Cassandra, like Byatt, maintains that there is some truth underlying the fictions that create our reality. Nevertheless, she surrenders to Julia's fiction rather than face the humiliation and messy contingency of reality. Alternatively, Cassandra's suicide can be read as a final and victorious move in the game she has been playing with Julia. As Cassandra has been living her life within the confines of texts and a set of absolute rules, she has in turn served as a text for Julia, determining Julia's responses to life. Julia in narcissistic fashion has used Cassandra as a mirror to reflect herself; "[i]t was Cassandra's reactions that proved her existence" (G 235). But Cassandra's final journal entry which serves as evidence at the inquest into her suicide confirms that, like the Lady of Shalott, she "want[s] no more reflections" (230). The journal entry itself recalls the letter written by Tennyson's and Malory's Elaine before her death with instructions to place the letter in her hand before her corpse is set off on its funeral journey to Camelot. The funeral barge signifies Elaine's desire "to be seen and known" (Jordan 164). Even here, however, neither Elaine nor Cassandra can be seen nor known without the mediation of language. Since they both write the endings to their texts, they have, in effect, created self-fulfilling prophecies.

Cassandra as signifier has disappeared from the text, while the curse of the Lady of Shalott threatens to fall upon Julia (G 235). Julia, who has spent her life trying imaginatively to possess Cassandra, must now make "an effort of will not to imagine what it had felt like to be Cassandra" (234). Julia is

determined to "work in freedom" (237), and feels that she has escaped her obsession with her sister. However, "Cassandra's private papers [that] bumped and slid" (238) in the trunk of the car leaving Oxford, looming ominously prophetic at the conclusion of the novel, portend a textual tyranny yet to come.

In a fascinating novel, Byatt has effectively distanced her own art from the "woman's novel" of domestic wretchedness. She has shown the necessity of a Coleridgean esemplastic process to transform the facts of life into an imaginative work, while at the same time revealing the dangers of an excess of fantasy. The two sisters are, in part, metaphors of the poles between which the female artist must operate. Cassandra represents the Romantic side of idealism, transcendence, possibilities, passion, and imagination; Julia symbolizes the physical and social world, materiality, incarnation, limitations, and sensation. Julia's authorial position, writing from the perspective of an earth-bound imagination, is deficient. However, Cassandra's extreme reliance on fantasy and her desire for a Platonic transcendence lead to solipsism and madness. Nonetheless, it is clear which pole of the imaginative, not to mention the moral, continuum Byatt privileges.

While it might be tempting to read The Game biographically, in many important ways the two fictional sisters represent aspects of Byatt's self as writer. As author of the novel, posing her female characters as writer and scholar, Byatt gets to work both sides of the street. Her conscious employment of characters who are writers allows her to explore both aspects: the

metaphysical visionary experience and the social world of a woman who writes novels her creator detests. Not only does Cassandra serve as a mirror for Julia, but the opposite is also true. The allusions to Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass are more than incidental to the novel. As Carroll's narrative accurately reproduces (with a few exceptions) the moves in a game of chess, recalling the medieval practice of chess games using human pieces (Carroll 171), so does the narrative of Byatt's novel alternate moves between the two sisters in their game of human dimensions and consequences. In many ways, Julia and Cassandra are "'enantiomorphs', mirror-image forms of each other" (Carroll 231). In the inverted looking glass world of "living backwards," "one's memory works both ways" (247). Events can be remembered before they happen in the same way that Julia can write about a fictional Simon's visit to Cassandra before it actually happens (G 208). Literature can be prophetic; therefore, in the context of Byatt's novel, it is morally obligated to be extremely careful about what it prophesies.

If Cassandra is the fantasy to Julia's fact, then it is worthwhile to note that the character of Julia in the novel is herself a character out of the kind of woman's novel that she writes, while Cassandra is an intertextual composite of Byatt's childhood "greedy reading" (PM xiii). By rewriting the narrative of the Lady of Shalott and the myth of Cassandra, Byatt has highlighted the question of whether, or rather the extent to which, texts determine our lives. Cassandra Corbett's journal reveals that she sees herself as the mythical Cassandra:

> Not Cassandra Austen, sisterly supporter of the expressive Jane. Cassandra who was Apollo's priestess, and--since she refused intercourse with the Lord of the Muses, and was thus no artist--incapable of communication. . . . Cassandra, like myself, like myself, a specialist in useless knowledge. (141)

Because she has written herself into the part of the mythical Cassandra, she perceives herself as lacking the power to turn her raw material into art. She has subscribed to, among other delusions, the myth that female artistic power must derive from a male source for the same reason that she joined the church, "looking for final Authority" (G 18), some transcendental signified. Cassandra's adherence to the Romantic view of the poet as seer, able to penetrate a transcendent realm, may, in fact, be her downfall. By adhering to narratives from the past, she becomes the victim of an epistemology that is deficient in an existential world.

The reader must ask how Byatt's obsession with the myth of Cassandra and her adherence to a male-centred view of the artist coming out of the Romantic tradition and the influence of F. R. Leavis affects her own art. Her models of the female artist seem to be split between fantasy and fact. There is yet no satisfactory artist who can write the kind of novel modelled in The Shadow of the Sun. Is Byatt suffering from what Patricia Meyer Spacks has hypothesized as a female "dissociated sensibility," split between intellect and emotion? Or is there a problem with the model of artist as prophet? Cassandra as a mythical prophet and as a solipsistic artist in The Game has escaped from the curse of Apollo only through her own self-prophesied death. While

Cassandra Corbett cannot survive without the world of factual reality represented by Julia, neither can Julia, who remains in the world at the end of the novel, be a first-rate writer without the element of fantasy provided by Cassandra. For the female writer, the question would appear to be one of integrating the two aspects of the imagination without diminishing either one. If Cassandra and Julia are mirror forms of each other, then, in the terms that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use in a slightly different context, they must reach through the looking-glass to help each other out of the textual trap (16).

Byatt's next two novels, The Virgin in the Garden, published in 1978, and Still Life published in 1985, companion novels in a planned tetralogy, contain some elements of her first two novels, but are also significantly different. Byatt revisits the genre of the Künstlerroman in the characters of two sisters, Stephanie and Frederica Potter, extending her earlier character of Anna Severell in The Shadow of the Sun to treat, among other issues, the female artist caught between possible and conflicting roles as writer and as wife and mother.

Virgin / Mother

In The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life, Byatt attempts to create a new female mythology of birth around the central female characters of the Potter sisters, Frederica and Stephanie. Byatt has made her intention explicit in an interview:

> In The Virgin in the Garden I wanted to substitute a female mythology for a male one. The male mythology is the Dying God and Resurrection. The female one is birth and Renaissance, and that is what the Elizabethans recognized . . . . I'm interested in Renaissance because things go on being born.
>
> (Dusinberre 193)

The very concept of Renaissance or rebirth implies a degenerative view of history, a decline from a golden past. Byatt notes that in Shakespeare's last plays, a daughter is the force of renewal (Dusinberre 193). In Byatt's companion novels, two sisters herald a reinvigoration of, on one hand, culture and language, and, on the other, the natural world. Each sister is connected with a golden age: one, the Ovidian golden age of timeless perfection in which language and eloquence flourished; the other, a golden age of stasis in nature, "a world without desire and division" (SL 192).

In The Virgin in the Garden, Byatt reconciles the thematic aspect of a golden age to the realism of the novel by situating the action in a saturnalian

setting (Kenyon 72). The social standards of a realist present are an inversion of the standards of a golden past (Frye Anatomy 171). Within this setting, Byatt parodies mythological and literary representations of women in ironic repetitions both to appropriate some of the humane values of the past for the benefit of the present (Holmes) and also to question past representations of women and create new possibilities for her female characters (Kenyon 65).

The two Potter sisters are parodies of different aspects of the Kore which Carl Kerenyi identifies as the primordial maiden figure of Greek mythology. Frederica is an ironic descendant of the virginal Artemis; Stephanie is a parody of the Persephone figure. In rewriting the story of the maiden, Byatt both conserves and changes these early narratives. When she presents contesting versions of them, she highlights the split inherent in these classical representations of women.

Byatt revisits the Bildungsroman genre of her first novel The Shadow of the Sun in which the young writer Anna Severell suffers an anxiety of influence in trying to measure up to her literary forefathers. Frederica, the younger of the Potter sisters, shares similarities with her predecessor Anna. Like Anna, Frederica is a somewhat grimy, crumpled, seventeen-year-old girl with ink-stained fingers and dirty socks (VG 30) who is finishing her final year at Blesford Girls' Grammar before proceeding to Cambridge. However, unlike Anna, Frederica's anxiety is less about influence than it is about trying to be both a woman and an active participant in the world of 1950's British art and

culture at a time when the two roles were considered, for the most part, mutually exclusive. Frederica fears possible future confinement in a world her older sister Stephanie has embraced: the domestic world of marriage and family.

As examples of the Bildungsroman or Künstlerroman, both The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life are more complex than the earlier The Shadow of the Sun. These later novels explore in greater depth a variety of ideas related to art, culture, society, language, representation, perception, and writing as well as concerns related specifically to women. I will try to give as full a treatment of Byatt's explorations as the rubric of my thesis will allow. Nonetheless, I will be concentrating on the characters of Frederica and Stephanie as parodic repetitions of mythological representations of women.

Like The Game, these two novels focus on the diverging lives of two sisters. Byatt's primary and unitary Anna Severell of her first novel has been split in two. The Potter sisters share affinities with D. H. Lawrence's fictional pair of sisters Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen of The Rainbow and, more particularly, Women in Love. Frederica's continuous battle against writing herself into Lawrence's narrative is made explicit in Byatt's novels. Analogously, Doris Lessing's female protagonists in The Golden Notebook, Anna Wulf and Molly Jacobs, have also been compared to Lawrence's Brangwen sisters (Spilka). As Lessing's characters have been read as aspects of a fragmented female writer (Sprague), so too can the reader interpret the Potter

sisters as two distinct possibilities of female experience. That experience would seem to necessitate a split between the public and the private, and Patricia Meyer Spacks has shown that this split particularly affects the female artist (206ff). Significantly, Byatt has claimed in an interview that Stephanie and Frederica are in many ways different aspects of herself, as also are the male characters Marcus Potter and Daniel Orton (Dusinberre 190).

The two sisters are described in diametrically opposed terms. Frederica is redheaded; she is thin and sharp with stick-like knobby limbs (VG 47). She is frequently enraged or glaring (VG 35,68), and is willful and aggressive (VG 74), alarming her mother because she is "always so embattled" (VG 35). Stephanie, on the other hand, is "a mild, soft, blonde girl with large breasts, elegant legs, and a rather too tightly rolled pageboy hairstyle" (VG 29); she is passive and complacent. Whereas Lawrence's Brangwen sisters are both "'sisters of Artemis rather than of Hebe,' virgin huntresses rather than cupbearers" (Spilka 69), Frederica and Stephanie are antithetical aspects of the Kore or maiden figure.

Carl Kerenyi has discussed the Kore as a composite of the mythological Greek goddesses Athena, Artemis, and Persephone. These classical female figures constitute three variations on the theme of the maiden. Athena, who shared power with her father Zeus, represents an androgynous intellectual power, having lost any connection with a mother and with a female sexuality (Kerenyi 107). In contrast, Artemis is both maiden and virgin, running the ever

present risk of succumbing to a man; she rules in a "purely naturalistic feminine world" (107). Persephone, traditionally considered the Kore figure by most mythographers, assumes two forms: in life, the daughter with a mother, and, in death, the young girl with a husband (107). As a maiden, Persephone is a type of Artemis akin to those companions of Artemis who betrayed their maidenhood and were subsequently punished by death (107). However, Persephone has no guilt associated with her loss of maidenhood because, according to Kerenyi, perpetual maidenhood is not in her nature (107). In the Homeric Hymn version of the rape of Persephone, the presence of both Athena and Artemis at the scene of the abduction supports Kerenyi's hypothesis (108). When Kerenyi collapses the distinctions between these three goddesses, the borders between maidenhood and motherhood are blurred and contradictions dissolve (104).

For the purposes of my thesis, Kerenyi's connection between Artemis and Persephone supports the argument for Frederica and Stephanie as contemporary fictional variations on a similar theme. Notwithstanding this connection, Byatt's parodic repetition of the mythological female figures highlights the ways in which traditional narratives have represented women as split beings. The extent to which these and other narratives mirror or determine women's experience remains at issue.

Frederica enacts her role as a contemporary and ironic repetition of Artemis by way of the virginal mythological figure of Astraea explicit in The

Virgin in the Garden. These two figures are related not only through their shared virginal status but also through a shared connection with the moon. For readers like myself who are not as familiar with classical myths as Byatt expects her readers to be, a brief synopsis of the history of the Astraea myth will help establish some connections with Byatt's contemporary characters. Astraea or Virgo is the goddess of justice who, according to Ovid, abandoned the "blood-drenched earth" of the modern corrupt iron age which resulted from the degeneration of the world from its original golden age (6). Because she is associated with the constellation Virgo and the month of August, Astraea is both virginal and fruitful. According to Frances Yates, "[t]he just virgin is thus a complex character, fertile and barren at the same time; orderly and righteous, yet tinged with oriental moon-ecstasies" (33).

In his Fourth Eclogue, Virgil posited the return of the virgin as marking the return of a new golden age, a renaissance: "'Iam redit et virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna'" (Yates 33). This line, translated loosely, announces the return of the virgin and the reign of Saturn; the Golden Age has returned. Virgil's statement was interpreted by the Christian church as a messianic prophecy of Christ's birth; the "virgin" became the Virgin Mary heralding the golden age of Christ (Yates 34). The concepts of virginity and fruition are no longer antithetical in a new golden age of timelessness; flowers and fruits can coexist in a world devoid of seasons (Yates 67). When the secular cult of Elizabeth I replaced the sacred cult of the Virgin Mary in Renaissance England, the

cultural iconography associated with the Virgin Mary and Astraea became identified with Elizabeth. Elizabeth I inherited all the virtues attributed to Astraea: piety, justice, mercy, strength (as in the Middle English vertu), plus faith, hope, charity, fortitude, temperance, and prudence (65).

When Edmund Spenser used the concept of the just virgin to represent Elizabeth I in The Faerie Queene, he split the virtues into public and private realms (69). Spenser makes this explicit in the Letter to Raleigh that precedes the text proper of The Faerie Queene. Gloriana is Elizabeth in her public character of just government; Belphoebe is Elizabeth in her private virtue of chastity. Elizabeth I as we know her is an iconographic construct, the subject of representations for political and religious purposes (cf. Montrose), but these representations are consciously split into the public, woman of power, and private, woman of chaste virtue.

The Elizabeth I that we know is primarily an iconographic construct rather than a historical entity. Byatt is fully conscious of the role of icons as signs. In the prologue to The Virgin in the Garden, Alexander Wedderburn, whose verse play Astraea is intended to signal a second Elizabethan renaissance of language and culture, is aware of the semiotics of iconography and the attendant problems of representation (13). A variety of portraits of Elizabeth I in the National Portrait Gallery offers "alternative Gloriana[s]" (VG 10). While Alexander correctly identifies the problem of portraying the real person behind the portraits (VG 13), he seems unaware that the real historical

person he is positing is a product of rather than producer of those very representations. Here, as elsewhere for women, representation precedes existence.

Byatt's fictional Frederica Potter is presented as a more semiotically fitting descendant of the Virgin Queen than the historical Queen Elizabeth II who is supposed to signal a second Renaissance in England. The Frederica of 1968 resembles a modern Britomart (VG 12); the seventeen-year-old Frederica of 1953 physically resembles the young Elizabeth I that she will play in Alexander's verse play (VG 98). Frederica identifies with Elizabeth's determination to prevail, her "pagan reliance on her own eternal identity" (103). Dry and stone-like, she insists, as does Elizabeth in her Tower speech, that she will not bleed (VG 101,317).

In one sense, Elizabeth's statement is an insistent affirmation of life over death, a willful assertion of the self. On another level, the metaphor of bleeding refers to female physical virginity; a refusal to bleed can be interpreted as a refusal to allow the hymen to be torn. Frederica's physical virginity is at issue in The Virgin in the Garden where she inverts the efforts of the chaste Artemis to remain intact, and attempts to rid herself of the stigma of ignorance. While virginity involves power, it also entails its own limitation (Kenyon 72). For Frederica, who associates power with the iconographic virginity of Elizabeth I, her physical virginity becomes an object of her own curiosity.

The treatment of virginity as merely a barrier to knowledge marks Byatt's treatment as unusual (Kenyon 72). Frederica willfully undertakes to dispossess herself of her virginity and its concomitant ignorance when she learns that Stephanie, like an unfaithful companion of Artemis, has defected from their shared imaginary love for Alexander Wedderburn (189-90). She reacts with loathing, anger, jealousy and curiosity to Stephanie's confession of a sexual relationship with and impending marriage to Daniel Orton, and fears that "defeat was horribly possible" (VG 189). In the terms of a childhood game that she and Stephanie had played, Stephanie's move has put her on a different playing field. Curiosity and discontent lead Frederica to Ed, the traveller in dolls, who dispels at least part of her ignorance (VG 205).

Frederica neither expects nor experiences the kind of Lawrentian "revelation" that characterizes Stephanie's relationship with Daniel (VG 188) despite having read Lady Chatterley's Lover, The Rainbow, and Women in Love (205). However, when Frederica coincidentally stumbles upon a furtive back-seat tryst between Alexander and Jenny Parry, she recognizes the power that accompanies knowledge, "as long as one did not muck it up by confusing one piece of knowledge with another and trying to ingest it and turn it all into blood and feelings" (VG 209). For Frederica, sex is biology and knowledge is power; the two should remain separate.

Frederica prefers her new-found concept of "laminated knowledge" in which things are kept separate to an "organic and sexual linking by analogy";

the notion becomes Frederica's aesthetic as well as her ethic (VG 209-10). The metaphor of lamination, which suggests its own analogy with geological rock formation rather than organic growth, implies an important distinction between the dry, stony Frederica and the earthy, organic Stephanie. Frederica thinks the most valuable lesson she has learned from the summer of her discontent is that she can keep things and people separate in her mind (VG 426). Her determination to keep knowledge separate from emotions by maintaining a separation between thinking and feeling recalls the split between woman's intellectual and emotional selves that Patricia Meyer Spacks has postulated as a "dissociated sensibility" (25). When Frederica feels "emotions seeping between the laminations of her attention," she knows she is in danger (VG 426).

Danger also resides in emotional submission to a man. Frederica's refusal to bleed can also be read metaphorically as her fear of succumbing to a man in an emotional rather than a physical sense. She is determined to separate biology from Lawrence's "mystic palpable real otherness" (VG 34). Her ultimate defloration is at the hands of the scientific Edmund Wilkie, who had played Raleigh to Frederica's young Elizabeth in Astraea. The hyperbolic deluge of hymenal blood prompted by this experiment (VG 419-22) might be read as an ironic rebuttal of Lawrence's concept of blood consciousness and his proselytizing of a religion of sex. In another context, the image ironically recalls the "long bloudy river" of love depicted in the tapestry of Cupid in Spenser's house of Busirane (Frye "Imagery" 83). It also parodies the

iconographic image of Elizabeth I as a virgin of plenty with a cornucopia spilling to earth from between her legs (VG 139). This episode proves Frederica's physical vulnerability and implies a potential emotional one: she does bleed, and profusely.

The deluge of blood undermines the validity of Frederica's smug deduction which follows her sexual initiation with Wilkie:

> You could sleep all night, with a strange man, and see the back only of his head, and be more self-contained than anywhere else. It was a useful thing to know. It removed the awful either/or from the condition of women as she had seen it. Either love, passion, sex and those things, or the life of the mind, ambition, solitude, the others. There was a third way: you could be alone and not alone in a bed, if you made no fuss.
>
> (VG 421)

Like Anna Severell who sought a third way in which to forge a life different from the lives of the women she saw, Frederica tries to bridge the either/or dichotomy of female sexual experience.

On a physically sexual level, the post-diluvian Frederica becomes a murderous Artemis, seeing Cambridge as "a garden full of young men" (SL 119) like Proust's garden of girls (SL 286). She cruelly and selfishly hunts them to collect and classify in a game of ornithology (SL 213), her own female version of a conventionally male game. The antediluvian Frederica horrifies Alexander Wedderburn when she plays an unsuitably unprotesting virgin to Matthew Crowe's impromptu Comus during the summer of Astraea (VG 216-21), but she can nonetheless convincingly act the part of a virginal young

Elizabeth I in Alexander's play. In contrast, she evokes derisive laughter from her Cambridge male bevy when she plays the virgin in a Cambridge production of Comus a few years later (SL 272-76). When one of the men remarks that she would better suit the role of Circe, Frederica haphazardly stumbles upon a definition of chastity that reveals some truth. She falters a response that defines chastity as "personal integrity" (SL 275).

Byatt seems to support a Spenserian or Miltonic concept of chastity as a directed sexual energy over the "waste fertility" of Milton's Comus parodied by Frederica's promiscuity (SL 286). Moral responsibility emerges in Frederica's feverish sickbed delirium when she has visions of the Cambridge men she has bedded dancing around the walls of her room, "like the cut-out friezes of dancing figures, hands and ankles joined . . . like a satyr dance on a Greek vase" (SL 286). This image recalls the plaster frieze of Matthew Crowe's Long Royston estate with its intimations of the dangers of Spenser's Bower of Bliss that had so disturbed the virginal Frederica with the destructiveness of "virginity and venery" (VG 138). Despite Frederica's attempts to separate the biology of sex from Lawrence's religion or from any moral restriction, she feels "strangled with her waste fertility" (SL 286). Byatt has, in a different context, equated Milton's concept of "'waste fertility'" with "self-indulgent creation," itself "a denial of real fertility and real freedom" (Dusinberre 186). Likewise, Frederica's sexual freedom is not a real freedom.

Frederica's feeling for Cambridge itself is ambivalent. Cambridge was a "southern Garden of Eden" to Byatt (Dusinberre 190). However, Frederica, like Anna Severell in The Shadow of the Sun, feels herself on the outside of Cambridge, wanting to be admitted to its closed courts, yet, simultaneously fearing it as a "dangerous bower of bliss, like Comus's magic structures" (SL 286). The doubleness of her attitude reflects Frederica's conflict between two possible futures: one inside the academic world of Raphael Faber (SL 291), the other in the outside world of London and Nigel Reiver (SL 287).

A similar but different dichotomy is inherent in her idealized relationship with Alexander Wedderburn in The Virgin in the Garden. Both Alexander and Raphael are, for Frederica, idealized constructs associated with the life of the mind: Alexander is a representative of the world of art and culture, Raphael, the world of scholarship and the academy. While the adolescent Frederica is in love with both of these men, neither love is physically consummated. To do so would break some kind of taboo which separates the imagined from the real. Frederica's fantasies are, however, a less destructive version of Cassandra Corbett's imaginary world in The Game.

When the reader interprets these male characters as projections of Frederica's love for the worlds of art and scholarship, a physical consummation becomes almost incestuous. Frederica must nonetheless choose between the two worlds. The prologues of the two novels suggest that Frederica has indeed

found a third way: she is an arts critic, thereby bridging the worlds of art and literary criticism.

On an emotional level, Frederica fears the loss of autonomy connected with surrendering to a man in the way that Stephanie has yielded to Daniel (VG 420). The omniscient author of Still Life, writing self-consciously from the advantage of retrospect about the Frederica of the 1950's, comments that Frederica was "instinctively in revolt against 'whole' (overwhelming) love" (SL 137). Frederica is struggling with incompatible desires. While part of her believes in marriage as "the end of every good story" (SL 136), another part sees Stephanie and fears marriage as confinement (SL 139).

The role of culture in subjecting Frederica to this dilemma is explicitly recognized: "She came, after all, not in utter nakedness but cocooned by her culture in a web of amatory, social, and tribal expectations that was not even coherent and unitary" (SL 136). Like a true postmodern heroine, she is the site of conflicting textual forces that reinforce the various concepts (Petrarchan, Freudian, Lawrentian) of woman in her role of Spenser's Venus or Dame Nature, responsible for the entire order of nature including love and procreation (Frye "Imagery" 80). Yet, Frederica is wholly engaged in a world of art and culture. She envisions herself as variously an actress, a novelist, a scholar, a journalist (VG 394, SL 63,304). Significantly, when she imagines "two hypothetical future Fredericas" (SL 304), neither possible future includes the Venus-like role of her sister Stephanie.

It is interesting to note here that while Byatt acknowledges the role of culture in determining Frederica's attitude, she qualifies the influence of texts on Frederica. Frederica rejects the female characters in male novels as unreal, but recognizes the heroines of Charlotte Brontë or Rosamond Lehmann "from some fund of ancient knowledge" (SL 138). Frederica is a resisting reader of the male text, but seems to credit some essential truth to certain female texts. Byatt thereby qualifies her earlier assertion of an Althusserian interpellation of the subject into a waiting culture to posit some fundamental instinct or essence outside the determination of culture. However, one could argue equally that Frederica had already been acculturated to accept the texts of Brontë and Lehmann as true. Which narratives should she resist?

Nowhere is Frederica's textualized self more evident than in the description of her ideal man whom she has "discovered, invented, fantasized, constructed, read, and written" in clichés derived from those same texts which she claims speak to some fundamental truth (SL 216). Frederica's ideal is also "a real, unknown man" whom she recognizes in Raphael Faber (SL 216). (Significantly, there is no reciprocal recognition on Raphael's part.) This ideal is derived from the mythic tale she had repeatedly told herself as a child in which, like Artemis, she ruled in a world of nature (SL 222). In later childhood, her ideal male enters Frederica's myth

> . . . with Raphael Faber's fine, dark good looks and an incompatible set of character traits, derived from Mr. Rochester, the sad and sinful Lancelot du Lac, Athos the mournful Musketeer, and other fictive innocent rakes. The Knight was

> beautiful but fallible and often in need of rescue. When rescued (as Lancelot was rescued by the Lily Maid of Astolat, as Artegall was rescued by Britomart), he would become strong again, a little cruel, intent only on his own purposes. The Lady would grieve: the Knight would be ambushed, by Morgan Le Fay, by Irish peasantry, by wizards, and would again helplessly need rescue. (SL 223)

Of course, the context of this description determines that it be read ironically. The narrator, writing from the vantage of retrospect and omniscience, undercuts the seriousness of Frederica's imaginative construct. She self-consciously intrudes to address the reader directly, contextualizing the myth with Frederica's own intellectual analysis of how she, despite her rationalizations, nonetheless "fell in love" with Raphael (SL 221).

As noted earlier, Byatt stresses the dichotomy between thinking and feeling. A large part of Frederica's pleasure in "falling in love" is derived from the non-rational nature of the experience. While she thinks about the event, she also sets it above thinking clearly and derives pleasure from being "taken over, overwhelmed" (SL 220).

In contrast to Frederica's resistance to conventional female roles, Stephanie's complacent acceptance establishes her as a parodic repetition of Persephone or Proserpina of classical mythology (Kenyon 73). As Frederica's older sister, Stephanie represents a possible but feared future. However, as noted earlier, Frederica does not acknowledge that Stephanie's life could be her future. Stephanie has returned from Cambridge where she had distinguished herself academically and had acquired sexual experience as Frederica will go

on to repeat. Stephanie's return home to become a junior teacher at Blesford Girls' Grammar is "an extreme act of passive defiance" by which Stephanie, unlike the ambitious Frederica, refuses to fulfill her father's worldly ambition for her (VG 70). When Daniel Orton abducts her in a scene that parodies the abduction of Proserpina by Dis (VG 80), Stephanie initially resents his attention as irrelevant to her, seeing it as a mere by-product of her "archetypal wife-face" (VG 115). However, despite her initial fear of Daniel's absoluteness, Stephanie submits in an elemental scene in which Byatt invokes a Lawrentian-like primitiveness to reconnect Stephanie with the watery birth of Venus Anadyomene (VG 174-86). Since Proserpina is both pure and beautiful, at the same time an Artemis and an Aphrodite or Venus figure (Kerenyi 128), the imagery and mythological identification are not inconsistent with Stephanie as a type of Kore.

While Frederica as an Artemis figure epitomizes the active assertion of the self, Stephanie embodies the "enthralment to non-being" associated with Proserpina (Kerenyi 123). She admits to Daniel that she has always lacked the desire for anything for herself (VG 182). She has learned to keep herself "unnaturally still" (VG 77), to absent herself and her attention, a technique she uses to quieten first the autistic Malcolm Haydock and later her brother Marcus (VG 107,426). When Daniel metaphorically abducts her into the underworld of marriage, he seduces Stephanie into a world in which she shares Proserpina's fate: "death in fulfilment and dominion in death" (Kerenyi 109). Paradoxically,

although Stephanie will come to life in her underworld life with Daniel and become the force of life in giving birth, her stillness associates her with the force of Thanatos.

Proserpina's death is in one sense a metaphorical death of the self, and even the passive Stephanie does not cross the border into this new world without regret for the world she is to leave behind. Before she marries Daniel, Stephanie has an unusual dream which she interprets with reference to Wordsworth's dream in Book V of The Prelude (VG 248-52). This reminds her of her passion for books and reading. She fears losing this world when she marries Daniel, and briefly considers not marrying. However, like Anna Severell in The Shadow of the Sun, Stephanie decides to do "what came easiest, what was already well-fixed," and marry (VG 252).

Stephanie's anxiety over a potential loss of creativity in the aftermath of marrying is manifested in the fear of drowning and loss which she feels upon waking from her dream. This apprehension mirrors Byatt's own early fear that marriage would thwart her imaginative capacity (Dusinberre 185). Stephanie is unsure whether life or the imagination is the destructive power, whether a passion for Keats's urn promises a life in death or a death in life (VG 252). But, once the wedding is over and she and Daniel are alone in their flat, everything seems to Stephanie "terrible, dark and final" (VG 277). Like Proserpina, Stephanie is imprisoned in a dark underground world; however,

whereas Proserpina ruled the dead, Stephanie will paradoxically come to life and reign in a world of birth.

Stephanie is awakened from her passivity when she marries Daniel (Kenyon 73). She enters a female world of the body and birth. The Proserpina of classical myth was interpreted by Sir James Frazer as a figure representing the death and rebirth of vegetation similar to the myths of Adonis and the risen Christ. Stephanie, however, as an ironic repetition of Proserpina, finds the Christian dying and resurrection myth of Easter alien (VG 154-55). For Stephanie, "[b]irth was a real miracle" (VG 155). Her concern with birth in nature has been apparent from the opening of the novel when the reader meets Stephanie in the task of trying to save premature kittens, while Frederica looks on with ironic scepticism (VG 29-30). Whereas Frederica and the Astraea figure connote a renaissance of language and culture, Stephanie and Proserpina signify physical birth and nature's fecundity.

Stephanie becomes pleasurably "sunk in biology" during her first pregnancy and labour (SL 14). In a capitulation of thinking and rational process to feeling and instinct similar to Frederica's reaction to falling in love, Stephanie indulges in pregnancy. Significantly, Stephanie's use of the term "biology" to refer to her chaste fertility is antithetical to Frederica's earlier application of the term to signify a promiscuous sexuality bordering on lust.

Stephanie's feeling of motionlessness and rootedness as a pregnant woman, a femina gravida, affects her reading of Wordsworth, her faithful

literary companion both before and after marriage. She had turned to Book Five of The Prelude to re-experience her passion for books and reading as solace prior to her marriage to Daniel. But Wordsworth reads differently in the context of biology (SL 15). Stephanie writes herself and her surrender of body and will into Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" to connect herself with his elemental "rocks, and stones, and trees" (SL 16). She will reaffirm her satisfaction with this role of earth mother when she and Frederica analyze the semiotics of the Moore figures of man and woman erected at the site of the new university (SL 298). The figures confirm the Miltonic view of man as erect, closer to God, and woman as tied to the earth. Frederica wishes that woman could be fire and air for once, but Stephanie likes the primal elements of earth and water (SL 298).

One might consider that Byatt has reinterpreted Wordsworth's poem to signify the paradoxical stasis of pregnancy that contains both stillness and life. Alternatively, reread in the context of Stephanie's tragic and appalling death at the close of the novel, her surrender into "earth's diurnal course" (SL 16) becomes ironically prophetic. As Wordsworth's poem covertly refers to Christ's parable of the sower (Miller 76), so might Stephanie be related to the images of Van Gogh's Sower and Reaper.

The idea of birth in classical mythology does not distinguish the begetter from the begotten (Kerenyi 105). In the myth of Proserpina and her mother Ceres, she is both daughter and mother, end and origin through a

continuity of birth (Kerenyi 144). In Byatt's realist depiction of birth, however, the child is separate and distinct from the mother. In an amazing and moving description of childbirth, Stephanie's body is torn asunder by the child, and she immediately senses "its own fluttering pulse, not hers" (SL 99). As she lies back after her ordeal, she is "surprised to be solitary, to hear the beat of her own life only, after so long" (SL 100), and her first address to her son is in the second person "you" (SL 101). Birth produces a separate and distinct being, more than simply an extension of its origin.

Failure to recognize the child as a separate being results in the horror of the Burtts whose story is a nightmarish and monstrous inversion of the Orton family's healthy bloom. When Gerry Burtt seeks Daniel and the church to judge his complicity in the death of his infant daughter at the hands of his wife, he attempts to explain his failure to save his child. He was unable to perceive the baby as separate from his filthy wife, but saw the child rather as "'all part of her, like. . . . with the same smell . . . her smell'" (SL 152).

In the aftermath of Will's birth, Stephanie's world swarms with "[v]egetable, animal, human" growth (SL 247). She becomes obsessed with growing things, planting a garden, rescuing a cat and kittens (which, unlike the orphaned kittens in The Virgin in the Garden, flourish), and nurturing the human strays and misfits who are drawn to her fruitfulness (SL 243-47). Like Spenser's Venus and Dame Nature in The Faerie Queene, Stephanie represents an entire order of nature, high and low (Frye "Imagery" 80). The rich fecundity

of Stephanie's world duplicates both the world of Spenser's Garden of Adonis, "nature as nature would be if man could live in his proper human world, the 'antique' Golden Age" (Frye "Imagery" 82), and the bountiful generation of a primitive Lawrentian world. Even Frederica, while maintaining a safe distance, will derive a "primitive pleasure" from the products of Stephanie's generative power (SL 283).

Byatt invokes a Wordsworthian golden world of childhood innocence in which to describe the growth of little Will and Mary. However, this world is not completely idyllic. Despite her contentment, Stephanie misses her books. Her disjointed attempt to work and think is both moving and comic as she struggles to separate herself physically, emotionally and intellectually from the preoccupations of her domestic world (SL 160-69). While refusing to acknowledge any essential difference between men and women writing, Byatt has noted the very real practical difficulties for women trying to write or work (letter to the author, 26 January 1994). Stephanie briefly enjoys an epiphanic moment of thought that "lift[s]" her out of her biology before she runs out of time (SL 167).

Once again, Wordsworth provides Stephanie with a connection between life and art as she reads Will's childhood into the lines of the "Immortality Ode" (SL 166). As Stephanie's pregnancy changed her reading of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal", now motherhood changes her previous scepticism about Wordsworth's view of childhood.

Byatt qualifies the Wordsworthian concept of childhood innocence, however, when she acknowledges the role of culture, the community that immediately asserts ties with the newborn child (SL 105). The very act of naming the child has a doubleness; Stephanie chooses the name William after her beloved William Wordsworth, completely forgetting the familial connection with her father (SL 104). In either case, as language represents our world to us, so does naming a child assert the mark of culture in determining the child's life. Will Orton will always be tied, at least partially, to both Wordsworth and his grandfather.

Byatt also complicates the entire female realm of birth and motherhood by incorporating other versions that contest the ideal of Stephanie's world. I have already mentioned the case of Barbara Burtt as a demonic antithesis to the Orton world. Jenny Parry, as a discontented young wife and mother engaged in an affair of sorts with Alexander Wedderburn, reflects the frustration of entrapment and boredom inherent in the confinement of domestic life. Elinor Poole, as the wronged wife who hides her reproach under the guise of solicitude, avenges her husband's infidelity with her own affair (also with Alexander) and gives birth to a child whose biological father is in question. Winifred Potter, resembling "a Victorian image of an exhausted Scandinavian goddess" (VG 29), is the aging mother whose menopausal rage is assuaged only when the care of her young grandchildren reverts to her following

Stephanie's death and Daniel's departure. These versions of motherhood undercut the absoluteness of Stephanie's ideal.

The reader must also question the implications of Stephanie's death in the narrative. The incident of the bird in the house immediately suggests the novel's epigraph which quotes Bede's story of the sparrow to represent the fleeting passage of life (SL 355) as well as the accompanying dedication to Jenny Flowerdew. From a biographical perspective, Byatt has acknowledged that Still Life was very painful for her to write (letter to the author, 26 January 1994). One immediately thinks of Byatt's own young son who was killed in 1972. Is the fictional death of Stephanie to be read as a sacrificial replacement for the more painful death of a child? In terms of the mythological association with Proserpina, Stephanie's death could represent another level of her descent into an underworld of death. However, unlike the myth, there will be no fictional re-enactment of what Neumann called the heuresis, or finding again of daughter by mother (Weigle 116). There is no reunion of mother and child. Daniel refuses even to dream Stephanie's return, fearing the illusion of a return (SL 370). Byatt's stark portrayal of the aftermath of death reveals the reality of devastating loss that no myth will comfort.

If Stephanie and Frederica represent two aspects of the female experience, Stephanie's death can be interpreted as a death of the natural world of female birth and generation that she represented. More significantly, the character of Stephanie suggested the promise of a female character that could

mend the split between woman's dual worlds of nature and culture. Her death intimates that bridging the gap is difficult.

Frederica's response to Stephanie's death is particularly telling in this respect:

> She had envied Stephanie the certainty of her desire for Daniel, who, however improbably, had been what Stephanie wanted, in a way she, Frederica, had managed to want no one. Confusedly she thought she had perhaps relied on Stephanie to do for both of them things she herself feared doing, perhaps couldn't do. (SL 381-82)

Is Frederica confused or did Stephanie fulfil some role incompatible with Frederica's plans for worldly success? The prologue of both novels suggests that Frederica does go on to achieve success in the world of art and culture that she had envisioned for herself. The reader assumes that, like Gloriana, she will assert her will and prevail. One can only await the next novel in the series, Babel Tower, currently in progress, to discover Frederica's future.

The female mythology of birth that Byatt has created in these novels does not solve the dilemma of woman's "dissociated sensibility" (Spacks 26). Why should it? Does her use of these classical myths perpetuate the very divisions that she would have women escape? When Byatt draws on past narratives to recreate her female characters, she foregrounds the division inherent in them. The question remains whether the division resides in the narratives or in the nature of women's experience. But foregrounding the narratives uncovers the cultural basis and bias of representations and experience.

The Female Pen

Possession, published in 1990, is, as its generic subtitle announces, a romance. As such, it is a dramatic departure from Byatt's earlier realist novels. The prefatory epigraph quoting Nathaniel Hawthorne's distinction between a romance and a novel offers one clue to Byatt's use of the romance genre: she wanted to make use of the latitude offered by the romance genre to connect the present with the past. Within the text of Possession itself, the journal of Sabine de Kercoz, cousin of the Victorian female poet Christabel LaMotte and herself an aspiring writer in 1859 Brittany, provides another clue when she records Christabel's view of romance as "a proper form for women" (P 373). Because, in Christabel's words, men considered women as "double beings, enchantresses and demons or innocent angels," the romance genre of writing allowed a reconciliation or integration of women's two natures (373). Here, Byatt is ironically restating in fiction what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued in The Madwoman in the Attic is a central feature of nineteenth-century fictional representations of women: a split between angel and monster.

In Possession, Byatt uses the generic tendency of the romance to recycle familiar stories (Beer Romance 2), along with a multiplicity of voices presented through letters, journals, poems, folk tales, biography, and literary critical

writings to offer, among many other ideas, a more overt critique of the traditional representation of the female artist. While the traditional romance has been seen as revolutionary in presenting our concealed dreams for an ideal world (Beer Romance 12), the postmodern romance, in the hands of Byatt at least, is both conservative and revolutionary in the terms that Linda Hutcheon has described postmodern parody: it both inscribes the past literary tradition and simultaneously subverts it (Politics 93-117). Hutcheon notes that postmodern parody is politically "doubly coded" (101). The parody's complicity with the values it inscribes does not negate its subversive power (106). There is no synthesis of the two elements; the "doubleness . . . remains intact" (107). Christabel LaMotte, Byatt's female artist in Possession, can be both a type of the fairy Melusina and, at the same time, a refutation of its monstrous essence. A further discussion will clarify how parody works in Possession.

In the same way that Byatt questions how or whether we can know the past (Holmes), she also challenges the ways in which present representations of women derive from past ones. Within her heuristic, Byatt uses postmodern parody to install aspects of the past in the romance and subsequently undercuts them. Like facets of the past which Byatt establishes in the romance and then deflates, the myths and tales that fascinate the Victorian poets, Ash and Christabel, as a potential path to the mysteries of life's origins are also subverted to show how present representations of women have been constructed

from past narratives. As Hutcheon has recognized, when it comes to feminist art, "the politics of representation are inevitably the politics of gender" (Hutcheon Politics 102).

Byatt, while avoiding the label of feminist, has constructed in the character of Christabel LaMotte a textual composite of the French fairy Melusine and the figure of Arachne from Greek mythology. In addition, Christabel's poetry has been described by several book reviewers as partly a composite of that of Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson (Jenkyns, Karlin, Feinstein); her poetry shares their technical and thematic elements, and Christabel's seclusion summons visions of Dickinson's self-imposed confinement for most of her life. She is also intertextually related to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Christabel. In one of her letters to R. H. Ash, the Victorian poet who initiates an epistolary, intellectual friendship with Christabel which leads to a passionate if truncated love affair and the secret birth of a daughter, she responds to Ash's comments in his previous letter about his "crude wish to be told the end of the poem Christabel" (176). Christabel recalls meeting Coleridge when she was a small child, and either remembers or has imagined his comments on the beauty of her name and his hopes that it will not bode ill (P 179). Christabel notes that this is the only clue she has to the ending of the tantalizingly incomplete poem. Byatt is playing with the notion of what Roland Barthes called the vulgar wish of the reader to pierce the veil of narrative illusion and invoke closure, and Byatt's use of the romance genre deliberately

plays with the narrative striptease (Parker 221). But my point here is to show how Byatt has appropriated and given voice to Coleridge's subject. Coleridge's Christabel was a passive victim, subject to the power of both her father and the otherworldly Geraldine. Byatt's Christabel is a an assertive woman who defies convention to realise her art.

In a similar way, Byatt, through Christabel and her epic poem, gives voice to the fairy Melusine, assuming the perspective of the monster, "seeing her as an unfortunate Creature--of Power and Frailty" (175). Melusine, as both "an Unnatural Monster" and "a most proud and loving and handy woman" (174), is another fictional construct of woman's divided nature. Whereas the monstrous aspects of Melusine had been emphasized in previous versions of the story, Christabel's epic poem will highlight the injustice of punishing female power: "But let the Power take a female form / And 'tis the Power is punished" (292). The story of Melusine is a fitting vehicle for this examination.

Byatt repeats elements of the story of Melusine several times in the text through the voices of Fergus Wolff (33), Ash's letter to Christabel (171), Christabel's letter to Ash (173-74), Christabel's version in Tales Told in November (179), and two excerpts from Christabel's epic poem (265-66,289-98). When Christabel claims that the story of Melusine is intertwined with her own history (174, 501), she is being both literal and metaphorical. Her father was a mythographer who, in the course of compiling his Mythologie FranÇaise, told the story of Melusine over and over to his daughter (173). If that daughter

grew up to become a poet, a spider spinning and weaving her tales, then it is only 'natural' that the source of her thread would be those same tales to which she would add her own particular twist.

Byatt establishes the history of the Melusine story within the text of her romance. However, she does not emphasize the material and political aspects of its origins. Melusine was the most famous fairy of French romance, a mythical founder of the house of Lusignan. Her name possibly derives from her status as "mère des Lusignan" (Lancner 1002). While the story of Melusine was known prior to the fourteenth century, the family of Lusignan hired Jean d'Arras to write the romance of Melusine as a way of glorifying their fabulous ancestry (Beer Romance 24). In this instance, as with many other French medieval romances, the magical has a material connection with the political (Beer Romance 24). Contact with the marvellous is a way of establishing semi-divine status, thereby elevating the hero and his descendants forever above their people (Lancner 1001). The mystique of mythical female figures of the nether world has served very material political purposes.

Arras, in 1392, drew on both literary and oral stories to compose his Mélusine (1001) in much the same way that Byatt incorporates literary sources and folk and fairy tales, both oral and written, into her romance. Blurring the distinctions between high and low culture is a significant feature of postmodernism which distinguishes it from modernism's insistence on high culture, and which, by extension, separates Byatt's concept of culture from

Eliot's. Byatt's use of the Melusine tale, like Jean d'Arras's, serves a political end: d'Arras's tale elevated the status of the Lusignan family in medieval society; Byatt's retelling intends to dissolve hierarchical boundaries between men and women, and between high and low culture.

The story of Melusine follows the pattern common to tales of the mysterious bridegroom, with a reversal of the roles. For example, in the myth of Eros and Psyche, on a literal level, Psyche is the beautiful human female who is punished when she breaks the taboo set by her mysterious bridegroom, Eros, and peeks at him while he is asleep. Psyche is punished for breaking this taboo. When the roles are reversed, as in the case of Melusine and Raimondin, and Raimondin breaks the prohibition never to visit Melusine on Saturday when she changes into a serpent, Melusine rather than Raimondin is punished.

According to Fergus Wolff, the vulpine psychoanalytic scholar, the myth has been interpreted variously as representing women's impotent desire, the androgynous mind, and a "self-sufficient female sexuality" (33). Each of these interpretations is centred in woman's monstrous attempt to appropriate some kind of male power. Female artistic self-sufficiency is an ingredient in the tale of the half-woman, half-serpent. From the perspective of the male who sees female artistic power as threatening, a woman attempting to write in a male genre is a monster. Melusine's "muscular tail" which beats the water in her bath (33), provides the "muscular" vigour of the female pen in Christabel's epic poem The Fairy Melusina (37). Once the female artist moves outside the

realm of Christabel's "restrained and delicate lyrics" (37), she is seen as a monster appropriating the male pen[is] to wield her own power (180,350). By inscribing the tale of Melusine into her text, Byatt foregrounds the prevailing Victorian attitude towards any female activity that went beyond prescribed roles of domesticity and refined constraint.

At the same time, by inscribing literary critical interpretations of Christabel's tale from different time periods, Byatt points to the act of interpretation itself as historically determined. In a contemporary discourse of psychoanalytic, feminist, deconstructionist, and Marxist theory, Christabel's epic offers fascinating interpretive possibilities with which Byatt deliberately toys. Like the mythical Cassandra whose prophecies were disbelieved, Christabel's epic poem could not be interpreted in a discourse in which the rules allowed only "'sweet simplicity' and 'noble resignation'" from female poets (49). While acknowledging the fact that we are a "theoretically" (P 424) knowing age, Byatt, like her contemporary characters Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, dislikes the theoretical excesses that reduce everything, "like boiling jam," to sexuality (P 253). On the other hand, she unabashedly exploits those same excesses to achieve, on one level of the text, the same kind of literary critical academic romance as David Lodge's Small World.

The figure of the fairy Melusine is a representation of female self-sufficiency, considered monstrous and feared by the male. But the fairy is also an enchantress, desired by men but also feared by them as a force threatening

to steal their power. Byatt explores these aspects of female self-sufficiency as they relate to the domestic and artistic lives of women in both the Victorian time of Christabel and Ash, and the present of the contemporary scholars Maud Bailey and Roland Michell who are determined to possess the past lives of their respective objects of study.

In the course of her exploration, Byatt constructs in the character of Christabel LaMotte a model of a female writer who, despite personal cost, does succeed in achieving her art. In terms of her art, she is the most successful of Byatt's female artists. Anna Severell in Byatt's first novel tries desperately to follow her father's visionary path. In The Game, Julia Corbett's women's novels are products of regurgitation rather than art; Cassandra Corbett fails to weave the raw material of her journal into an imaginative fabric. In Byatt's next two novels, the Potter sisters are potential writers. However, Frederica Potter defects to the world of art criticism; Stephanie Orton, to marriage and family. It is symptomatic of Byatt's degenerative view of history that her most successful female artist exists, not in a contemporary world, but in a Victorian past. However, Christabel will pay a horrendous personal price for her art.

When she creates the character of Christabel LaMotte, Byatt dispossesses herself of earlier notions of the female artist as seer to allow herself and her characters the freedom to spin their own tales. In The Shadow of the Sun, Anna Severell had adopted her father's aesthetic of art as divinely

inspired. However, for Anna, this Romantic aesthetic failed. In contrast, Christabel's aesthetic centres on the artist as Aristotelian maker, shaping and ordering her thoughts; for Christabel, art is a matter of will (41).

If Christabel, like Cassandra Corbett in The Game, is also a type of the Lady of Shalott, she is one "with a Narrower Wisdom . . . who chooses to watch diligently the bright colours of her Web" (P 187). Christabel has chosen art over the world. Her seclusion within the confines of Bethany, the charming and homely cottage she shares with her artist friend and presumed lover Blanche Glover, is not a form of imprisonment, but rather a sign of self-sufficiency. In quasi-religious terms, she and Blanche have a "chosen way of life," inspired by the neo-mediaeval dictates of John Ruskin on the "dignity of handicraft and individual work," to support themselves from the proceeds of their crafts (187). Art was one of the few areas open to women in a society which offered few economic alternatives besides marriage or governessing.

The self-sufficiency of Bethany, however idyllic, is fleeting. Christabel is aware that her economic situation is perilous; however, she does at least have the benefit of family support when her subsequent out-of-wedlock-pregnancy prevents her from supporting herself. The unfortunate Blanche Glover suffers from a loss of economic, emotional, and spiritual support when Christabel abandons her; in a state of feeling "superfluous" to the world, Blanche, "who would rather not live than be a slave" as a governess, commits suicide (306-09).

If Christabel has chosen seclusion, Bethany is not only a place where females neither serve nor are served (186), but is also a nest rather than a tower. Christabel empathizes with Arachne, describing herself in her letters to Ash "not like a Princess in a thicket . . . but more like a very fat and self-satisfied Spider in the centre of her shining Web" (87). The image of the female artist spinning a web presents not only the traditional but also the only acceptable avenue for female art. The Arachne of Greek myth excelled at the female art of weaving. When her boasting about the superiority of her weaving brought her into direct but futile conflict with her teacher, the goddess Athena in her role as patroness of female household arts, Arachne's desperate suicide attempt was foiled when Athena changed her into a spider, forcing her to spend her life spinning. Not only was Arachne guilty of hubris in challenging the goddess, but she dared to question the more ignoble actions of the male gods by inscribing pictorial representations into her weaving:

> Arachne's picture: Europa deceived by Jove-bull:
> seems real bull, real sea; the girl
> seen looking back at land left, screaming
> to friends, timid feet up fearing touch
> of rising water; . . . (Ovid 115)

As Arachne's art presents a contesting perspective on Zeus's abduction of Europa, in the process becoming perhaps unwittingly the first feminist assertion of sexual assault, so does Christabel weave into her art contesting perspectives of classical myths and traditional tales. But Christabel is aware, as Arachne was not, that certain subjects are off limits to the female artist (P 180).

Nonetheless, in the prologue to The Fairy Melusine, Christabel highlights the bias of classical myths towards punishing female power, listing Medusa, Scylla, Hydra, and the Sphinx as slaves and victims of male authority (292). Changing the perspective from which myths were written challenges the accepted interpretation of the myth itself.

In her description of the female imagination, Patricia Meyer Spacks has used Swift's description of the spider's web as "'Flybane and a Cobweb'" (223) as one critical perspective of female art. Christabel's poem presents the web and the spider's efforts more sympathetically. The web comprises "filaments of wonder / Bright snares . . . an order fine and bright / Geometry threading water, catching light" (P 38). Yet, there is a savagery lurking in the beauty and fragility. The spider replaces the homely image of the loom, and a certain desperation to spin enters Christabel's equation of her "need to set down words" with "the Spider's need who carries before her a huge Burden of Silk which she must spin out--the silk is her life, her home, her safety" (180). As the spider's savagery is seen as a necessary component of its nature so that it does not "die of Surfeit" (180), so must female artistic power be "assertive, insistent, dominating" (Spacks 213) in order to survive. Christabel, distinguishing her own "Silken Self" from her "more Savage and businesslike sister" of the poem (P 87), tries to distance herself from the same monstrous aspects of artistic narcissism that Cassandra Corbett equated with her sister Julia in The Game. The female who must be an angel for public display and a

monster to effect her art would seem to be forever a divided creature. But for a woman whose survival depends on a "Life of Language" (180), savagery is a form of self-preservation.

Christabel's need for isolation from the social world in order to realize her art is considered a freakish demand in a world where women primarily fulfil a social function of nurturing relationships with others. However, in the context of Christabel's letters to Ash, the reader is offered insight into her urgent need for solitude. She presents the "Treasure" of her solitude to Ash in terms of the riddle of the egg which Ash's attentions threaten to crack and destroy (137). Christabel's surname LaMotte is of Breton origin, and means a fortified tower or a strong castle, and also, fertility (Jamet 14). Christabel has fortified herself against intruders to protect her valued solitude. Despite Ash's protests to the contrary, she feels that he threatens her "Core" (195). When she becomes more deeply involved with Ash, Christabel initially feels diminished by this loss of self-possession, and her poetic muse deserts her for a time (198-201). The issue of the female artist's need for solitude is not resolved in the text. Byatt, recognizing her own passion for seclusion (Vincent), also understands the female need for love as well as its terrifying transformative powers.

Artistic seclusion is necessary to the female writer, but it can also assume a dangerous form of possession of the self, limiting experience and condemning the artist to a sterile existence. In Christabel's final letter to Ash

(which he never gets to read), Christabel confesses to the fear and rage that motivated her to keep the fact of their daughter Maia secret from him (500). (Ironically, Christabel's letter tends to confirm the view of feminist criticism in the contemporary narrative that sees Christabel as "distraught and enraged" (37).) She also wonders whether her relationship with Ash prevented her from being a great poet, or whether his generosity expanded her experience and consciousness (502). The weight of the text seems to favour the latter. Christabel feels that she owes both Maia and her Melusine to Ash (501). However, she paid a prohibitive price for them: thirty years as an "old witch in a turret . . . a hanger-on" by the graces of her family (500). Perhaps the question Christabel should be asking herself is whether she would have written Melusine if she had shared some kind of life with Ash and Maia.

The monstrous sexual features of the Melusine character are two-fold; they form part of the mystery of both the mythical figure and her fictional counterpart, Christabel. Female self-sufficient sexuality is a lesbian sexuality, monstrous from a male perspective since it constitutes a negation of his own sexual power. Earlier, I discussed Christabel and Blanche Glover's attempt to establish a utopian female world at Bethany. The reader and the fictional feminist literary critics studying Christabel's poetry assume that Christabel and Blanche are lovers, and Byatt gives no evidence either to affirm or deny this assumption other than an ambiguous reference in Blanche Glover's journal to the "special ways" that she and Christabel share following a moment of conflict

(47). In addition, Christabel's poem "[Gloves]" (306), carrying echoes of Roland and Maud's earlier discussion of the semiotics of gloves (253), appears as an epigraph to the chapter containing Blanche Glover's suicide note. This same chapter introduces the American lesbian feminist literary critic Leonora Stern into the action of the contemporary narrative.

The relationship between Blanche and Christabel recalls the ambivalent sexuality of Geraldine and Christabel in Coleridge's poem. Geraldine, as a type of white lady or Dame Blanche, has been as problematic for literary critics as has the entire poem, or rather, fragment, since part of the interpretive crux resides in the poem's unfinished state. Geraldine has been interpreted as a lamia, witch or demon lover (Luther 6). Susan Luther interprets the poem as a dream-reverie, seeing Geraldine as a projection of Christabel's unconscious fears of her own sexuality, an erotic, creative force with which Christabel must come to terms (46). According to Luther, when Christabel accepts Geraldine, she acknowledges this force, moving into a world of creative experience (62). Under the terms of this interpretation, Coleridge is using Geraldine to represent the same kind of psychic 'otherness' conventionally reserved for the female monster figure.

When Byatt rewrites or completes the story of Christabel, Blanche Glover, while a type of Geraldine in the literal sense of a lesbian sexuality, is presented, to a certain extent, sympathetically from the perspective of a marginalized figure who has been rescued from her fate by Christabel (46) in

the same way that Coleridge's Christabel had rescued the fairy Geraldine. However, Byatt's treatment of lesbian relationships in both the Victorian and contemporary levels of the narrative is not uncritical. (Leonora Stern is a comic caricature whose breezy if unsuccessful attempts to seduce Maud are surpassed in their outlandishness only by her unwitting captivation of Blackadder.) Contrary to the ideal of sisterhood implicit in the concept of Bethany, and expressed by the "Spinster Ants" of Christabel's poem "Psyche" (161), the reality of Christabel and Blanche's situation has the same pitfalls of a heterosexual love relationship. Blanche's jealousy finds an outlet in her attempting to prevent Christabel from meeting with Ash, intercepting Ash's letters, and making agitated claims to Ellen Ash. In contrast, Ash's love for Christabel excludes ownership (279). While his imagination is possessed by her, he does not possess her (277). Byatt clearly denies any mystique to the sisterhood, privileging heterosexual relationships. One need only look at the couplings in the text for further evidence.

I noted earlier that the Melusine figure is monstrous in two ways. In addition to a self-sufficient sexuality, Melusine represents a monstrous female sexuality that enchants and entraps the unsuspecting male in order to steal his power. The mystery of Christabel's sexuality is part of her mystique, and the reader must question her motivation to forge a friendship with Ash. Granted, Christabel's initial reluctance to begin a relationship with Ash belies an accusation of seductress. Nonetheless, Blanche Glover's journal suggests a

different viewpoint from which to examine the relationship between Ash and Christabel. Blanche records in her journal around the time of the burgeoning friendship between Ash and Christabel that Christabel claimed she was "learning so much, so very much, and when it was all learned she should have new matter to write about and many new things to say" (47). Christabel may have been trying to appease Blanche's anxiety about her new friendship. Nonetheless, the journal entry suggests the second source of male fears concerning female sexuality: the image of the female as enchantress, seducing the male in order to steal his power.

Other images of entrapment implicate Christabel as a beguiling Vivien to Ash's Merlin. The image of Christabel as a fat and self-satisfied spider in her web does, as Ash himself notes, suggest entrapment or enticement (157). Christabel had, in fact, issued a veiled warning to Ash when she disputed his perception of her:

> . . . and as for the wit you may have perceived in me when we met, you saw, you must have seen, only the glimmerings and glister of your own brilliance refracted from the lumpen surface of a dead Moon. (87)

Christabel's seemingly modest deference to Ash's genius invites an ironic reading from a contemporary reader. Blanche's painting depicting the imprisoning of Merlin by Vivien which uses Christabel as the model for Vivien (45,172,308) further implicates Christabel as an enchantress. So too does Christabel's perverse interpretation of the tale of Merlin and Vivien 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?" (354). As the characters of Vivien and Merlin change from telling to telling in an oral tradition, so too can the reader posit different readings of Christabel.

The whiteladies of "The Threshold" (150-56), the sorceress Dahud of "The Drowned City" (134-35) and "The City of Is" (330-31) who was punished for her wickedness, as well as the fairy Melusine (296-98), are female enchantresses who draw men across the threshold into a female nether world beyond the rational in which their powers are useless. Byatt contests conventional representations of these figures as the projections of male fears when she rewrites the narratives to present alternative interpretations of the enchantresses as embodiments of the female desire for autonomy and passion (134,349). Women's need to resort to a "negative world" for power is also recognized by Ash. An excerpt from Ash's poem "Mommy Possest" recalls the prefatory epigraph quoted from Robert Browning's "Mr. Sludge 'the Medium'". The parody of Browning's dramatic monologue offers the voice of a female medium speaking to a "Geraldine":

> Know you not that we Women have no Power
> In the cold world of objects Reason rules,
> . . . . . .
> Here we have Power, here the Irrational,
> The Intuition of the Unseen Powers
> Speaks to our women's nerves, . . .
> . . . . . .
> Come into this reversed world, Geraldine,
> Where power flows upwards, . . . (410)

Women must seek power in the "reversed world" (410) across the threshold and beyond the mirror of the sea's surface because they are powerless in the male world above. By offering a different perspective on these sirens of myth and folk tale, Byatt foregrounds the purportedly essential qualities of the female that have constructed the female as the inverse of the male, presenting them as the product of male fears and female powerlessness.

At the same time, by writing myths and tales into her text, Byatt conserves the narratives in the way that Christabel praises Sabine for keeping the story alive, adding her own approach without "appropriat[ing] for private or personal ends" the tale itself (350). What might Byatt be implying here? Is she directing a critical comment at writers who might use myths and tales for radical ideological purposes? Byatt is both conserving and rewriting narratives in Possession, yet she wants to constrain the limits within which the story can be rewritten. Is this limited latitude logically consistent with her own project? If the stories are cultural constructs which have served specific ends in the past, why should they not be appropriated and revised for political ends in the present?

Both the Victorian Randolph Ash and the contemporary Roland Michell cross thresholds into the worlds of Christabel LaMotte and Maud Bailey respectively. Liminality or the disruption of borders is a recurring theme in the romance, assuming at various times psychic, sexual, and textual overtones. Maud Bailey, the contemporary feminist scholar whose erection of the same

kind of "motte-and-bailey defences" (502, 506) connects her more than genetically with her ancestor Christabel, in ironically fitting fashion, conducts research into the area of liminality. As Roland notes while he perches comfortably in Maud's apartment preparing to read Christabel's "The Glass Coffin," both he and Ash are "intruder[s] into their female fastnesses" (58).

Like Roland and Ash, the reader crosses the threshold from a male discourse that limits literary value to the 'works' of great poets into the hidden world of female 'texts' such as journals and tales that do not fit into the male paradigm of literature. Ellen Ash's journal, which, with its intentional evasions and gaps (462), perplexes its contemporary keeper, Beatrice Nest, shows the lost potential of a female writer who had wanted as a girl to be both "a Poet and a Poem" (122). When Ellen married Ash and became his helpmate, she, in effect, chose to be a poem, realizing too late that her life had been "built around a lie" (457). Ironically, Ellen's choice can be read as a double loss since the reader, encouraged to read Ash's Ask to Embla poems biographically, posits Christabel, not Ellen, as the 'Embla' to Ash's 'Ask' (262). Ellen is also a discerning literary critic. When she reads Christabel's Melusina, she is impressed with its originality and power (120-21). By presenting Ellen's journal voice, Byatt shows the repressive confinement to which the Victorian ideal exemplified by Coventry Patmore's The Angel in the House subjected women. In the character of Christabel, Byatt concurs with Virginia Woolf's prescription that a woman writer must kill the "Angel in the House" to escape

its imprisonment (52). She must, in effect, cross the threshold into the mirror world of the text to kill the angel by writing it into oblivion.

Byatt also crosses the threshold between the past and the present. The contemporary feminist scholar Maud Bailey is another textual composite who is related to Christabel and the Melusine figure. Maud is, like Tennyson's Maud, "[p]erfectly beautiful . . .[f]aultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null" (1.II.80-82; P 505). Tennyson's Maud has been read as an object of "aggressive desire, of the will to possess" (Jordan 142). If Tennyson used Maud as an instrument for the speaker's madness, Byatt, as the ventriloquist, frees Maud, giving her a voice with which to speak. For Maud Bailey, her beauty, her "doll-mask" . . . had nothing to do with her" (57). Her coldness masks her fear of being treated as "a kind of possession" because of her beauty (506). She shares Christabel's fears, but for a different reason, for her own autonomy, and, as such, has erected the same kind of defences as her forebear.

Maud, as a successful and materially comfortable scholar, has imprisoned herself in the glass coffin of Tennyson Tower, the site of a women's studies department of a modern university. Maud's imprisonment in this modern glass tower recalls Christabel's incarceration in the turret of Seal Court for most of her life (79,501). Both Christabel and Maud are princesses; however, Maud is tangentially related to Tennyson's Princess Ida who seeks to establish a place of learning for women apart from men. In a reversal of material status from the Victorian to the contemporary narrative and in a

parody of romance, Maud possesses the worldly and material power in the academic and social worlds, while Roland is a poor theory-deprived postgraduate student living in a smelly basement apartment. Maud assists Roland materially during their narrative quest. Nonetheless, it is the "clownishe younge man" (Spenser 3) who, in parodic romance fashion, rescues Maud from her glass coffin and promises to take care of her at the close of their adventure (507).

The poetic parody of the tale of Rapunzel that precedes Maud's entrance into the narrative indicates that Byatt would interpret this tale in its traditional sense. Roland is the young hero who rescues Maud from her imprisonment in the "glassy Tower" (35). In contrast to other contemporary writers such as Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, and Angela Carter who have written contesting versions of the story of Rapunzel from feminist and lesbian perspectives (Rose), Byatt reconfirms the tale's conventional interpretation. Whereas these other writers equate the relationship between Rapunzel and the witch as either a privileged "mutually affirming bond between women" or as a lesbian sexuality (Rose), Byatt writes her version of the tale through a censorious male eye. By extension, as Bethany, the Victorian ideal of a female self-sufficient community, failed, so too is Maud's confinement within a female world of scholarship restrictive and limiting. Significantly, Christabel's poem about the Cumaean Sibyl who was "safe in her jar" beyond anyone's reach is

the poem that had originally attracted Maud to the study of Christabel's poetry (54).

As Byatt questions the ways in which we know or cannot fully know the past, so too does she point to the ultimate difficulty of any representation. Christabel notes the difficulty of writing the story of Melusine from Melusine's perspective when "Who knows what Melusina was in her freedom with no eyes on her?" (P 373). Of course, Melusine is a construct. All we can know about Melusine from past narratives is through the gaze of the male who sees her as double. The reader must extend this comment to ask how s/he knows Christabel from the text. Richard Jenkyns notes that the reader is able to

> walk around Christabel and see her from different angles: we understand both why earlier critics saw her as a poet of sweet resignation or domestic mysticism, and why a newer school sees her as a proto-feminist, probably lesbian, although we realize that neither view is very close to the truth. (213)

We see Christabel primarily through the filters of her poetry and tales, the correspondence between her and Ash (131-200), Ash's post-Christabel poems, Blanche Glover's journal (44-7), Sabine de Kercoz's journal (335-79), feminist literary criticism (244-46), and the omniscient author (273-88). Nowhere in the text do we see Christabel without the filter of someone's gaze as, of course, we ultimately cannot since even written from Christabel's own perspective the representation would be one more gaze. We can see Christabel only through the mediation of language and within the framework of a particular text.

Finally, any representation becomes fallacious in the same way that every reading is a misreading.

But Christabel has consciously constructed herself within the confines of the Melusine narrative, and has assumed its tragic vulnerability as well as its power. Like the Greek Demeter or the Roman Ceres, the classical goddess of plenty, Christabel, like Melusine, loses the product of her powerful plenitude. The loss of a child is the narrative thread that connects Christabel to the myth of Demeter, presented in the text in terms of both Ash's Proserpina and Christabel's Melusine. The opening scene of the novel shows Roland Michell searching for sources for Ash's Garden of Proserpina (2-3). Vico's interpretation of the myth of Prosperina as "the corn, origin of commerce and community," and Ash's projection of Victorian religious doubt onto the myth (3) suggest the Frazerian kind of reading which interpreted the myth in terms of the death and regeneration of vegetation. In contrast, Byatt returns to the literal story of the abduction of a daughter from her mother and the consequent grief and rage suffered by Demeter or Ceres.

The rage and loss that Christabel suffers is primarily that of a mother for her child. As readers, we are forced to read this aspect of the narrative at least partially in the context of Byatt's biography because I think it accounts for the particular poignancy of both Christabel's poem on "Spilt Milk" at the end of Sabine de Kercoz's journal which details Christabel's confinement in Brittany (381-82), and the moving encounter between Ash and Maia which

occurs at the conclusion of the text. Byatt had denied her character the illusion of a return in Still Life, but the genre of romance allows the consolation of a heuresis. Byatt's short story "The July Ghost" published in Sugar and Other Stories expresses the same kind of pain. My discussion raises an interesting point: does the poignancy reside in the language itself or have I read it into the text because I am familiar with particular events in Byatt's life? Byatt's eleven-year-old son was killed by a drunk driver in 1972. While she is a very private person, she has spoken recently about her son's death (Vincent) in the same kind of terms that she uses to portray Christabel's fictional rage.

Byatt's use of the myth of Proserpina to represent female plenitude parallels her parodic repetition of the Proserpina figure in the character of Stephanie Orton in The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life. In Possession, the third sense of "LaMotte" to denote fertility has both literal and figurative significance in the text, referring to Christabel's literal daughter, Maia, as well as to the fertility of her mind that produced her epic Melusine.

Byatt also repeats the concept she had employed in her two previous novels and that she associated with Shakespeare's last plays: restoration by a daughter (Dusinberre 193). As Christabel had predicted in her final letter, her offspring was not recognized until astute readers of a later generation determined its significance (501). She is, of course, referring to her fairy Melusine which Maud as a scholar helps to restore to literary legitimacy. As well, Maud has restored Christabel's biological offspring and, in fitting

romance fashion, her own heritage. If Maud does not literally inherit her great-great-great-great grandmother's (or grandfather's) poetic faculty, she does at least restore Christabel's legacy.

If both Christabel and Melusine suggest female self-sufficiency and the androgynous imagination, then they must be read in the context of Byatt's own talent that combines aspects of both male and female. I have concentrated on the female characters and Christabel's tales and poetry because of my thesis. While they constitute the major part of the text, both thematically and in the narrative sense of the romance that restores the lost descendants, genetic and textual, to their rightful heritage, the voice of Ash and the character of Roland, as well as the minor characters, are significant aspects of the text. They remind the reader of a fact that is easily forgotten in the pleasure of the text: the multiplicity of voices is the product of Byatt's amazing ventriloquism.

The voice of Randolph Ash offers a mythology that contests the prevalent classical myths. Ash's Ragnarök reminds the reader that the narratives that have formed the bulk of western literature are not the only narratives (239-42). When Byatt, through Ash's voice, inscribes tales from Scandinavian mythology into her text, she offers a narrative of human origins that contests the Christian myth of Adam and Eve with its inherent subordination of women to men. As the archetypal man and woman, Ash's Ask and Embla are created equally, neither subordinate to the other. Yet, at the same time, Embla, the first female, seems to need Ask's male gaze to confirm

herself: "Then he saw that she / Was like himself, yet other; then she saw / His smiling face, and by it, knew her own--" (242). The poetic voice is purportedly that of Ash speaking in Victorian England who, despite his generosity of spirit and his speculative curiosity, sees woman in terms of himself and woman in turn as mirroring his view.

This same mythology presents the sun in terms of the female (240). Maud, whose pale green-gold blond hair connects her to her great-great-great-great grandmother Christabel, and suggests both the tale of Rapunzel and the Kore or young maiden of the myth of Proserpina, is encouraged by Roland to let down her hair in a scene which evokes the blazing rays of the sun (272).

If the reader tries to connect this image with Byatt's own conception of her art as heliotropic as outlined in the introduction, a problem emerges. While Maud can physically evoke the sun image, as mentioned earlier, she does not gain a poetic inheritance in the novel. Roland Michell, as the questing hero is rewarded for his curiosity, his textual scholarship, his insistence on the denotative capacity of language, his romantic questing, and his dispossession of Ash's identity by a transformation which allows him entrance into the literal and poetic gardens of Andrew Marvell (474-75). In true romantic fashion, Roland is revealed as the rightful inheritor of the poetic tradition while Maud must settle for a restoration of her genetic heritage. Roland has ceased to be concerned about the inadequacies of language, focusing instead on the myriad ways in which things can be said (473).

Similarly, Byatt has used the romance genre as "an emblem for the pre-apocalyptic, or threshold, nature of language itself" (Parker 220). She has used narratives to contest interpretations that fix meaning. When Byatt rewrites narratives from the perspective of mythical figures, she admits that there is no final knowledge outside of language, only different perspectives, in the same way that Roland comes to realize that "Christabel was the Muse and Proserpina and that she was not" (472). Despite her insistence on a denotative capacity for language, Byatt has invoked the semiotic sensibility as "part of the Romantic transformation of romance, the modulation of the revealed, or stripped, enchantress into a Lamia or Belle Dame figure whose unveiling is never unambiguous or complete" (Parker 221).

Byatt has indulged in a hedonistic pleasure of the text, playing on the narrative deferral and postponement of romance (Parker 4). At the same time as she offers to reveal the mystery of the past and of contesting perspectives of traditional narratives of female self-sufficiency, she ultimately refuses to do so. The text is a romance because it stops in the "liminal space" before fully naming or revealing the Other of the Melusine figure (Parker 4).

However, the reader must acknowledge the role of parody in the text which does not allow for resolution, but remains double: installing and ironizing, conserving and subverting, with "no dialectic resolution or recuperative evasion of contradiction" (Hutcheon Politics 107). The text is not, then, simply a pastiche of intertextual references, but a critique of the ways in

which we know the past and the ways in which narrative representations of women have, in part, determined cultural roles.

Conclusion

Byatt has developed her particular female art through a process of integrating a male literary tradition and making it her own. Her early novels focused on a search for a unified female artistic identity. Paradoxically, however, Byatt experiences her greatest artistic achievement and enjoys her greatest success only after she abandons this search for a unified artistic identity to indulge in a decentred plurality of voices and a pleasure of the text in Possession. Like the seventeenth-century poet George Herbert whose poetry evolved from a narcissistic affirmation of the artist to a denial of selfhood and a struggle to efface the self from his poetry in order to reveal God's voice beneath, so too does Byatt's art develop from a narcissistic anxiety to establish herself as a writer worthy of the tradition to an artistic self-effacement in favour of the textual polyphony of Possession.

Byatt's integration of the literary tradition can be traced through the changing stance toward the male characters in the novels. In Byatt's first novel, Henry Severell represents the Romantic ideal of the divinely inspired writer. As a strongly male patriarchal figure, Henry embodies the male literary tradition within which Byatt wants to situate her writing. Byatt's young protagonist,

Anna Severell, aspires to repeat her father's visionary experience, but feels powerless to do so. Both her father and his world remain exterior to her.

In contrast, the world of the male characters associated with art in The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life, Alexander Wedderburn and Raphael Faber, are attainable for the female protagonist, Frederica Potter. These characters more closely represent aspects of Byatt's own art than does the visionary Henry Severell and indicate an attempt to assimilate Henry's male voice into her own. Alexander's tendency to pastiche and parody, and Raphael's aesthetic of impersonality can be read as reflections of Byatt's own aesthetic. In addition, the sexual ambivalence of these male characters suggests that they be read metaphorically as well as literally; they partly represent the concept of an androgynous imagination. If we interpret Alexander's analysis of the failure of his innocent if naive attempt at a "florid and rich and muscular" renaissance of language as Byatt's critique of her own art in The Virgin in the Garden, Alexander's androgyny produces an art that leaves "too little to create or render" (VG 315,366).

In Possession, the voices in the text express different aspects of the literary tradition that Byatt has integrated and given voice to through her ventriloquism. The concept of the androgynous imagination is examined from the female perspective of the Melusine figure. At the same time, the Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash expresses the male aspect of her art. When Byatt creates separate voices that express male and female aspects of her art, she in

effect rejects the idea of androgyny. Rather, like Frederica Potter and her aesthetic of lamination, Byatt allows both male and female aspects of her art to exist side by side. Byatt's ventriloquism succeeds where Alexander's pastiche and parody failed.

I argued in the introduction that Byatt is a Janus figure: simultaneously Romantic and postmodern. The reader is tempted at times to apply Raphael Faber's description of Van Gogh in Still Life to Byatt and label her "a post-Christian Romantic in a world [s]he hasn't come to terms with" (SL 338). While Byatt appears to set aside both the youthful yearning of Anna Severell for the Romantic visionary experience and her own search for a unitary artistic voice, both of these desires resurface in the character of Roland Michell in Possession. Roland experiences the kind of poetic revelation of which Anna Severell could only dream. When he is granted literal and metaphorical access to Andrew Marvell's garden, he enters Byatt's own version of paradise: the lost paradise of language that precedes Eliot's dissociated sensibility.

Despite these aspects of Romantic thought that permeate Byatt's writing, there are also significant traces of what has been labelled postmodernism that complicate any tag one might want to apply to her art. Byatt's use of parody is an aspect of postmodern art that Linda Hutcheon has identified as challenging "our humanist assumptions of originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and property" (Politics 93). When Byatt overtly appropriates literary voices of the past to rewrite the

tradition, she both endorses, as Olga Kenyon notes (54), and gives a particularly literary spin to Roland Barthes's concept of the text as "a fabric of quotations" and his notion that "the writer can only imitate an ever anterior, never original gesture" ("Death" 1132).

Byatt's refusal to be bound by conventional limits of gender and culture is another facet of her writing that marks it as postmodern. According to Patricia Waugh, both postmodernist and feminist art are particularly concerned with liminality or the disruption of boundaries between the binaries of masculine and feminine, high and popular culture, and art and life (6). We have seen Byatt's ambivalence toward the binaries of culture and nature, art and praxis, writing and literary criticism, art and the world, and male and female, to mention only a few. These elements of postmodernism are evident throughout Byatt's novels, and achieve their most overt presence in Possession.

Byatt is also a Janus figure in looking to past narratives of women to posit possible narratives for women's present experience. When she uses parody to repeat past representations of women from a critical ironic stance, Byatt questions the very process of representation and, by extension, highlights the ways in which gender itself is a construct, "the product and the process of both representation and self-representation" (de Lauretis 9).

Parody itself as a literary tool is not without problems. As Linda Hutcheon has noted, parody assumes a culturally sophisticated audience (Parody 19). Parody exists in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, it can pose a

problem of accessibility, and lends itself to a charge of elitism (Hutcheon Politics 103). Byatt's reader has undoubtedly experienced this problem of accessibility at times (at least I have), and she has been criticized for overloading her texts with intertextual allusions (Kenyon 54). I am thinking here particularly of The Virgin in the Garden, whose density of allusion becomes difficult for the reader. Possession, on the other hand, is the greater success because the intertextuality operates on a level separate from the narrative proper. The reader has the option to engage the parodies or not; the intertextuality enriches rather than diminishes the reader's experience.

Despite the threat of parody to alienate the reader, Byatt's reliance on it to repeat representations of women from the past permits what Martha Rosler has described as a "'defeat of alienation, an asserted reconnection with obscured traditions'" (Hutcheon Politics 105). Parody permits Byatt to write within the literary tradition that she loves and simultaneously to change the tradition. It is a way of conserving the tradition while changing the story for women.

When Byatt de-doxifies representations of women by rewriting the past, she participates in the project of subverting doxa, the voice of consensus or public opinion. As I noted earlier, Byatt is very aware of the role of culture in determining our subjectivity; she is also aware of the paradox of subversion and wonders: "What happens when there is a large quantity of general agreement that 'the culture' is stultifying and that authenticity of life lies in

subversion? Do we not get another orthodoxy? Another set of unquestioned values?" ("Subversion" 47).

Byatt's questions point to the tendency of intellectual or any revolutions to petrify into a new dogma. While her comment may appear to be a conservative statement, ironically, it is echoed by the more radical student of representation, Teresa de Lauretis, who notes a slightly different but related paradox of gender construction:

> the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction; that is to say, by any discourse, feminist or otherwise, that would discard it as ideological misrepresentation. For gender, like the real, is not only the effect of representation but also its excess, what remains outside discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contained, any representation. . . . If the deconstruction of gender inevitably effects its (re)construction, the question is, in which terms and in whose interest is the de-re-construction being effected? (3,24)

The process of de-doxification can be seen, then, as an ongoing need to question the assumptions underlying our representations of, not only what is female, but also our assumptions of what we consider nature. Nature, it is said, fears a vacuum. The thought of Roland Barthes and other cultural critics suggests that it is perhaps culture rather than nature that intends to fill the gap between our world and the way we understand our world through language.

If myths and early narratives are our initial attempts to come to terms with the world, then one can perceive the danger of resting our understanding of a changing and dynamic experience in the myths and narratives of the past.

One can then understand the need to conserve the tradition as well as the need to change the story. As Robert Eisner notes (249):

> The conflict between myth and literature is only a skirmish in the great war between determinism and freedom, between a morbidity before and a delight in the dilemma of existence. A myth, qua myth, generalized, tidy, and closed, leaves us no room for freedom--of interpretation, of characterization, of invention. But a literary telling, mythical or fictional, revels in precisely what the handbook summary has left out of its account: ambiguity, duplicity, irony, playfulness, openness. We readers and interpreters of ourselves as characters in the myths vacillate between, on the one hand, the comfort of confinement offered by an entry in the archetypal encyclopedia of human behaviour and, on the other hand, the terrifyingly blank pages of the unwritten text of our lives. We, like the poets and tragedians, feel ourselves drawn to and drawn into the old plots--until the saga is just about to close over us for good. And then we must break free, like willful little fascicles from the binding of a codex called tradition . . .

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