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“Mocking Eternities”:
Writing Beyond the Ending of *Possession*,
or A.S. Byatt’s Intersections
between Academia, Literary Criticism, and Fiction

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Abstract

In 1995, a two-page-long letter signed by Professor Maud Michell-Bailey – which furthermore enclosed two original poems by Christabel LaMotte – prefaced a special edition on women poets in the academic journal *Victorian Poetry*. The letter and poems invite a critical return to *Possession*, since they are a complex game in which made-up characters come to life and actual people are fictionalized. They also raise significant theoretical issues while appearing to break free from the limitations imposed by what *Victorian Poetry* editor Linda Hughes has correctly described as “overdetermined readings, simplification, distortion” (6). In doing so, they masterfully create a parodic and intertextual dialogue in an inverted mirror game that blurs the lines between the real and the imagined and invites the reader to engage in an active participation. When combined, Maud’s letter and LaMotte’s poems offer an intriguing look at the fruitful fusion of A.S. Byatt’s critical and literary imagination. Therefore, this article explores Byatt’s intersections between academia, literary criticism, and fiction by analysing her metafictional discourse on fictional Victorian poems vis-à-vis the real contemporary academic journal in which they were published.

Keywords: A.S. Byatt, biographic metafiction, feminist critical history, Victorian women’s writing, Maud Michell-Bailey, *Possession*; postmodern parody, self-reflexive realism

The (Meta)Fictiveness of Fiction Vis-à-Vis Life Imitates Art

In 1995, a two-page-long letter signed by the fictional Professor Maud Michell-Bailey prefaced a special edition on women poets in the academic journal *Victorian Poetry*. Addressed to Professor Hughes, the editor of the journal, the letter enclosed two original poems by Christabel LaMotte, which had ostensibly been discovered by Maud on the reverse side of a drawing of the Winter Garden at Seal Court done by May LaMotte and preserved in a folder of May's schoolwork. Although the fictional, "newly-found" LaMotte poems and Maud Bailey's accompanying letter were published almost three decades ago in *Victorian Poetry* (and in the wake of *Possession*'s critical success), they have – to appropriate a consistent metaphor in wonder tales – slept undisturbed so far. In fact, neither the letter nor the poems have drawn any scholarly attention since their publication.

Hailed by the editor of *Victorian Poetry* as a superb simulacrum as well as an instance of poetic buoyancy on the part of "the creator of, arguably, the most famous 'Victorian' woman poet of the late twentieth-century, Christabel LaMotte" (Hughes 5), both Maud's letter and LaMotte's poems are worthy of consideration. As Linda Hughes argues, to open this special issue with Professor Michell-Bailey's letter on newly-found LaMotte poems significantly anchors this volume both on fictional poems and on scholarly discourse that is likewise a fiction, in addition to being metadiscourse on fictive poems. In fact, as far as *Possession* is concerned, Hughes argues that Maud's letter is even meta-meta-discourse (6). For Hughes, the complex framework of entwined literary text and analysis serves as a reminder that recovering women poets is more like a reconstruction (or, at times, a construction) than a discovery, and is therefore more like fiction than transcription. Hughes regards the asymmetries in *Possession* between the academically constructed histories and the passions of historic lives in relation to poetic texts as a reminder of the intricacies inherent to the recovery of lost poets. She also considers the perils of overdetermined readings, simplification, and distortion, whether done for hegemonic literary institutions, liberatory politics, academic reputations, or personal goals, as part of that recuperation (6).

Hughes raises several important theoretical questions which can only be fully examined with a parallel investigation into *Possession*. Therefore, I will read beyond the textual ending of A.S. Byatt's novel by exploring this self-consciously creative experiment and the consequent establishment of a complicity with the audience which – again – goes beyond the novel. I argue that both Maud's letter and the original LaMotte poems function as a structural parodic inversion of the novel.

Postmodern Speculations: Biographic and/or Historiographic Metafictions? The Case of *Possession*

The literary historian Robert Burden considers new forms to derive from past traditions (133), hence implying that a new work is always the result both of an established pattern, or genre, and its creative alteration in a new historical context. Burden further argues that the meaning of a work is often anchored in a self-conscious connection with preceding forms, so that their alteration and implicit examination frequently serve as the foundation for a work's structure as well as its present historical character. While he illuminates the process through which new literary forms are self-consciously partially constructed in terms of an ingrained aesthetic dialogue with the literary tradition that both defines and constrains them, Burden also emphasises the way they depart from tradition by using traditional strategies in new circumstances, ensuring that past forms continue to exist (133-134).

The related implication, I would agree with Byatt, is the theoretical impossibility of making writers fit into critical categories that seem more exciting to critics than the literary texts themselves (*On Histories and Stories* 6). As Byatt illustrated in "People in Paper Houses," there is a symbiotic relationship between "old" literary genres and "new" aesthetic devices that, in Burden's view, foregrounds a specific mode of historical consciousness whose literary forms confront momentous paradigms (136). In this sense, both Burden and Byatt seem to suggest the absence of so-called "pure" literary genres and forms, rather implying that literary texts are in fact hybrids which intertwine elements from different traditions in productive interaction. The related task of literary theory is to identify

these separate elements and examine their articulation within literary traditions or movements, to the detriment of monolithic theoretical labels that by contrast can only partly describe a literary text. This is not to say that these critical terms are pointless, as they aggregate a series of important characteristics which allow for comparison and differentiation between texts. Yet, trying to pin down a writer like Byatt, who is a self-acknowledged non-believer and non-belonger to any particular theoretical framework (*Passions of the Mind 2*), is not only a futile exercise, given her deliberate commingling of genres and forms, but also an expression of the inadequacy of theoretical agendas as a means of literary analysis that Byatt so deplors.

Possession engages in a literary and critical praxis in which the chronological momentum of realism lights upon the problematizing of reference grasped in self-reflexive modernism, since their narrative is permeated by the history of both (Hutcheon, *Politics 25*). According to Bożena Kucała, Byatt's novel is a striking self-reflexive sample of Byatt's coalescence of creative and critical writing, with a plot that centres on literary scholars conducting their research in an uncomfortable misalliance with their own private lives (67). In *Possession*, Kucała further argues, the ending clearly signals a pleasant balance between personal and professional life as well as freedom from the restrictions of literary theory (67). In other words, *Possession* investigates the relationship between fiction and literary theory by appropriating critical forms to speak to the academic milieu from within the values and history of that group, while still questioning it. Therefore, Kucała rightly notes that the twentieth-century scholars highlight the textuality of the past while rejecting any textual "fixity," a methodology which, she argues, helps to interrogate the idea of an unbiased truth about the past as an ideologically contaminated mirage (78). Despite its reliance on postmodern undecidability and suspicion of grand narratives by its investigation into the validity of universalist theories regarding objective reality, truth, human nature, and language (all common targets of postmodern criticism), *Possession* celebrates the ultimate victory of literature over criticism.

In a typical postmodern move, Max Saunders argues, problematizing the attempt to connect fictional aspects to their biographical roots suggests

that truth, biography, or history can only be understood via fictions. In order to illustrate his point that Byatt's fictional work is beguiled by lives, or "acts of biography" (87), Saunders elaborates on the distinction between "historiographic metafiction," "biographic metafiction," and "biofiction" in the context of *Possession*. He points out that in the historiographic metafiction which Linda Hutcheon refers to as those well-known and well-liked books that circuitously lay claim to historical figures and events while also being deeply self-reflexive (*Poetics* 5), such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) or Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), the historical events are given pride of place in the narrative process of converting the traces of the past – our sole access to those events today – into historical representation. This is demonstrated to be a process of converting occurrences into facts through the interpretation of archival data (Hutcheon, *Politics* 57). In fact, Hutcheon argues that the combination of historical fiction with the literary devices of metafiction foregrounds the postmodern epistemological interrogation of the framework of historical knowledge by mostly eschewing both "presentism" and "nostalgia" in its relation to the past it portrays via its intensely self-conscious theoretical and textual de-naturalisation of that temporal relationship (*Politics* 71).

Conversely, Saunders argues, in biographical metafiction historical events are relegated to the background to favour the fictionalisation of personal history so as to illuminate the reality of individuals, and in particular the truth of their interiority which, before the emergence of internet-driven celebrity confessional culture, is the element least likely to be documented in the public domain (90). In this instance, the very nature of the archival evidence Hutcheon refers to is in itself biographical and autobiographical, since the traces of the past are mainly composed by what Saunders terms "forms of life-writing" (90), namely letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, interviews, autobiographies. Since *Possession* is more concerned with biographical stories and processes than with world-historical events, Saunders further argues, Byatt's magnum opus could be classified as biographic metafiction (90). Despite sharing with historiographic metafiction an interest in the process by which historical narratives are created, it primarily focusses on telling the tale of a person,

or a group of people, rather than on a historical circumstance (90). Saunders convincingly draws the difference between historiographic and biographic metafiction by insisting on Byatt's privileging of personal history – however fictional it may prove to be – over history in *Possession*.

Saunders argues that in biographical metafiction like *Possession*, the historical context – Victorian proprieties toward relationships – remains in the background, while the subjects who did not actually exist are in the forefront. The painstaking documentation of their existence, as well as the pursuit of their lives by the fastidiously portrayed biographers – who do not actually exist either – is omnipresent. Contrary to its historiographical cousin, biographical metafiction stands out for its contradictory mix of meticulous recording and the fictitious nature of the subject(s) being chronicled, which turns it into the polar opposite of the historiographical portrayal. Thus, Byatt's biographical metafiction in *Possession* generates fictive documents to support the presence of fictional characters, unlike historiographical fictions that may use genuine documents to fictionalise real characters (Saunders 92).

Furthermore, Saunders distinguishes between biographic metafiction and biographical fiction, or biofiction, by emphasising the decisive metafictionality in the combination (90). In light of this distinction, I would agree with Saunders that *Possession* is a biographical metafictional novel rather than biographical fiction, or biofiction (as it is now frequently termed), which uses real historical figures as characters in a novel.

Playful Dealings With(in) Fiction: A.S. Byatt's Use of Postmodern Parody in *Possession*

In one of the earliest uses of the term, Dana Shiller defines neo-Victorian novels as literary works that adopt a postmodern approach to history and are at least partially set in the nineteenth century. This broad definition encompasses texts that update particular Victorian predecessors, texts that imagine new adventures for well-known Victorian characters, and "new" Victorian fictions that mimic nineteenth-century literary conventions (558). Byatt's novel *Possession* fully fits these two categories: a

biographic metafiction which eschews both presentism and nostalgia in its relation to the past it depicts, the novel self-consciously de-naturalises that temporal relationship. Additionally, *Possession* relegates events to the background and favours the fictionalisation of personal history to illuminate the reality of individuals, and specifically the reality of these individuals' interiority. Although it broadly illustrates a postmodern allegiance to self-consciousness, self-referentiality, and epistemological relativism, *Possession* resorts to parody as a way "to point out to the fictiveness of fiction" (Byatt, "People in Paper Houses" 30).

A literary scholar herself, Elaine Showalter argues, Byatt has so comprehensively engaged with the feminist critical history of Victorian women's writing that she creates an entire canon of it in *Possession* in a remarkable literary feat. In the specific context of voicing and/or parodying contemporary feminist literary criticism, Showalter further remarks, not only does Byatt invent all the poems, letters, stories, and diaries of the great Victorian women poets and authors she has created, but she also imagines, mimics, and satirises the feminist literary critique that French, British, and American academic women have written about them. Considering Showalter's reference to self-reflexive fiction's privileged use of parody and satire, I will focus on Byatt's double-coded, playful use of language (namely, parody), and on the double-narrative structure as technical distancing devices of neo-Victorian texts. To do so, I examine the way these postmodern texts ultimately manage "to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions" they appear to challenge (Hutcheon, *Politics* 1-2).

For Byatt, modern-day forms are parodic, "not in a sneering or mocking way, but as 'rewriting' or 'representing' the past" ("Choices: On the Writing of *Possession*"). This is an accurate reading of her nineteenth-century characters, but it does not encompass her twentieth-century characters. I argue that Byatt's different use of parody in the two timelines serves the double purpose of highlighting both the fictional use and the critical understanding of parody within the textual boundaries of the novel. Therefore, it illustrates the ambivalence of postmodern parody, which may "double-code" the modern form with another without displaying either the satire, irony, or comedy of any kind that distinguishes some uses

of parody (Rose 238). At the same time, it illuminates its main virtue: other than its wit, it is its command of cliché and convention which stands out as a crucial aspect of communication in Post-Modernism (Jenks 93).

The fact that the Victorian characters Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte are poets, whereas the three mocked contemporary characters, Fergus Wolff, Leonora Stern, and Mortimer Cropper, are all caricatures of particular types of academics, validates this reading as it furthers the distinction between serious literature and a specific kind of self-centred modern literary criticism which operates throughout the entire novel. Whereas the presentation of the Victorian characters produces empathy, the portrayal of the twentieth-century scholars invites the readers' scorn (Gutleben 80). Yet, only narcissistic academics such as Stern and Wolff, who "make writers fit into the boxes and nets of theoretical quotations which . . . excites most of them at present much more than literature does" (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* 6) – a practice Byatt deplores – or biographically-obsessed scholars like Cropper (another practice Byatt is suspicious of) are satirised.

It is not their being scholars, as opposed to the nineteenth-century poets, that is the target of Byatt's satire, as the radically different treatment of Roland Michell and Maud Bailey in the novel emphasises. The portrayal of these two scholars, who do not belong to Stern's, Wolff's, or Cropper's categories, provokes empathy at two levels. On the one hand, both are serious academics whose primary aim is, in Roland's words, "some violent emotion of curiosity – not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge" (*Possession* 82). On the other hand, they will become the twentieth-century counterparts of the nineteenth-century pair, not only because they will discover Ash and LaMotte's literary and personal relationship, but also because they will re-enact it.

The fact that it is Roland and Maud – the "children of a time and culture which mistrusted love, 'in love,' . . . and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality" (*Possession* 483) – who will have the happy ending denied to the former pair is deeply ironic with regards to postmodern conventions. At the same time, it bridges the gap between literature and literary criticism depicted in the

two narrative timelines, since Maud manages to keep her autonomy as a woman scholar while she has a relationship with Roland (a choice LaMotte did not have), and Roland becomes a poet as well as an academic after discovering that he is in love with Maud. For both, it is a case of “both/and” (finding love and keeping their independence), not the “either/or” allowed their nineteenth-century counterparts.

There is another significant understanding of parody that resonates in *Possession*, once again bringing together Byatt’s literary and critical imagination. In fact, Byatt’s novel can also be argued to be partially constructed in terms of an ingrained aesthetic discourse with the literary tradition which both defines and circumscribes them, as Burden argues in the different cases of John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Angus Wilson’s *No Laughing Matter*, and David Lodge’s *The British Museum Is Falling Down*. Burden connects parody and tradition by arguing that the former functions as “a means of as a means of self-conscious interrogation of the English novel convention, the convention being especially understood as being one of realism” (134). Realism is seemingly “a crucial hypothesis” since it vitally represents the established model of fiction through which a parody of it becomes understandable (134). Burden therefore agrees with Byatt that the English parodic novel has mostly worked within the boundaries of realism, notwithstanding its criticism of the realist aesthetics (137). Thus, Burden argues that parody should be viewed as a form of aesthetic foregrounding in the novel, since it identifies a certain kind of historical consciousness in which form is made to question itself in light of important antecedents; this mode is serious, as opposed to various forms of lively imitation that are also included in the same category. For Burden, this type of self-consciousness necessitates close examination since it is a conventional strategy used in new situations in response to the way that historical forms endure and structurally dominate later work. Burden further argues that the parodic novel makes itself capable of probing into the difficult link between real-seeming artifice and reality by methodically presenting and flouting the parameters of its own artifice. A persistent attempt is made in the fully self-aware novel to give readers the impression that the fictitious universe

is an authorial creation set against a backdrop of literary tradition and convention (136-37).

Burden's argument that the whole post-romantic demand for originality is both represented and destabilised in the contemporary use of parody and pastiche also mediates Byatt's understanding of parody (136). Byatt's focus on parody as a "particularly literary way of pointing to the fictiveness of fiction, gloomily or gleefully" ("People in Paper Houses" 30) privileges a text's literary ties to other texts over originality. Byatt would certainly agree with Hutcheon that, since it both reveres and challenges the past, parody does not obliterate it (*Poetics* 126). Hutcheon's definition highlights the ontological function of parody in *Possession*: as Andrea Louise Rohland-Lê pertinently argues, the nineteenth century both inspires and links the characters to their intellectual and biological precursors, whereas present-day misconstructions of the past command Byatt's critique (104). Rohland-Lê adds that the novel's entire structure – which alternates between the 1980s and the past – is parodic, since it demands a continual appraisal of Byatt's reproduction of the Victorian novel vis-à-vis the reader's perception of the "genuine article." As a result, for the reader who is familiar with nineteenth-century fiction, Byatt's novel becomes a seemingly endless creator of intertexts (104).

On the other hand, Byatt also emphasises her use of parody in the novel as a combination of candid, unmalicious insight, criticism and ridicule (Rose 24). In fact, she declared in an interview that she hoped the mockery of the academics in *Possession* was comic rather than viciously satirical (Franken). Since Byatt believes that satire can be nasty as it is uncomfortably close to cruelty and that understanding is more important than criticising, she portrayed "all the appalling scholars also as intelligent beings who actually understood things" (Franken). However, I would suggest that this is done in a curiously distorted way very much compatible with the political agendas Byatt so dislikes in the study of literature. This nuanced ambivalence, in which Byatt's explicit favouring of understanding over criticism is complicated by her use of comic mockery as a parodic strategy to highlight both the gross misreadings of certain types of critical approaches through their representatives, and the fact that these individuals did not lack intelligence despite their

formidable misconstructions, is in itself a subtle denial of Byatt's abhorred either/or dichotomy. In this sense, Byatt's simultaneous empathy with "the intelligent beings who actually understood things" she implicitly wants to "understand," and distance from "the appalling scholars" whose academic endeavours cannot help but be "criticize[d]" can be said to evince Byatt's understanding of the meaning of parody in its truest significance as *both* imitation *and* distance, as opposed to its more restrictive understanding as *either* one *or* the other (Rose 49).

Hence, I would argue, Byatt's typical rejection of polar opposites finds a natural expression in parody. This repudiation is further enhanced by her complex use of parody in *Possession*, since the history and etymology of parody lend themselves to the same ambivalence Byatt skilfully navigates in her novel.

The Most Famous Fictional Feminist Scholar of the Late Twentieth-Century: Maud Bailey

With three remarkable exceptions, the "Victorian" chapters in *Possession* are mainly written as first-person narratives (a device which brings the reader closer to the characters), as opposed to the chapters set in the twentieth century, which are narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator (a technique which is believed to create narrative distance). These Victorian chapters – chapter 15, an exploration of the Victorian poets travelling as man and wife to Filey Brigg; chapter 25, a poignant account of Ellen Ash's impotent watch over her dying husband; and the postscript, a moving description of Ash's and Maia's only encounter – are narrated by an omniscient narrator and are the only ones which contain information that is unavailable to the twentieth-century academics.

Thus, while seemingly using a structural narrative device which invites distance from the reader at three key moments in the text – as she consistently does in the narration of contemporary events – Byatt actually furthers the reader's complicity by disclosing secrets which the academics are not aware of. The same technique is used for two opposite purposes, much like what happens with Maud's letter to *Victorian Poetry* and LaMotte's retrieved poems. Maud's letter – the only first-person insight

into the thoughts and feelings of a contemporary character that is also outside the diegesis and beyond the ending of the novel – brings the reader closer to her rather than to LaMotte, paradoxically rendered more inaccessible and remote in these poems. At another level, Maud's letter insists on the impossibility of ever really knowing the past, except in its textual traces – which may be wrongly interpreted, as was the case of the contemporary feminist reception of LaMotte's poetry – which *Possession* had already brilliantly investigated.

The letter, which mimics the academic exchange of information between colleagues illustrated by Ariane le Minier's letter to Maud in *Possession* (379-380), is surprisingly much more personal than Maud's constrained, self-imposed distance from her fellow women academics might lead us to expect, showing a side of her that is only hinted at towards the end of *Possession*. The letter starts with Maud wondering if Professor Hughes "would be interested in the two enclosed fragments" which, she specifies in the second paragraph, are "fragments of poetry, in holograph," "in Christabel LaMotte's handwriting, though they are not signed" (Michell-Bailey 1). At this point, the unsuspecting reader/critic turns to the signature at the end of the letter to behold the immediately conspicuous "Maud Michell-Bailey," which in visual terms marks the material boundary between Maud's letter and LaMotte's poems. After the initial shock of finding a fictional scholar suddenly coming to life in a real academic journal, and, having absorbed the news regarding Maud's changed marital status since the end of *Possession*, the reader/critic is quite prepared to be subjected to more thrilling discoveries. In fact, this signature confirms our readerly expectations that Maud and Roland's relationship would bloom into a serious commitment, in which Maud would no longer have to "keep [her] defences up because [she] must go on doing [her] work" (*Possession* 506). For his part, Roland is expected to keep on holding in high regard the fact that she looks real while "everything else – fades" (*Possession* 506), regardless of how inconvenient that may be, given the new position as a lecturer he contemplated in one of three universities. Although Maud and Roland are said to have grown up not believing in love outside the academic context of analysing it – as opposed to feeling it, like the Victorian counterparts they are now

seemingly bound to emulate – they will rewrite LaMotte and Ash’s love story with the happy ending the Victorian poets were unable to achieve.

Maud’s letter continues with her admission that she – a devoted LaMotte scholar and LaMotte’s great-great-granddaughter – does not know of any complete or published version of the poems (Michell-Bailey 1). Hence, Maud immediately – and excitingly – certifies the authenticity and originality of the poems in her possession in a way that furthermore echoes Roland’s first discovery of Ash’s drafts of a letter to LaMotte in the London Library. In fact, Maud makes the reader of her letter become as “profoundly shocked by these writings” (*Possession* 6) as Roland was when he first found Ash’s letters. Unlike the reader of *Possession*, who might be untrained in literary theory, the reader of *Victorian Poetry* is certainly a specialised reader, if not a literary scholar, and Maud’s letter brilliantly awakens in her reader the feeling described by *Possession*’s narrator with regard to Roland: “in his scholarly capacity, [he was] thrilled” (6). Likewise, Maud’s discovery of LaMotte’s poems mirrors Roland’s unearthing of Ash’s letters, since the poems were as much hidden in the plain sight of Maia’s belongings as the drafts had been lying undisturbed inside Ash’s copy of Vico’s *Principi di Scienza Nuova*, held by the library at the time of their discovery.

The most significant difference between the two discoveries seems to lie in the fact that, given his literary status both in his and in the twentieth-century scholars’ time, Ash’s drafts could be expected to have been found earlier by a scholar who was perusing his personal books for the potential existence of handwritten notes. Conversely, bearing in mind LaMotte’s relative obscurity – in addition to the fact that she had only been recently traced back to Maia – the fact that her poems were not uncovered earlier is perhaps not as surprising. Significantly, the physical spaces in which this documental evidence of the two Victorian poets was discovered seem to transcend the boundaries between the private and the public, since Ash’s personal letters to LaMotte were discovered at a public library, as opposed to the domestic space in which LaMotte’s poems – a potentially public art form – were found.

Given Maud’s privileging of LaMotte’s poems over Maia’s drawing, which were discovered among the latter’s personal effects, the reader is

led to assume that the poems were written first. Moreover, Maia's drawing on the back of a sheet scrawled in her aunt's handwriting seems to prove that the work produced by "an aunt who [was] always telling [her] poems" (*Possession* 510) – despite Maia's dislike for poetry – was of no consequence to her. However, since there is not enough textual evidence to support this hypothesis, the opposite might with equal probability have occurred.

After describing the process whereby Maud uncovered LaMotte's poems, the opening paragraph of Maud's letter conveys two new clues to the many events that ostensibly occurred between the end of *Possession* and the publication of the letter. Hence, the reader is turned into the literary sleuth embodied by Maud and Roland in their quest for the Victorian poets – and, in the process, is deliberately brought closer to Maud in a way unparalleled in *Possession*. Maud's letter informs the editor of *Victorian Studies* (and not least, the readers of that journal) that May – or Maia as she had been christened by her mother – had become a renowned painter whose work was daringly impressionistic and fragmentary (Michell-Bailey 1). More importantly still, the reader is apprised that Maia signed her work – which resembled other works of May LaMotte, Maud's great-grandmother – with her biological mother's surname (1).

This disclosure provides two interconnected implications regarding May/Maia LaMotte's name. On the one hand, it suggests that LaMotte's daughter chose the name May over Maia, "which she did not like" (*Possession* 509) as she told Ash in their only meeting in 1868, as poignantly described in the postscript. Therefore, Ash's proposition that her dislike "might come to change" since "names grew and diminished over time" (*Possession* 509) does not seem to have come to pass. In fact, the child's dislike of her name does not seem to have abated in the slightest when, upon hearing that her long name was Maia Thomasine Bailey, Ash volunteered the information that "Maia was the mother of Hermes, thief, artist, and psychopomp; and that he knew a waterfall called Thomasine" (*Possession* 509) – the one the reader knows he visited with LaMotte, but which had no tender association in their daughter's mind.

On the other hand, and since, unbeknownst to herself, Maia had been raised by her maternal aunt, Sophia Bailey (a married lady who adopted her husband's surname in lieu of her maiden name), the fact that Maia would eventually recover her biological mother's surname is open to the speculation that she would have come to know the secret of her true parentage, and would have shown her forgiveness for her mother's unwilling, yet life-long deception by changing her own surname into LaMotte. Although Maud's letter does not reveal whether Maia was told the secret, or if she found it out by accident, LaMotte's letter to Ash, written while he lay on his deathbed, makes it quite clear that she did not betray the secret to their daughter, nor did she expect Ash to have done it, since for all she knew he was not aware of their daughter's existence (*Possession* 501).

Hence, we can only surmise that this discovery probably took place after LaMotte's death, as corroborated by a second piece of documental evidence. In fact, in a short testament dated 1890 – which LaMotte dictated to her sister, since she was too weak to write clearly – and later found among Sophia's personal effects, LaMotte bequeathed “all [her] books and papers, and [her] copyrights, [on] Maia Thomasine Bailey in the hope that in the fullness of time she may become interested in poetry” (*Possession* 435-436). Although Maia never took kindly to the books and poetry her mother loved, there is no indication in *Possession* that during LaMotte's lifetime she ever painted either, as the former's account of Maia's adulthood in her last, unread letter to Ash evinces (*Possession* 500, 502).

Again, Maia's taking to painting as an artistic pursuit that escaped the close confines of domesticity – as suggested by the fact that the drawing found by Maud is neither a piece of juvenile memorabilia nor the work of an untrained, amateurish hand – can be speculated upon as the discovery of a vocation later in life, after the birth of her son Walter. The doubly artistic blood that coursed through her veins would eventually come to make itself felt, albeit in a form different from her parents.' It can also represent a late tribute to the mother who, Maia would eventually learn, sacrificed her own art for the sake of the daughter she could never acknowledge. Either way, Maia seemingly achieved the balance between personal and artistic life that LaMotte was denied, while retaining the

feminist precedent of becoming known in the art world by her mother's name instead of her husband's.

The next two paragraphs of Maud's letter are devoted to analysing the enclosed LaMotte poems. The Victorian poet's scrawling across the page seems to suggest her arachnidan alias's contortions while spinning its web. Hence, it visually contributes to a feeling of inaccessibility, which sharply contrasts with the presentness of Maud's probably typewritten reader-friendly letter. LaMotte's handwriting is moreover so minute and blurry as to set, the reader intuitively feels, a deliberate barrier – which resembles the glass barrier that separates fairy tale princesses from the world – against the trespassing of reading, let alone interpreting its signs. The process of reading is often interrupted by one or more illegible words, where the reader must speculate over the words in context to grasp the meaning of the line.

Yet, even that interrupted and often conjectural reading corroborates Maud's remark that the poems undoubtedly have some biographical relevance (Michell-Bailey 1), since the reader is able to perceive truly LaMottean tropes in both the spider poem and in the witch-in-a-tower fragment. Additionally, the poem about the “white and gray angry spirits” conveys a typically Victorian concern with the afterlife combined with LaMotte's personal fears and desires, poignantly rendering in poetic form her confused sensations regarding her two irreconcilable love(r)s at the séance in which Ash also participated. Moreover, the reading of the poems is facilitated by Maud's analysis, which proves doubly useful in its first decoding of the actual words on the page, followed by a characteristically insightful discussion.

“The Most Famous ‘Victorian’ Woman Poet of the Late Twentieth-Century, Christabel LaMotte”

The first poem is a meditation on the afterlife, in which LaMotte seemingly hopes and fears being reunited with both Ash and Blanche. The poem is structurally divided into four stanzas of four lines each, with an uncharacteristic single line interpolated between the first and second stanzas. The perfect single rhyme consistently used in every stanza

enables the reader to guess at more illegible words, hence assisting to clarify meaning, in addition to its more immediate aesthetic effect of creating a musical cadence. “When I come to my last home,” the poem opens, “There shall be two angry spirits come / To claim my remnants” (Michell-Bailey 3); these lines set a strangely mixed tone of despondency and combativeness by immediately suggesting that the persona’s reception in the afterlife would be troubled by the same anger that marked LaMotte’s final earthly encounters with both Blanche and Ash. This was also suggested in LaMotte’s letter to Mrs. Cropper in *Possession*, when she questioned the cheerfulness of “those revenants, those Loved Ones” towards the ones who have betrayed them, as opposed to the expected “Voices of Righteous Anger” (389) she felt she deserved instead. Although the ends of both the second and fourth lines are difficult to decode precisely because the last word in each line is not easily decipherable, the words that can be read without interruption are clear enough.

The analysis of the single interpolated line – “And one is white as any bone” – in connection with the first two lines of the second stanza, “And one is white and one is gray / As white as bone, as cold as clay,” substantiates Maud’s interpretation that “the two angry spirits” are Ash and Blanche. On the one hand, Maud argues that Ash and LaMotte frequently used the word “ash” in their poetry and correspondence as a metaphor for “grey cinders.” Likewise, in Maud’s view, Blanche Glover’s name is connected to practically any reference of whiteness in LaMotte’s middle and later works (1). In her allusion to the Victorian poets’ wordplay with “ash,” Maud refers to both the poems and letters that the reader of *Possession* is familiar with. On the other hand, there is the added suggestion of some other texts (almost certainly poems, since *Possession* ostensibly provides the complete correspondence) which the reader has no knowledge of, because the wordplay in the poems in *Possession* is not as frequent as Maud seems to assert in her remark. I would expand Maud’s correct observation that Blanche’s name seems to become interchangeable with whiteness in the aftermath of Blanche’s death by focussing on the uncanny simile that LaMotte used in two consecutive lines in her poem. In fact, the description of “the angry spirit” as “white as bone” eerily

underlines the association of white with "the colour of shrouds, of apparitions and spectres" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1106) which consistently characterises Blanche even while alive, further enhanced in this spectral figuration through an insistent emphasis on death.

Hence, this construction talks back to the séance, in which "a white hand was seen hovering above the table, carrying a marvellous white wreath, with the dew still fresh upon it, and surrounded by a crown of silvery lights," in conjunction with a disembodied "marvellously sweet voice" that claimed to have brought "gifts of reconciliation" (*Possession* 396-97). At the same time, the white-as-bone angry spirit also evokes LaMotte's musings on the "corporeal nature" of the body beyond the grave, as expressed in her letter to Mrs. Cropper (*Possession* 387-89). The full significance of the interpolated single line is thus made apparent, with LaMotte privileging Blanche over Ash due to her unabated guilt towards her lost companion.

The final two lines of the second stanza must be read in connection with the first two lines of the third stanza: "Amongst my ribs ten fingers play / And meet ten more, and turn away. // They clutch the fragments of my heart, / They grasp and slide, they tear apart" (Michell-Bailey 3). Clearly LaMotte hoped to be reunited with both Blanche and Ash, and yet she did not anticipate any possible reconciliation between them even in the afterlife. Conversely, LaMotte foresaw their enduring competition for her favour in a process which would literally tear her heart apart, as the disagreeable reference to bodily grasping ominously predicts. Unable to choose between the two, LaMotte could not resort to the same elegant solution of keeping both near her while not committing entirely to either, which she devised in her tale "The Glass Coffin" (*Possession* 58-67).

Therefore, the poem concludes with a note of despair: "And so we struggle wearily / And separate, and join, and sigh / In a mockery of eternity" (Michell-Bailey 3). While the first two lines reinforce the impression of LaMotte's long struggle, the last line suggests her subdued anticipation of the disturbed eternity that is commonly held to await unredeemed sinners. In her letter to the editor of *Victorian Poetry*, Maud associates this poem with the deceptive perpetuity she has referred to in her article, "Dolls as Simulacra of Women and of Works of Art," which

chiefly concerns the poem “Dolly Keeps a Secret,” since it also encloses a phrase about “mocking eternity” (1). Thus, Maud cites both an academic paper she has ostensibly written after the end of *Possession*, and LaMotte’s poem on dolls which gave her a clue as to where LaMotte hid her correspondence with Ash, to comment on LaMotte’s reference to eternity in “the two angry souls” poem.

The second poem, detailed by Maud in the fourth paragraph of her letter, is even more fragmentary than the first, both due to its Dickinson-like formal structure, and to the several crossed words which increase its resistance to interpretation. Maud’s critical reading of the second poem connects several threads in LaMotte’s poetry and letters. For Maud, both biographical and thematic interest may be found in the verse that begins, “The witch is the bobbin,” since LaMotte’s poetry about witches and fairy tales is a significant component of her body of work. The Victorian poet regularly alludes to *Rapunzel* and to the English and French translations of *The Sleeping Beauty*. The spider in the “insect poems” and the letters, whose spinning is a metaphor for LaMotte’s female creativity as figuratively spun from herself, is connected in this poem to the witch from poems such as “The Thicket is Thorny” (*Possession* 35). As Maud perceptively remarks, LaMotte frequently describes herself as a witch in a tower in her later letters from Seal Court (Michell-Bailey 1-2).

Significantly, Maud connects the female image of “the thread as something binding the ‘witch’ to the ‘small head’ or ‘gold head’” (2), which she has seen described as “an elastic thread joining mother and child in other women’s poetry about maternity” (2), to the mother/ child bond, in which “a kind of metaphoric post-umbilical cord, whose presence is experienced as a physical tug and limitation” (2) is sometimes uneasily felt. The critique of motherhood, whose conception is quite reminiscent of LaMotte’s own experience, is however unexpectedly turned into a personal commentary, since Maud admits to having felt exactly like that since the birth of her own baby, Rowan, and having had nightmares very similar to the images in this poem – before she learnt about the poem itself (2). Therefore, the reader is apprised that the similarities between the Victorian and contemporary plot after the end of *Possession* are reinforced by the fact that Maud has had a daughter with Roland.

Ever the scholar, Maud comments that feminist criticism concedes the legitimacy of personal response (2) to preface her own reaction to LaMotte's predicament: "I can say that before the birth of my daughter I had quite failed to imagine the nature of the pain LaMotte must have daily experienced, seeing her child and being unable to acknowledge the tie – so literally the tie" (2). In this admission, Maud reconciles the biological experience of childbearing with the intellectual apprehension of motherhood, which is quite consistent with a feminist conceptualisation which insists that "[m]otherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage – pregnancy and childbirth – then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct" (Rich 12). Therefore, I would suggest that by giving birth to her child, Maud has also given birth to herself, in the sense that she resolved what Byatt has termed the body/mind dilemma by thinking through her female and maternal body, in addition to feeling the constraints that motherhood imposed on LaMotte with her mind. In the process, Maud has become both a more empathetic person, since she is now able to identify with LaMotte as a mother where before giving birth she could not, and a better academic, in the sense that she is now able to intellectually explore possibilities that had not presented themselves to her before.

This is not to say that a childless female academic, or a male scholar for that matter, is unable to apprehend the meaning of motherhood, since I would agree with Adrienne Rich that "[m]otherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is *one part* of female process; it is not an identity for all time," as "we need selves of our own to return to" after we "let our children go" (36-37). Still, in keeping with Rich's feminist approach, I would argue that Maud's experience of motherhood is likewise informed by "the experiencing of one's own body and emotions in a powerful way," since "[w]e experience not only physical, fleshly changes but the feeling of a change in character" (Rich 37) – in which the communal pronoun "we" includes the women who, like Rich and Maud, are mothers themselves.

Maud passes no further comment on the hardly decipherable spider poem – whose more erratic handwriting is further complemented by the greatest number of blots and crossed-out words of the three poems – other

than her referencing it back to *Possession*, in which several allusions to LaMotte's insect poems can be found. The first reference is found in the collected feminist scholarship on LaMotte, which includes Leonora Stern's essay, with the indication that the essay "Ariachne's Broken Woof" "elegantly dissected one of Christabel's insect poems, of which there were apparently many" (38), although neither the poem nor the essay is included in the novel. Another reference can be found in Maud's aside to Roland, when they first start reading the letters together at the Baileys' manor, that Ash "seems to have read Christabel's insect poems" (130). Maud's hypothesis is confirmed in one of Ash's letters, in which he writes *à propos* a spider poem that LaMotte had enclosed in a previous letter (157-58).

The poem that Ash alludes to seems to give poetic form to LaMotte's remarks on the "altogether more Savage and businesslike sister" (87) Arachne, which are first mentioned in her answering letter. In fact, despite chronologically coming after Ash's letter, LaMotte's missive – in which she famously compares herself to Arachne (87) – makes an earlier textual appearance. The poem proper is notoriously missing in the correspondence, and it would be another literary coup if the poem Maud encloses in her letter were actually that lost poem. Yet, I would say that is highly unlikely, since the three poems were found on the back of one of Maia's drawings that was likewise unknown in the context of her later work and was itself found lying among her school things. This suggests that the poems were written after Maia was born – thus excluding the spider poem, which is known to have been written long before – and accidentally preserved because they happened to be among the work that Maia (or Sophia, or Christabel) had chosen to keep. The poems' subject matter suggests particular times in LaMotte's life, and they might in fact have been written at different intervals. The writing of the witch poem seems to correspond to LaMotte's self-acknowledged comparison in her final letter to Ash, hence suggesting it might have been written at that time. Conversely, the "mocking eternity" poem must have been written after Ash's demise, since LaMotte expects to be un-welcomed into eternity by him and the long-lost Blanche, although of course there is no room in

Maud's concise letter for textual evidence that could support these speculations.

Conclusion: "Mocking Eternity"

The last paragraph of Maud's letter turns from the enclosed LaMotte poems to Maud's proposed future research with a postmodern parodic twist, in which Maud declares her intention to write an article on dolls, fairytales, myths, and rhythms as mocking or fragmentary eternities. As an example, Maud adds, one could look at the supernatural creatures and stories in Byatt's self-referential novella "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," which is about the life and death of the (female) body (Michell-Bailey 2).

This playful reference to Maud's project of writing on Byatt is significant at two different levels. On the one hand, if Byatt had already essayed a blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality by making a genie from *One Thousand and One Nights* grant three wishes to a contemporary female scholar in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," it had nevertheless happened within the confines of a fictional text. Yet, both Maud's letter and LaMotte's poems evince a different blurring of boundaries, as they bring two fictional characters into real-life academia. In fact, Byatt displays in *Possession* the conditions of the novel's artifice by conveying a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention, thus indicating the problematical relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality. Therefore, these fictional constructs manage to de-naturalise the relationship between the fictional and the real world. Furthermore, Maud's project of writing on Byatt's supernatural beings in "The Djinn and the Nightingale's Eye" as mocking or partial eternities obscures this distinction even further at the same time it engages the complicity of the reader even more than in "The Djinn." After all, it is not every day that a late twentieth-century fictive professor comes to life in the pages of a very real academic journal and speaks of a real author, her creator.

Hence, I would argue, Byatt's life-long exploration of boundaries between "the problems of the 'real' in fiction" and "the relations between

truth, lies, and fiction” (*Passions of the Mind* 3, 21) brilliantly frees itself from the confines enforced by the realism/literary experimentation divide in a text that simply transcends such constraints. By turning a fictional character that she created into a “real” person, with added documental evidence to prove it, while she allows herself to become a critical reference in her character’s writing, Byatt plays impressive games with metafictionality, metatextuality, and intertextuality. She both writes into and beyond the sophisticated web of her own preceding novel, which Maud’s letter speaks back to, in addition to a superbly executed imaginative tour de force in which there are no fixed boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Through Maud’s letter, the imaginary becomes real, in Picasso’s sense that everything you can imagine is real, and life imitates art in the Wildean sense that telling beautiful but untrue things is the proper aim of Art.

A sophisticated game in which fictional characters come to life and real people become fictionalised, the letter and poems raise important theoretical questions while they seemingly free themselves from the constraints imposed by what Hughes, the editor of *Victorian Poetry*, has rightly termed “overdetermined readings, simplification, distortion” (6). At the same time, they joyously invite a critical return to *Possession*, with which they establish a parodic and intertextual dialogue in a magisterially executed inturned mirror game in which the boundaries between the real and the imaginary cease to exist and which the reader is also called on to actively participate in. Taken together, Maud’s letter and LaMotte’s poems are a fascinating exploration of the productive meeting of Byatt’s literary and critical imagination, further informed by a typical refusal to be bound by theoretical labels.

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