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Edited by

Alexandra Cheira

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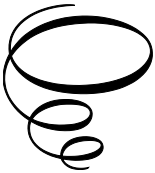

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INTRODUCTION

ALEXANDRA CHEIRA

A. S. Byatt and the Wonder Tale

A. S. Byatt "has earned a formidable reputation as a novelist of ideas" (Roe 1990, 215). Moreover, she has admitted to having read "quite difficult things quite young [because] nobody told [her that she] couldn't [and] worked [her] way through Dickens and Sir Walter Scott and Stevenson and Jane Austen when [she] was little" (Miller 1996, para. 31). Hence, it is perhaps surprising to learn that Byatt's primary impulse to write was not due to what her most famous teacher in Cambridge would name "The Great Tradition" of English writers, as she acknowledges in the essay "Fairy Stories: *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*":

> [M]y impulse to write came, and I know it, from years of reading myths and fairy tales under the bedclothes, from the delights and freedoms and terrors of worlds and creatures that never existed. (…) So I learned the world from Asgard, and from the Greek myths, and from Grimm and Andersen, for the world is clearly not only what it appears to be in the pages of history books. ("Fairy Stories" para.1)

Unsurprisingly, Byatt's lifelong fascination with the enchanted realm of wonder tales is therefore embedded in both her creative and critical work. To provide some examples, in her critical capacity she has devoted three out of the seven chapters, which comprise her essay collection *On Histories and Stories*, to chartering the lands of wonder from *The Thousand and One Nights* and Boccacio's *Decameron* to the Grimms and Andersen, Italo Calvino, and Karen Blixen. Byatt has also authored the introduction to Maria Tatar's *The Annotated Brothers Grimm,* as well as the introduction to *The Arabian Nights*, a collection of tales taken from Richard Burton's translation of *One Thousand and One Nights.* Finally, Byatt translated into English "The Great Green Worm", a seventeenth-century tale by the *conteuse* Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy – who, at the time of Byatt's translation in 1997, was a relatively unknown writer since most of her work had been out of print.

In the *Guardian* article "Happy Ever After", Byatt acknowledges the fact that she acquired "a hunger for fairy tales in the dark days of blackout and blitz in the second world war" and mentions Hans Christian Andersen as one of the authors she read "early and voraciously and indiscriminately" ("Happy Ever After" para.1). Yet, the fact that Byatt admires Andersen's wonder tales does not mean that there may be no differences or tensions between them and her incorporation of Andersen's motifs in her own tales.

In fact, the quality of Byatt's fictional and critical work has deserved public recognition via the award of several prizes and distinctions, namely the Hans Christian Andersen Literature Award in 2018, a Danish literary award established in 2010 which is bestowed bi-annually on a living author whose work resembles Andersen's. Upon announcing the award, the committee said: "The Hans Christian Andersen Literature Award 2018 is conferred to A. S. Byatt for her belief in the true value of fairy tales, fables and poetry, along with her historical fiction that innovatively brings the works of Andersen to life" (Gadd 2017, para. 4).

While Andersen is unquestionably one of Byatt's wonder tale forefathers (the others being the Brothers Grimm), the subject of her foremothers in this specific genre has not been sufficiently addressed. In fact, I would appropriate Virginia Woolf's axiom that "[p]oetry ought to have a mother as well as a father" (Woolf 1945, 101) in the different context of the wonder tale to suggest that it is important to recall that both male and female authors contributed to its inception and development. This necessarily brief overview of Byatt's wonder tale literary foreparents takes into due consideration the fact that the authors who automatically spring to mind tend to be male – Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, Lewis Carroll, J. M. Barrie – since their tales entered the European canon, thus continuing to be read and analysed.

Conversely, the genre's female authors before the twentieth century might be likened to the traditional princesses in distress, given the fact that many of them – Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, Henriette-Julie de Murat, Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy, Christina Rossetti, Juliana Horatia Ewing, Jean Ingelow, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, E. Nesbit – have figuratively slept the long slumber of readerly oblivion before they were awakened by the kiss of literary scholars and folklorists who revived reader interest via their scholarship. Yet, given Byatt's dislike of separate literary canons, the fact that her own personal wonder tale canon has both mothers and fathers is certainly not accidental.

Therefore, on a par with Byatt's more influential forefathers, her more prominent foremothers necessarily must figure: the fictional Scheherazade,

Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy, and Christina Rossetti. One of the most well-known heroines in world literature, Scheherazade can dispense with an introduction, unlike d'Aulnoy – one of the seventeenth-century French women writers who were better known and whose work was more widely circulated than their best-known male counterpart, Perrault. To a lesser extent, the same has happened to Christina Rossetti – one of the nineteenth-century English women authors who wrote tales much appreciated by their contemporary readers, which however are now largely forgotten by general audiences, despite being the object of recent scholarship.

In light of my argument that Byatt participates in the female tradition of the literary wonder tale via her thematic and stylistic re-use of specific conventions delineated by the French *conteuses* as well as the Victorian women writers in their tales (see Cheira 2022, 531-562), the connection between Byatt's and her literary foremothers' ideal of gender relations is all the more significant in this context, despite the time and space which separate them. Regarding the *conteuses*, Lewis Seifert argues that "[t]o take the marriage endings seriously is not to discount the subversiveness of many of the *conteuses*' plots and characters". For Seifert, this "is not an 'either/ or' choice'", conversely meaning that "many of their *contes de fées* are fundamentally ambiguous or, more precisely, ambivalent", in which "competing ideological visions coexist" (Seifert 2004, 67). This could not fail to earn Byatt's seal of approval given her own views on the subject, while she also mirrors the *conteuses*' ambivalent endings in her tales.

Likewise, Victorian women wonder tale writers rebelled against both the conformity of the conventional tradition and the status quo itself and aligned themselves with the Utopian tradition of the wonder tale, whose subversive potential was used by the Romantics to question precisely both the Protestant and the Utilitarian ethics from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards (Zipes 1999, 114). Hence, the literary wonder tale allowed writers to symbolically deal with social taboos and suggest alternatives to accepted practices, namely with regards to children's education and social roles. It privileged the creation of strong female characters and emphasised the blending of so-called male and female qualities through their non-specificity. This meant that both men and women could be compassionate, brave, intelligent, and strong-willed – a characteristic that also noticeably resonates in Byatt's own tales.

From a stylistic point of view, it should be noted that the time-honoured narrative device of enclosing one or several tales within wider frames so favoured by the *conteuses* – which Byatt retakes in novels such as *Possession* or *The Children's Book*, but also in independent tales – spans storytelling in general and the wonder tale in particular. A few examples

will suffice to illustrate this point: the Sanskrit story collection *Panchatantra; The One Thousand and One Nights;* Boccacio's *Decameron;* Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales;* the *conteuses*' wonder tales; Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* Writers have deliberately used the narrative structure of frame tale and embedded stories to signal, as A. S. Byatt points out, "a narrative within a narrative and (…) part of that outer narrative" ("Fairy Stories" para. 9). Likewise, they have used different types of narrators as a literary device to emphasise the symbiotic relationship between teller and tale. Hence, the *conteuses*' narrators emulated their creators' self-appointed status as "modern fairies" – "all beautiful, young, well formed, nobly and richly dressed and housed", who lived "only in the courts of kings, or in enchanted palaces" (Murat quoted by Harries 2001, 57) – in stark contrast to Perrault's old illiterate lower-class narrators who merely performed menial "female" tasks and whose tales were dismissed by the *conteuses* as unsophisticated old wives' tales quite unsuitable for a cultivated adult audience. Unlike the *conteuses*, Victorian women wonder writers privileged single old women as their frame-tale narrators, which seems to suggest that these narrators were the visible mask of their creators as a means of implicitly questioning the institution of marriage itself.

In this light, Byatt follows in the critical footsteps of wonder tale scholars such as Marina Warner in her use of three specific female narrator figurations in her tales. In fact, in her 1995 study *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, Warner has traced the role of the female narrator of the wonder tale oral tradition as a mediator between silence as a female duty and speech as a male prerogative via the female narrator figures of the Sybil, the old wife, and the *conteuse's* fictional alter egos, which uncommonly intersect pagan and Christian traditions – as well as feminist tropes and postmodern narrative techniques. Like the *conteuses* before her, in the novels which contain embedded wonder tales Byatt privileges a narrative structure in which the female narrator is both the agent and the object of her narration. Yet, and unlike the *conteuses* (whose narrators were exclusively their narrative aliases), Byatt uses the entire range of female narrator figures at her disposal, so much so that in the same novel there are sometimes two different types of narrators. Therefore, in *Possession* Christabel LaMotte is a perfect embodiment of the Sybil whereas Gode typifies the old wife, while in "Morpho Eugenia" Matty Crompton assumes the symbolic contours of the *conteuses*' female narrators. Significantly, and in keeping with Warner's comprehensive account of their historical genealogies, Byatt productively draws from the symbolic configurations of each type of female narrator, so as to provide an

extra layer of meaning to the symbiotic interaction between her narrators and their tales.

Therefore, Byatt's own wonder tale production has been shaped by both male and female authors, as expressed both in her allegiance to, and in her subversion of their narrative tropes, motifs, techniques, and morals. In this sense, and like her novels, Byatt's wonder tales are also "about joining together thinking and feeling" (Brace 1996, para. 15), namely by subverting traditional wonder tales' gendered and moral expectations.

On a different note, Byatt has commented on the novel's embedding of myths and fairy tales as a significant narrative and structural strategy in European storytelling. In *On Histories and Stories,* she points out that "[t]he novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has always incorporated forms of myths and fairy tales, working both with and against them" (*On Histories and Stories* 130). In this light, *Possession* is certainly the quintessential fictional matrix for such concerns given its significant array of European mythologies, and of original and revised wonder tales such as "Gode's story", "The Three Caskets", or "The Glass Coffin". In addition, in her creative work Byatt has consistently crafted wonder tales as embedded stories in the wider frame of a novel ever since *Possession* (1990) to reflect on the symbiotic relationship between her fictional women writers and their fictional women written. That is not to say, however, that Byatt did not use wonder tale tropes in her pre-*Possession* fiction, most notably on her first short story collection *Sugar & Other Stories* (1987).

Yet, it was only in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (1994) that Byatt wholly devoted herself to writing an exclusively wonder tale collection, as explicitly announced in its title. According to Byatt, this collection is a fictional response to the need of "[a]nalysis of motives and responsibilities [which] is for the middle years when human beings are in the middle of decision-making and choosing partners", in which the eponymous story "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" is "a tale about this discovery" (*On Histories and Stories* 131-132). Assumedly "postmodern, in that they reflect on the nature of narrative, and of their own narrative in particular" (Byatt, "Fairy Stories" para. 12), Byatt's wonder tales "are stories about storytelling" (*On Histories and Stories* 136) which reflect Byatt's fascination with this enchanted realm, namely via her re-creation of traditional wonder tale motifs such as ice, snow, glass and mirrors (*On Histories and Stories* 151).

The second wonder tale collection *Elementals: Stories of Ice and Fire* (1998), perceptively reviewed as a re-appreciation of "the classic metaphorical opposition between hot (passion) and cold (rationality)" its subtitle suggests, offers "an implicitly Blakean twist to how Byatt goes

about doing this, in which hot and cold are never simple oppositions, but are instead made to depend upon each other in order to understand fully their meaning". This redeployment gets "its fullest treatment in the allegorical story 'Cold,' a full-blown modern fairy-tale that confirms Byatt's long-acknowledged debt to Angela Carter" (Matthews 2012, para. 3).

In fact, in the wider context of the contemporary literary wonder tale, and together with Robert Coover, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, and Salman Rushdie, A. S. Byatt belongs to what the editor of *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* has christened as "the Angela Carter generation" to designate the group of "indisputably influential writers of fiction for whom the fairy tale served (…) as a key point of reference, in terms both aesthetic and ideological" (Benson 2008, 2). Hence, Stephen Benson further argues, "the fairy tale generation, in the sense that their fictional projects are intimately and variously tied to tales and tale-telling", is perhaps more accurately described as "the Angela Carter generation, in that Carter's extensive work on the tradition of the fairy tale – as author, editor and critic – was pre-eminently influential in establishing a late-twentieth-century conception of the tales, the influence of which has continued into the new millennium" (Benson 2008, 2). In this light, Carter's "modernized fairy tales", which play with "the appropriation, recycling and combining of often antithetical literary forms" (Gamble 2008, 20), have paved the way for the contemporary, often feminist and/ or postmodern, revision of the genre.

Both Carter and Byatt refuse the simplistic formulation of the feminist wonder tale as a mere reversal of roles in which the heroine changes from passive to active agent, becoming the rescuer rather than the one who is rescued. Yet, they use different narrative strategies: Carter's transgressive heroines radically deconstruct politically correct visions of female propriety while they also "consistently refuse to occupy the moral high ground and behave as 'politically correct' feminist role models should" (Gamble 2008, 25). Therefore, Carter's fiction is peopled by lascivious female vampires and libertines, girls who barter their bodies for money, and not-so-pure newly-weds who prefigure sexual liberty at its most (politically incorrect) excessive. By contrast, Byatt's female characters are rather sedate: the fairies, princesses, lamias and mélusines who roam her fiction are less aggressively sexualised and eroticised than Carter's since Byatt does not regard female sexual agency (transgressive or otherwise) as the main locus of female power. For her, true female power comes from the ability to remain a separate, autonomous being who will dedicate herself to her life's passion (which in Byatt usually entails a woman artist), even – and especially – when falling in love. Unlike Carter, whose strongest heroines definitively belong to the realm of fantasy, Byatt's most remarkable wonder

tale female characters border the crossroads of realism and fantasy, often meeting at what, in Byatt's fiction, constitute the blurry boundaries between these two narrative modes.

In fact, Byatt's critics tend to agree that her tales "often take a truly hybrid form and present the reader with a heady mix of realism and fantasy" which allows them to alternatively be described as "realist stories with fairy tale touches, or as fairy stories injected with realism" (Alfer and de Campos 2010, 109). As Elizabeth Harries accurately points out, "Byatt is part self-conscious realist, part postmodern writer, and part storyteller", hence suggesting that Byatt's "continuing interest in alternative narrative possibilities" (Harries 2008, 90-91) coherently manifests itself in writing "the narrative expectations of a fairy story into a realist short story" (Chevalier 1999, 21). For Stephen Benson, Byatt's wonder tales are "different entirely not only from the realism of the classic European novel but also, and crucially, from the high literary experimentation of modernism" given her concern with "narrative and the self" as expressed in her consistent fictionalisation of "subjectivity conceived in narrative terms" (Benson 2008, 4).

Narrative and the self can surely be expressed through what Émilie Walezak terms as Byatt's "colour vision" in her review of the third wonder tale collection *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003). "Byatt's 'colour vision' is a key factor to uncover the leading patterns of her books", Walezak writes, and in this collection its very title "sets the tone for its five short stories", in which "black also dominates the book's cover in its various editions, which contrasts greatly with the vivid colours of Byatt's previous collections". Hence, Walezak argues, "the five stories are quite dark and could be labelled as domestic horror tales as they focus on the darkest aspects of British national history, namely World War 2, and of the body's personal story, whether the ageing body or the abused body" (Walezak 2015, para.1). Significantly, while commenting on the genesis of *Possession* in her 1999 essay "Choices: On the Writing of *Possession*", Byatt acknowledged that her creative process invariably starts when she "first recognise[s] a thought as the germ of a novel or story", upon which she "form[s] a shape, or file, in a corner of [her] mind, to which [she] add[s] things that seem to belong to it, quotations, observations", followed by such an intense visualisation of the text in terms of colour that she is able to describe in detail the individual hues that form the text-as-picture ("Choices" para. 2). She further elaborates on her visualisation of the novel in terms of changing colour schemes, powerfully enhanced by the vividness of her word palette, throughout the essay. Hence, Byatt's ekphrastic description of the lavishly opulent colour extravaganza at the heart – or, more fittingly in this context, at the eye – of

her creative process can also be argued to constitute "subjectivity conceived in narrative terms".

Perhaps the "Citation to the Erasmus Prize" – one of Europe's most distinguished recognitions awarded every year by the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation to individuals or organisations that have made outstanding contributions to culture, society, or social science in Europe and the rest of the world, which Byatt was awarded with in 2016 – best sums up Byatt's life-long achievements as a writer, as well as her decisive contribute to the expansion of our intellectual universes as readers – and namely, as wonder tale readers:

> The prize is awarded to A. S. Byatt on the following grounds: (1) Her work crosses boundaries in style and content. It covers an enormous range of genres, literary forms and subjects. She immerses the reader in the history of European thinking, taking the big questions about science, history and identity as her starting point; (2) In her wide-ranging body of work she unites great intellectual force with unbridled imaginative power; (3) Central to her work is a reinvention of 'old tales in new forms'. In revisiting myths and fairy tales, she turns them into a lasting reflection on the European history of ideas in narrative form; (4) Among her recurring themes are the influence of art on life, magic and realism, and the conflict between ambition and family; (5) The jury describes A. S. Byatt as a born storyteller with a keen eye for relationships in public and private life; (6) Many of her novels and her critical work explore the act of writing biography or conducting research. In the process, A. S. Byatt has reshaped the genre of life writing in her own unique way. (Annual Report Erasmus Prize 2016, 8).

"Stories about Storytelling": Discussing Wonder Tales in A. S. Byatt's Fiction

Richard Todd's designation of "wonder tales" as opposed to the more common appellation "fairy tales" is the earliest to be found in connection with Byatt's tales – to the significant exception of Christabel LaMotte's likewise preferred use of that term, which she used in a letter to Randolph Henry Ash in connection with the Holy Bible (*Possession* 160). Likewise, Byatt herself used the term in the related argument that "biblical narrative ceased to be privileged as unique truth, and became associated with partial histories of other kinds, of what Froude in *The Nemesis of Faith* calls 'Wonder Tales'", to explain the revived interest in "the nature of the individuals and the values they represented, as portrayed in secular narrative" (*Passions of the Mind* 94).

Todd's reasons for preferring "wonder tale" to "fairy tale" or "fairy story" are informed by Marina Warner's emphasis on the wondrous element, which is always present in this type of tales, as opposed to the actual absence of fairy entities in many of them. As she writes in *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment* (1996), "The French *conte de fées* is usually translated as fairy tale, but the word *Wundermärchen* was adopted by the Romantics in Germany and the Russian folklorists to characterise the folk tale or fairy tale". Warner further argues that this is "a useful term" because "it frees this kind of story from the miniaturised whimsy of fairyland to breathe the wilder air of the marvellous" (Warner 1995, 5). Likewise, the term "wonder tale" is preferred in this edited collection as more conducive "to the feel of the marvellous, and is indeed in every way less constricting, in conveying the sense of what are more usually referred to in English as 'fairy tales' or 'fairy stories'" (Todd 1997, 39).

The present investigation into A. S. Byatt's wonder tales stems from the fact that there is no sustained critical study which exclusively examines this particular area of Byatt's fictional work among the several critical volumes which examine her whole oeuvre, or that alternatively focuses on particular thematic tropes or novels. Therefore, this volume aims to add to the existing scholarship by focusing on a very productive, yet unaccountably little explored area of research within Byatt's fiction.

In fact, there are already several excellent comprehensive monographs on A. S. Byatt which investigate her entire creative production until the time of their respective publications, with a specific focus on the novels, namely Kathleen Coyne Kelly's *A. S. Byatt* (1996); Richard Todd's *A. S. Byatt* (1997); Celia Wallhead's *The Old, the New and the Metaphor: A Critical Study of the Novels of A. S. Byatt* (1999); Christien Franken's *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* (2001); Helen E. Mundler's *Intertextualité dans l'Ouevre d' A. S. Byatt* (2003); Jane Campbell's *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (2004); Louisa Hadley's *The Fiction of A. S. Byatt: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (2009); Alexa Alfer's and Amy J. Edwards de Campos's *Contemporary British Novelists. A. S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling* (2010); or Mariadele Boccardi's *A. S. Byatt* (2013).

Of these, some examine Byatt's short fiction within the wider panorama of her novels, usually in a single chapter which discusses several short-story collections (Todd 1997; Hadley 2009; Boccardi 2013), or investigate the intertextual connections between a particular story, or group of short stories and a novel (Mundler 2003; Alfer and de Campos 2010). Significantly, most of these critical chapters are particularly interested in specifically examining Byatt's wonder tales, as immediately suggested by their titles: "Wonder Tales" (Todd 1997); "Fiction Making, Fairy Tales and Feminism: Short

Stories" (Hadley 2009); "Tradition and transformation: *Possession* and fairy tales" (Alfer and de Campos 2010).

Other critical studies privilege more specific works, or one or more thematic tropes, namely Catherine Burgass's *A. S. Byatt's Possession* (2002); Margaret Reynolds' and Jonathan Noakes', *A. S. Byatt: the Essential Guide* (2004); Margarida Esteves Pereira's *Do Romance Vitoriano ao Romance Pós-Moderno: A Reescrita do Feminino em A. S. Byatt* (2007); Lena Steveker's *Identity and Cultural Memory in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Knitting the Net of Culture* (2009); or Elizabeth Hicks's *The Still Life in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt* (2010).

In 2001, the first edited collection of scholarly articles on A. S. Byatt's fiction, which discusses both novels and shorter fiction, was published: Alexa Alfer's and Michael J. Noble's *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real.* Of the twelve chapters that form this essay collection, four are entirely dedicated to shorter fiction – *Angels and Insects*, and "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" – and two of these explore the latter text in particular. A. S. Byatt's chapter "True Stories and the Facts in Fiction" from *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (2010) is also reprinted, with its specific focus on the two novellas that form *Angels and Insects.* The second edited collection of scholarly articles on Byatt's fiction – *Book Practices & Textual Itineraries: A. S. Byatt, Before and After Possession: Recent Critical Approaches* – was published in 2017 and comprises eleven articles, two of which analyse shorter fiction. The volume was guest edited by Armelle Parey and Isabelle Roblin in the aftermath of the international conference in Normandy organised by the *alma mater* of A. S. Byatt's late French translator, and personal friend, Jean Louis Chevalier. (Byatt was the guest of honour at the conference, since the organisation wished to commemorate Chevalier's extraordinary contribution to Byatt scholarship in her presence.)

The publication of two monographs entirely dedicated to the study of Byatt's short fiction – Carmen Lara-Rallo's *La Narrativa Breve de A. S. Byatt* (2004) and Celia Wallhead's *A. S. Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction* (2007) – has brought critical attention to the fact that, compared to the lengthy scholarship devoted to the study of Byatt's novels, there has been almost no sustained analysis of her shorter fiction. More recently, a special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English*, edited by Armelle Parey, Isabelle Roblin, and Emilie Walezak, which will be published in 2022, has specifically remarked on this critical neglect in its call for publications, which it has sought to address.

I would appropriate these editors' concluding remark that "Byatt's short stories have not been studied *per se*" into the related context of the wonder tale as a specific type of short story. The only sustained examinations of

Byatt's wonder tales until now remain Lisa Fiander's *Fairy Tales and the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble and A. S. Byatt* (2004), and the two chapters in Jane Campbell's *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (2004), which respectively examine two out of the three wonder tale collections that Byatt had published until 2004, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994) and *Elementals – Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998). Hence, the present critical project, in the form of an edited essay collection, seeks to increase a more sustained critical attention to Byatt's wonder tales, both the ones which are stand-alone tales and the ones which are embedded in the wider frame of a novel or novella.

In this light, *Wonder Tales in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt* examines Byatt's claim that her wonder tales "are modern literary stories and they do play quite consciously with a postmodern creation and recreation of old forms" ("Fairy Stories" para. 4) through a revisitation of the wonder tale in a productive dialogue with tradition as an expanded recognition of this fertile creative-critical dialogue with regards to the significance of the wonder tale in Byatt's fictional work. The individual chapters evince a fresh variety of conceptions and approaches to Byatt's wonder tales, some spanning several tales and others focussing on a specific wonder tale, all thoroughly observant of the nature and workings of the relationship between story or novel and genre or tale, and theoretically informed by innovative critical approaches. Hence, the chapters demonstrate the undeniable importance of the wonder tale in Byatt's fiction, in terms of both the relevance of individual tales and the author's extended interest over time in aspects of the wonder tale.

In "Wonderful Creatures and Liminality in A. S. Byatt's Short Fiction", *Carmen Lara-Rallo* offers a comprehensive account of Byatt's lengthy relations with the wonder tale, not least by analysing both Byatt's affiliation within the female literary tradition of the genre and by arguing the aptness of the term "wonder tale" within Byatt's fiction as informed by Richard Todd's and Marina Warner's discussion. Drawing on Byatt's translation of Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy's wonder tale "Le Serpentin Vert" ["The Great Green Worm"], Lara-Rallo investigates particular continuities between Byatt and her literary foremother by proposing the theoretical framework of liminality as a common thematic link in d'Aulnoy's tale and in Byatt's "A Lamia in the Cévennes", "A Stone Woman", "Dragons' Breath", and "The Thing in the Forest". Princess Hidessa's encounters with the eponymous Great Green Worm, Lara-Rallo argues, illustrate alterations in the protagonist's development by materialising as figurative initiation rites or liminal occurrences, a premise which she carefully scrutinises in Byatt's four tales. Hence, Lara-Rallo examines the presence of wonderful creatures

in these tales by exploring both the threshold between human and non-human beings as mediated by female metamorphosis, such as the lamia and the stone woman, and the trauma-derived liminal encounters with ghastly monsters, such as the eponymous dragons and supernatural thing in the forest.

The nature of female metamorphosis informed by trauma is also discussed by *María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro* in "Beyond the Single Gesture": Loss and Reconnection in "A Stone Woman", a chapter which examines Byatt's tale "A Stone Woman" in light of the evolutionary significance of the arts as a primary aid against illness and trauma, one of those adaptative coping skills that result from the traumatic nature of human evolutionary history (Bloom 2010,198-199). Martínez-Alfaro argues that A. S. Byatt's work recurrently prompts reflection on the value of art and literature, but her *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003) particularly engages with this issue in connection with loss, illness, death, and traumatic experience in general. Taking this as a point of departure, Martínez-Alfaro's chapter focusses on "A Stone Woman" as a story that bridges the black hole of traumatic loss through strategies that make it possible to negotiate the unthinkable through art and storytelling, metamorphosing previous stories of female petrification in order to ponder on and tell about what defies both the mind and language. As crucial to understanding Ines's evolution from loss to reconnection, from grief and fear to exhilarating life-in-death, Martínez-Alfaro also focusses on the tale's careful blending of geology and myth, metamorphosis of bodies and of tales, stony realism, and fantastic wonder. "A Stone Woman" is shown to illustrate the features of the "art of trauma" and to rely, in tune with Bloom's views, on integrating mechanisms that heal the fractured and remove the either/or from even the human/non-human binary.

"A Stone Woman" is further discussed by *Gillian M. E. Alban* in "Transformation through Celebration in A. S. Byatt's Wondrously Illuminated Tales", a chapter which also examines "Medusa's Ankles", "Art Work", "Body Art", and "Gode's Story" through the rhetorical lens of ekphrasis. In this light, Alban argues, these wonder tales offer a privileged insight into Byatt's ekphrastic imagination. Whether they are narrated realistically, in magical realist form, or in fairy tale style, these tales illustrate "literature's capacity to evoke visual impressions in the reader" via its "verbal power to create mental images" (Hertel 2005, 49). Hence, Alban focusses on the literary devices Byatt employs to visually evoke art works and objects by emphasising the strikingly pictorial quality of words purposefully used to create visual impressions as mediated by the creative work of the protagonists or real-life artists vis-à-vis literal, symbolic, or mythical female metamorphosis within the framework of a generative,

maternal power which can both create and destroy. These stories, Alban further argues, portray a unique array of fiercely insubmissive women who sassily strive towards their own authentic selves as figurative embodiments of either Kali or Medusa through Byatt's ekphrastic skills in creating textually lush visual images of personal metamorphosis and renewal which evidence a mythic flair while expressing a spirited approach to lives of celebration and celebrating lives.

Another approach to mythical embodiments in Byatt's wonder tales involves looking closely at the interplay of female goddesses and female protagonists, namely in *Possession*'s embedded story "The Threshold". Hence, in "'All old stories (…) will bear telling and telling again in different ways': Literary and Mythological Motifs in "The Threshold"", *Alexandra Cheira* investigates Byatt's homage to a specifically female tradition of the wonder tale, in which "the embedded tales and the frame (…) are always symbiotic, drawing life and sustenance even from their friction" (Harries 2001,107), since female narrators are similarly "narrators within narrations" ("Fairy Stories" para. 12). In the case of "The Threshold", Cheira argues, the fictional author of the tale, Christabel LaMotte, writes herself in her tale as the symbolic embodiment of the Roman goddess Diana Triformis in her triple form as Diana, Luna, and Proserpina, to suggest that, like the goddess, she likewise possesses sometimes conflictual facets integrated in the same person. Hence, Cheira contends, the mythological motif of Diana Triformis in *Possession* is strikingly heightened both in the embedded tale and within the wider frame of *Possession*. In addition to examining the literary sources which historically substantiate the theory of a triple representation of the goddess Diana, Cheira also examines the motif of the three caskets as a literary trope, together with Byatt's reception of Freud's eponymous essay.

Narrative voices, intertextualities, and the magic of storytelling are likewise discussed by *Barbara Franchi* in "A Matter of Stories: Transcorporeal Entanglements in 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'". In fact, Franchi argues, this tale is a modern rendition of the *Arabian Nights*' vortex of embedded stories, intertwining Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Anglophone traditions. Read as either "a feminist narratology" (Campbell 2004, 190) or an orientalist exploration of how a western female traveller fares in an exoticized east (Renk 2006, 115), Franchi contends that this postmodern novella intersects the power of stories with the material contingencies of embodied experiences. Byatt's protagonist Gillian, a female narratologist championing western second-wave feminism while experiencing the qualms of ageing, is juxtaposed to the more-than-human djinn: sharing stories becomes not only a regenerative act of mutual support and a tool in the inevitable romance, but also a strategy to question

hierarchies between male and female, east and west, layered, infinite temporalities of supernatural life with the finite, determined scope of human life. Mixing the metatextual concerns that characterise Byatt's oeuvre as a whole with a preoccupation with non-human forms of agency which emerges most prolifically in the writer's later works, Franchi argues here that the magical tropes of glass, water, and – more ambivalently – stone, become key transcorporeal entanglements where the human and the non-human intersect, opening the possibilities of shared, infinite narratives.

While Martinez-Alfaro focusses on myth and wonder tales as primary integrating mechanisms to cope with and confront the traumatic real, *Celia M. Wallhead* engages with trauma as "dis-integration" (Bloom 2010, 198) in "'Tom Underground', A Story within a Story: Its Role in *The Children's Book* and Its Coherence". Hence, Wallhead envisions "Tom Underground" – the story dedicated by the female protagonist Olive Wellwood (a writer of children's stories modelled on E. Nesbit) to her eponymous favourite child – as a disruptive tale that actively fosters Tom's traumatic loss of self. Rather than resorting to strategies that allow the child to mediate the void through the art of storytelling, Wallhead emphasises, Tom's tale offers an escape to a fantasy world that can also be related to physical and emotional suffering. In addition to examining the trauma and resulting fragility of Tom's mind vis-à-vis the trauma suffered by his generation a few years later in the First World War by arguing that the underground world and the tunnels of "Tom Underground" point not only to the mine shafts in which Olive's father and brothers died, but also to the trenches, Wallhead investigates the idea of personal writing and loyalty in Byatt's fiction. In this light, Wallhead argues, Tom is a new, youthful version of Cassandra of *The Game* (1967), who commits suicide upon feeling betrayed by the commodified and divulged writing about her by her sister. Within the novel, Tom himself echoes both Peter Piper "who walked to the sea" (Byatt, *The Children's Book* 90) and Peter Pan, the boy who wouldn't grow up, but also Benedict Fludd, who commits suicide by walking into the sea.

From the investigation into intertextual wonder tale motifs and common tropes in *The Game* and *The Children's Book, Margarida Esteves Pereira* moves on to an examination of the way women writers in A. S. Byatt's fiction conform to Marina Warner's assertion that the fairy tale opened an opportunity for women "to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas" (Warner 1995, xix). Hence, Pereira brings the discussion on the intertextual wonder tales inserted in Byatt's novels and their relation to the women writers represented in them full circle in "'Telling Stories about Stories': Embedded Stories, Wonder Tales, and Women Storytellers in A. S. Byatt's Novels". In order to understand how the stories within the stories contribute

to the creation of credible women characters who use the wonder tale to put forward messages of female autonomy and empowerment, Pereira's chapter focusses on such characters (and their stories) as Christabel LaMotte (*Possession: A Romance*); Gillian Perholt ("The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye"); Olive Wellwood (*The Children's Book*); and Matty Crompton ("Morpho Eugenia"). Therefore, Pereira argues, Byatt's novels are permeated by the figure of the woman writer, who seems to belong to a long tradition of women storytellers and wonder tale writers while being simultaneously a powerful reader empowered by her writing. Hence, Pereira's chapter fittingly concludes the volume by offering a comprehensive discussion of embedded stories, wonder tales, and women storytellers in Byatt's fiction.

The first and last chapters in the volume are intended to be read together with this introduction, since they cast a wider net over thematic tropes and stylistic devices in the context of Byatt's overall wonder tale production while broadly reflecting on the matter of gender and genre in Byatt's independent and embedded tales. Chapters Two to Six focus, in unique yet interconnected ways, on questions regarding the form, function, and role of storytelling in Byatt's specific tales, and the intimate relationship between narrative(s) and selfhood concerning the stories and their histories. All the chapters point beyond the end of the volume, in terms of both wonder tales in the fiction of A. S. Byatt and their reception, in the sense that they suggest questions for future consideration, hopefully pointing towards new texts and new critical inquiries. Therefore, it is fitting that the final word should go to A. S. Byatt, since she creatively and critically metamorphoses old tales into new forms (*On Histories and Stories* 123) – and whose commentary on *The Thousand and One Nights* might be applied to her own fiction as well:

> *The Thousand and One Nights* are stories about storytelling – without ever ceasing to be stories about love and life and death and money and food and other human necessities. Narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of blood. (…) We are all, like Scheherazade, under sentence of death, and we all think of our lives as narratives, with beginnings, middles and ends. Storytelling in general, and *The Thousand and One Nights* in particular, consoles us for endings with endless new beginnings. (…) [T]here is something very moving about Scheherazade entering on the happiness ever after, not at her wedding, but after 1001 tales and three children. (*On Histories and Stories* 166)

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CHAPTER ONE

WONDERFUL CREATURES AND LIMINALITY IN A.S. BYATT'S SHORT FICTION

CARMEN LARA-RALLO

Introduction

One of the stories collected in Marina Warner's *Wonder Tales. Six Stories of Enchantment* (1994) is Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's 1698 "Le Serpentin vert", translated by A. S. Byatt as "The Great Green Worm". This narrative revolves around the adventures of Hidessa, one of the twin princesses whose birth is evoked at the beginning of the story. The central events in these supernatural adventures are the princess's encounters with the wonderful creature that gives title to the story, the Great Green Worm. These moments acquire special relevance because they signal changes in the protagonist's evolution, emerging as symbolic rites of passage or liminal experiences. Indeed, my contention is that the anthropological concept of liminality becomes a fruitful theoretical framework to explore the recurrence of wonderful creatures in Byatt's fiction, and particularly in her short stories. As a genre, the short story has been examined by Adrian Hunter in terms of its suitability for the representation of liminal or problematic identities (Hunter 2007, 138) while Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann have argued that the in-betweenness of the short story places it as "an ideal terrain for mapping out liminality" (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 23).

In the light of this, the aim of the present chapter is to examine the presence of wonderful creatures in Byatt's short stories, exploring two types of supernatural beings from the point of view of liminality: those involving a process of female metamorphosis, in-between the human and the non-human (the lamia in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" and the troll woman in "A Stone Woman"), and those projecting the liminal passage through a traumatic or painful experience in the form of a terrifying monster (the creatures in "Dragons' Breath" and "The Thing in the Forest"). This examination will pay attention to the effects that Warner has found in

"wonder", "compounded of dread and desire at once, attraction and recoil, producing a thrill, the shudder of pleasure and of fear" (Warner 1996, 3).

Liminality and Byatt's Wonder Tales

The origins of liminality as a socio-cultural concept go back to Arnold van Gennep's anthropological studies in the early twentieth century. In *Rites of Passage* (1909), Van Gennep developed a tripartite model of transition rites in any society, which was rediscovered in the 1960s by Victor Turner. Deriving its name from *limen*, the Latin word for "threshold", the liminal period or phase was identified as the middle stage in a rite of passage. As Turner argued in "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage" (*The Forest of Symbols*, 1967), and later in *The Ritual Process* (1969), any transition or rite of passage follows a three-step process, as the ritual subject or passenger goes through the phases of separation, *limen* and aggregation (Turner 1969, 94-95) . The separation implies the passenger's detachment from a state or earlier fixed point in the social structure (Turner 1969, 94) whereas the aggregation means the reincorporation of the passenger as a stable subject into the social structure or *communitas*. In this process, the key phase that makes that reincorporation possible is the liminal period, during which the characteristics of the passenger are ambiguous: "he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 1969, 94). As Turner acknowledged later on, in his examination of social dramas in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974), sometimes the final stage of the transition may result not in the reintegration of the subject or social group, but in the social recognition of irreparable schism (Turner 1974, 41).

The image of the threshold is spatial in origin, like that of the margin or the border, although it has the advantage of suggesting movement in terms of the passage from one state to the other. The points of departure and arrival are in themselves "places of transition and transformation," (Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton 2000, 8) and the liminal emerges as "'transitional', without being unstable or provisional" (Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton 2000, 68). In his approach to the processualisation and temporalisation of space, Turner imbued the threshold with temporal attributes (Thomassen 2014, 9) and he emphasised the temporal dimension of liminality by focusing not on the threshold itself, but on the sequential action of passing through the threshold. In this way, the liminal is essentially dynamic, and so fluid and open to change (Aguirre 2004, 13-16) since it captures the processual sequence of the transition between the phase of break and the phase of reintegration (Ellis 2004, 34, 49). Therefore, liminality appeals to temporality

in its marking not just a beginning and an end, but also "duration in the unfolding of a spatio-temporal process" (Andrews and Roberts 2012, 1), consequently emerging as a chronological formation (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 7).

The dynamic quality of liminality is particularly significant because it opens the way, so my contention goes, to argue that, in its application to the exploration of wonderful creatures in Byatt's short fiction, liminality operates on two main levels: ontological and phenomenological. Firstly, from the ontological perspective, liminality becomes an apt critical tool to explore the in-between condition of the lamia and the woman turned to stone, immersed in a fluid state of metamorphosis. Secondly, from the point of view of phenomenology, the experience of a traumatic event is symbolically depicted as the encounter with wonderful creatures like the dragons or the thing in the forest, and this encounter triggers a change in the character that places the experience as a liminal transition in the character's evolution. This double quality of liminality as a state or condition, and as an experience or process, can be connected with Bjørn Thomassen's categorisation of the dimensions of liminality from the sociological perspective. As he argues, the liminal can be classified according to different parameters that include not only subjecthood (individuals, social groups, and whole societies), but also a spatial dimension, and interestingly, a temporal dimension, too (Thomassen 2014, 89-92). In the confluence of the axes of subject and time (moment, period, and epoch), Thomassen distinguishes liminal situations and processes whose duration ranges from a moment in an individual's life to an epoch in society at large. From this perspective, liminality underlies the individual conditions of the lamia and the stone woman as hybrid creatures (together with the events of their final transformations into a woman and a troll, respectively), and the wars affecting the protagonists and societies of "Dragons' Breath" and "The Thing in the Forest", as well as the psychological consequences that they entail.

Considering the ontological and phenomenological levels of liminality, as explored in Byatt's short stories below, it is possible to discover the convergence of both in "The Great Green Worm". On the one hand, D'Aulnoy's narrative, as translated by Byatt, is pervaded by transformation and change from the very beginning, incorporating several characters (including the protagonists) that find themselves in a condition of metamorphosis or hybridity. If princess Hidessa is transformed into the ugliest creature in the world almost at the time of her birth, the king of Pagody appears under the hideous form of the great green worm throughout

the story, displaying human traits such as the powers of reasoning and speech in conjunction with the terrifying aspect of the monstruous being:

> The Green Worm gave a long hiss (this is a serpentine way of sighing) and without reply, plunged beneath the waves. What a loathsome monster, said the princess to herself; he has greenish wings, and his body is all sorts of changing colours – he has ivory claws, and his head is covered with a sort of mane of ugly fronds. […] And yet, she went on, what makes him want to follow me, and by what mysterious agency does he talk like a rational being? (D'Aulnoy 1996, 196)

This description of the liminal creature, which both swims and has wings, contains some significant passages in the light of Byatt's wonderful beings: like the lamia, the body of the great green worm is "all sorts of changing colours", while his head "is covered with a sort of mane of ugly fronds", a characteristic echoed in the frightening aspect of the thing in the forest. In the context of Byatt's production, this fragment is quoted in the third volume of the Quartet, *Babel Tower*, as a tale read to a group of schoolchildren (*Babel Tower* 182).

On the other hand, the story portrays Hidessa's process of maturation and learning in the context of the moral lessons about the value of inner beauty and the dangers posed by curiosity. In this process, the princess's painful encounters with the great green worm trigger changes in the protagonist and her worldview, and so these experiences emerge as liminal transitions in Hidessa's emotional and intellectual evolution. All these changes are necessary for the expected happy ending, which portrays the eventual recovery of the monster's originally human nature, and Hidessa's beauty, as she literally crosses a threshold in her arrival in the underworld (D'Aulnoy 1996, 227).

Hidessa's liminal experiences with the great green worm become therefore revelatory in their teaching of the moral messages of the story. Similarly, the encounters with the wonderful creatures in the narratives by Byatt examined below can be seen as epiphanic in the way they exert an inspiring influence (as the lamia and the stone woman do on the artists depicted in the narratives) or allow the characters to face or overcome the effects of traumatic experiences, like the monsters in "Dragons' Breath" and "The Thing in the Forest". This revelatory or epiphanic quality is particularly significant in the context of the nature of Byatt's wonder tales, following Richard Todd's criterion when preferring the term "wonder tale" to that of "fairy tale". As he argues, the first expression is less constricting than the second one in the light of Warner's analysis of the pan-European and fantastic nature of wonder tales (originating in German *Wundermärchen*) in

comparison with the French *contes des fées* (Todd 1997, 39-40). This etymological explanation has been further expanded in the context of Byatt's criticism by Alexa Alfer and Amy Edwards de Campos, who argue that "the German term '*märchen*' also and crucially retains its etymological link to the *storied* event it not only relates but which it itself constitutes" (Alfer and de Campos 2010, 114-115).

What I find particularly inspiring in Todd's argument about Byatt's wonder tales, beyond the etymological dimension, is the way in which he resorts to Randolph Henry Ash's incomplete poem "Mummy Possest" in *Possession* (1990). The last lines in this quotation – "I call it artfulness, or simply Art, / A Tale, a Story, that may hide a Truth / As wonder-tales do, even in the Best Book" (*Possession* 408-409) – identify the ability to conceal a message or truth as the defining trait of wonder tales. This definition is taken by Todd as the starting point to examine those stories by Byatt which are embedded in larger fictions, considering how they hide a deeper level of meaning that becomes visible only in the narrative matrix of the longer piece of fiction. My contention is that, apart from such stories like "The Glass Coffin" or "Gode's Story", the terminology of wonder tale can be applied as well to those narratives that are revelatory or epiphanic for the characters in the portrayal or encounter with wonderful creatures, like the stories explored below. Such narratives "contain a Truth" under the form of an aesthetic or vital revelation that is triggered by the liminal existence or experience of the extraordinary being. Considering how the more intense images in fiction "occur in iconic moments that simultaneously function as units of semantic compression and as enablers of mental transgression" (Brosch 2015, 96), the vivid visualisations of wonderful creatures in Byatt's stories foster the characters' creative or emotional evolution, whether in the form of ontologically liminal beings like the lamia and the stone woman, or through the phenomenologically liminal experiences of the encounter with the dragons and the thing in the forest.

Liminal Creatures in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" and "A Stone Woman"

The ontological liminality of the lamia and the stone woman is associated with a process of female metamorphosis which also lies behind Byatt's interest in the figure of the Melusine in *Possession*, as suggested below, in the presence of the whistlers of bird-women in *A Whistling Woman* (2002), and in the writer's attention to the myth of Arachne in her contribution to *Ovid Metamorphosed* (2000). In this narrative, Byatt provides a kaleidoscopic revision of Pallas Athene's transformation of Arachne into a

spider, described by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* VI, while she argues that "[t]he nature of myth is not to be resolved into one meaning or another. It is a fluid, endlessly interconnected web" ("Arachne" 143). The fluidity of myth, together with the hybrid nature of Byatt's tales as mixing fairytale elements with realism (Alfer and Edwards de Campos 2010, 108-109) and the relevance of transformation in the liminal space of the text (Brosch 2015, 101) accompany Byatt's fictionalisation of female metamorphoses in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" (from *Elementals. Stories of Fire and Ice*, 1998), and "A Stone Woman" (from *Little Black Book of Stories*, 2003). Although both stories are told in the voice of the omniscient narrator, they complement each other in the way they follow the points of view of, respectively, male and female characters, from the outside and the inside perspectives of the transformation process: the painter Bernard Lycett-Kean, who becomes fascinated by the liminal body of the lamia in *Elementals*, and Ines, the woman turned to stone in *Little Black Book of Stories*. If this narrative revolves around the processual passage through Ines's gradual metamorphosis into a creature blending the human and the mineral, "A Lamia in the Cévennes" focuses on the hybrid condition of the lamia, in-between the human and the animal, rather than in her eventual transformation into a woman.

Hybridity is already present in the image preceding the story, *Sirène* (1948), one of Henri Matisse's illustrations for the *Florilège des Amours* by Ronsard. Like the mermaid, the lamia fuses traits of a water animal (the sinuous and coiling body of a water snake) with those of a woman, displaying human eyelashed eyes and teeth, and having the ability to speak. The lamia's conflation of female features with the appearance of a snake is particularly interesting in the context of the recurrence of snake imagery in Byatt's translation of "Le Serpentin vert", and in her fiction as a whole. From the beginning of "The Great Green Worm", the snake imagery is associated with the process of transformation, as the food in the celebration of the princesses' births becomes "snake stew" (D'Aulnoy 1996, 190) and the great green worm is consistently referred to as "the serpent-king", with the final stage in the reversal of his metamorphosis being the "unserpenting of the Serpent" (D'Aulnoy 1996, 217).

Snakes recur in Byatt's fiction, from her early novel *The Game* (1967), and they occupy a central position in *Possession* through the image of the Melusine, one of those "snake-women, La Motte-Fouqué's Undine and Goethe's Melusine" (*On Histories and Stories* 130). As Christien Franken has argued in her chapter "*Possession*: Melusine or the Writer as Serpent Woman", the image of the Melusine lies behind the structure of *Possession*, where the nineteenth-century plotline "resists an image of Melusine as an