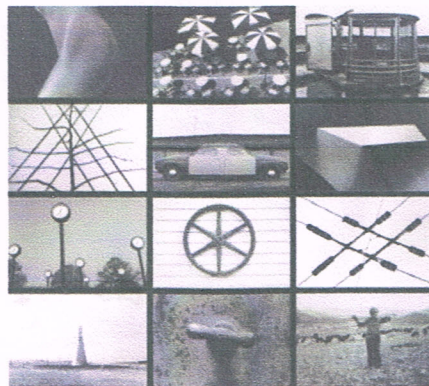


# Intertextual Dialogues Travels & Routes



## ACTAS

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# 'DESTINY IS YOUR SEX': THE IMPRISONING BODY OF A. S. BYATT'S FICTIONAL WOMEN

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You are not a woman. You may try – but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out – “ (...) this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt.”

(in GEORGE ELIOT, *Daniel Deronda*)

In conversation with the Brazilian psychoanalyst Ignès Sodr , A. S. Byatt asserts that in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, the character of Gwendolen Harleth can never have a destiny other than the one her sex constrains her into and declares peremptorily that “destiny is your sex” (Byatt & Sodr , 1995: 84). Although aimed at refuting a remark made by Ign s Sodr  about the relationship between Gwendolen and Daniel Deronda in the novel, this assertion strikes me as a rather universal proposition about gender. Moreover, it strikes me as an assertion of A. S. Byatt's own view of femaleness as a constraining destiny. A. S. Byatt corroborates this view in several interviews and writings on the issue that enhance the idea, which is so well described by Daniel Deronda's mother in George Eliot's novel, that the feminine is a negative mark for a person of genius. Princess Alcharisi's remark that her son “can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet suffer the slavery of being a girl” is, I think, a remarkable statement about restricted artistic genius on the basis of gender. A. S. Byatt agrees with this view and describes her reaction to this statement in a manner that I think is indicative of a malaise she feels regarding her own femaleness and the way it obtrudes upon her career as a writer:

What I've always felt about Deronda's mother, and this is a personal remark – is that of all the characters in fiction she was the one who I felt I was, as

opposed to feeling I ought to be or wanted to be, or might have been. In that sense there must be some great power in her as a woman artist; she says that terrible sentence about 'you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you.' (IC: 100)

That a nineteenth-century woman of genius might feel that her gender prevented her from fulfilling her artistic genius does not, perhaps, strike us as such an odd statement; that a twentieth-century writer feels that comment to be one she can identify with may signal an anxiety in relation to her own femaleness that is, I believe, worth remarking upon. Even more so, when we find other twentieth-century writers displaying the same type of anxiety about their own femaleness, or about gender in general.

On the one hand, this may well indicate, as A. S. Byatt's comments on the issue clearly demonstrate, that gender is still an impediment to a woman's writing career. Byatt writes, for example, about the difficulty she experienced in managing her professional and her domestic life, to concentrate on her creative writing while having to attend to the needs of her young children. Several female writers, when asked about this, mention the same problems and difficulties, as writing does require a focus and isolation that are not easily compatible with the demands of child care.<sup>1</sup>

On the other, however connected to the practicalities of women's social and private lives, this anxiety may also originate in a deeper feeling of unresolved identity, which is linked to an identity model void that women experience whenever they try to stand out in areas that have traditionally been the domain of the masculine. Although influential feminist studies, such as Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) or Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1978), have struggled to argue that nineteenth-century women writers shared a literature and a culture that was truly their own, and that they formed "a community in which women consciously read and related to each other's works" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: xii) – and although I would not entirely dispute this view – there seems to be a strong-

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<sup>1</sup> In interview with George Greenfield, Byatt describes the pains of trying to write while raising their children in the following terms: "The most terrible thing about children and writing is the total uncertainty of being able to plan ahead. Because the moment you sit down, they fall off a wall, they get measles... you plan to go to the library and finish a track of thought but the phone will ring and the teacher will say, "I'm sending Miranda home, she's not very well today." You feel terrible in all directions all the time." (Greenfield 1989: 47). In *Delighting the Heart: A Notebook by Women Writers* (1994 [1989]), edited by Susan Sellers, many writers make the same remark in relation to their "Starting Points", describing how difficult it was to write without being interrupted. See in particular; statements by Carol Rumens, "Starting Fiction" (3-6), Carole Satyarmuti, "Lady Scribbler" (14-17), Medbh McGuckian, "Room of calm, room of thunder..." (25-26), and Emma Tennant, "A Strong Story-Telling Impulse" (27-28).



hold of patriarchal thinking that imposes itself in the literary world as a model to which many a woman writer is willing to subscribe. For example, Iris Murdoch, when questioned about the reason why she used the masculine instead of the feminine in her first-person narratives, declares: "I suppose it's a kind of comment on the unliberated position of women... I think I want to write about things on the whole, where it doesn't matter whether you're male or female, in which case you'd better be male, because a male represents ordinary human beings, unfortunately as things stand at the moment" (*apud* Alexander, 1989: 13).

It would be, I think, appropriate to recall here Luce Irigaray's conceptualization of the female subject as a non-existent entity. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray develops this idea, explaining that women can only exist as subjects if they discard the current conception of subjectivity, for this has been completely appropriated by the masculine. Thus, "as things stand at the moment", woman can only exist as a distorted masculine subject, because, as Murdoch reminds us, "a male represents ordinary human beings". Irigaray states, as you may remember:

We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the "masculine." When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse – by being "female". Re-objectivizing her own self whenever she claims to identify herself "as" a masculine subject. A "subject" that would re-search itself as lost (maternal-feminine) "object"? (Irigaray, 1992: 133)

Hence, for Luce Irigaray the only solution is to overlook the dichotomy subject-object and to think anew the position of women outside existing philosophical and scientific models, outside the "model of the same: the subject", as Irigaray states in her essay. This is a model that imprisons the female in a subject position which is not strictly speaking her own, but is merely reproduced from an imposed representation that limits woman's subject position, as Irigaray asserts in her theorization of the (masculine) subject:

The 'subject' plays at multiplying himself, even deforming himself, in this process. He is father, mother, and child(ren). And the relationships between them. He is masculine and feminine and the relationships between them. What mockery of generation, parody of copulation and genealogy, drawing its strength from the same model, from the model of the same: the subject. In whose sight everything outside remains forever a condition making possible the image and the reproduction of the self. A faithful, polished mirror; empty of altering reflections. Immaculate of all auto-copies. Other because wholly in the service of the same subject to whom it would present its surfaces, candid in their self-ignorance (*idem*: 136).



Although I am inclined to believe that not many women writers would so overtly suggest, nowadays, that “a male represents ordinary human beings”, there are still many that endorse the idea of a gender-neutral position, as is the case with A. S. Byatt. In an interview with Juliet Dusinberre she refutes alignment with a community of women writers, as proposed by feminist critics, which reclaims a place in a literary tradition that is not overwhelmingly female. Quite the contrary. She states, for example: “I like writing very long sentences, but I think that comes from Henry James and Proust and Eliot rather than from a tradition of women’s writing” (Dusinberre, 1983: 183-4). In this assertion, one may perceive a certain anxiety in relation to the effect the category “women’s writing” may have in assessment of her as a writer, that is, as a serious, canonical writer.<sup>2</sup> It is true that writers are inclined to feel threatened by very imposing labels which may pigeon-hole them into very strict and limited categories.<sup>3</sup> However, in the case of A. S. Byatt, the refusal to have her work categorized as “woman’s writing” seems to be linked to a very constricting vision of the female condition; so much so that, as Byatt states, she needs to write in order to be able to transcend it, as becomes apparent when she declares:

What frightens me about a critic like Moers is that I’m going to have my interest in literature taken away by women who see literature as a source of interest in women. I don’t need that. I’m interested in women anyway. Literature has always been my way out, my escape from the limits of being female. I don’t want to have to get back in. (Dusinberre, 1983: 186)

For A. S. Byatt, being a writer seems to be a form of transcending the implied inferior stance of womanhood, of transcending the imprisoning body

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<sup>2</sup> This is clearly evident in certain declarations Byatt makes against feminist criticism, such as: “The feminists feel we should write about women being trapped, which men don’t want to read about, and they’ve got the readership because most novel-readers are women, anyway, but they’re not writing the big novels. They’ve betrayed us in one way. They’ve invented a subject-matter that was peculiarly female and said that women must write in a particularly female style, whereas those of my generation who knew that we were trying to be serious writers, were on the aggressive – we had to prove more than any man” (Greenfield, 1989: 48-9).

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the introduction to a collection of interviews with women writers, Margaret Atwood states: “Neither the white women writers nor the black women writers in this book feel that they have to deny anything about themselves to gain entry into the category of writer; but none of them feel, either, that their other attributes should be allowed to obscure what it is they are focused on, what it is they have been called to do. For them writing is not an offshoot; it is the one thing that includes all the other aspects of their lives” (Atwood 1999: xv). Jeanette Winterson makes a relatively similar remark in relation to her categorization as a ‘lesbian writer’, saying: “I am a writer who happens to love women. I am not a lesbian who happens to write” (Winterson, 1996: 104).

of the femaleness that she was destined to by birth, which may be a rather gloomy perspective of womanhood. What frightens me about a comment like this is the implication that you can disrobe yourself of your womanhood to inhabit an illusory gender-neutral space, which, as the lessons of Simone de Beauvoir, before Irigaray, have taught us, cannot but be the mark of the masculine.<sup>4</sup> This is the reason why so many feminist critics have picked on her writing, criticizing her unseemly anti-feminist and patriarchal worldview. From my point of view, an assumption of neutrality such as the one displayed in these comments hides a flagrant discomfort with the sexual that only a century-old disregard for women can explain. As Luce Irigaray writes, in this respect:

I am a woman. I write with who I am. Why wouldn't that be valid, unless out of contempt for the value of women or from a denial of a culture in which the sexual is a significant subjective and objective dimension? But how could I on the one hand be a woman, and on the other, a writer? (...) The whole of my body is sexuante. (...) I think the effects of repression and especially the lack of sexual culture – civil and religious – are still so powerful that they enable such strange statements to be upheld as “I am a woman” and “I don't write as a woman” (Irigaray, 1993: 53).

However, a closer look at some of these comments and especially at the novels, from a historical perspective, will bring to the fore the contradictions that arise in Byatt's representation of the feminine. It is my conviction that these contradictions are generated, on the one hand, in the gap between the discourse of feminism and the actual conditions of women's lives throughout the twentieth century, and on the other hand, by the evolution of the several feminisms or feminist discourses.

Byatt herself provides the historical background that may help us assess her representation of the feminine in the dark patterns I intend to analyse here. In the “Introduction” to the 1991 edition of her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun* (first published as *Shadow of a Sun*, in 1964), Byatt writes quite extensively about the beginning of her career, underlining the difficulties and the stereotyping that she had to overcome. It may be useful to remember that A. S. Byatt was born in 1936, at a time when women were still being educated

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<sup>4</sup> As Beauvoir writes in *Le deuxième sexe*, the masculine is the neutral or the positive, whereas the feminine cannot but be the negative: « Le rapport des deux sexes n'est pas celui de deux électricités, de deux pôles: l'homme représente à la fois le positif et le neutre au point qu'on dit en français «les hommes» pour désigner les êtres humains, le sens singulier du mot «vir» étant assimilé au sens général du mot «homo». La femme apparaît comme le négatif si bien que toute détermination lui est imputée comme limitation, sans réciprocité » (Beauvoir, 1972, I: 14-15).



to marry and have children and expected to act accordingly. As the author explains: "No woman of my generation would have expected any putative husband to consider her work prospects when making his own decisions. I myself went on to do academic research, and had my grant taken away when I married. Men in my position had their grants increased, to provide for their households" (1991: ix). For this generation of women the question of identity was still clearly intertwined with the probably more pressing question of the right to equality. In this sense, we cannot accurately say that Byatt is anti-feminist, in spite of her obvious mistrust of literary feminism. She is aware of the questions raised by the Woman's Movement, which are very much present in her fiction (although not so much in later, more well-known novels, like *Possession*). One can find comments she makes on the issue that are telling in relation to the importance she ascribes to the movement, but are also indicative of a certain feminism that she subscribes to, which is clearly liberal, as is conveyed by the following statement:

The feminist I admire the most is Betty Friedan, because *The Feminine Mystique* was written for my generation, who had been brainwashed into thinking that a woman's place, whatever her training and talents, was back in the home bringing up children. Child psychologists like Bowlby made you feel that you ought to be with your children all the time, whereas Betty Friedan did try to get women back to work, and I believe in the right to work. I value my job as a form of independence, because I am a woman (Dusinberre, 1983: 189).

From this statement, we can conclude that A. S. Byatt cannot conceive of the right to independence and autonomy outside the paradigm of equality, that is, outside the paradigm of the liberal humanist thought in which she was educated. In other words, it seems that for her the question is never one of the right to difference, but one of transcending the apparent social, political and economic barriers that prevent women from ascending to a position of social equality with men, becoming not quite subjects in their right but minor masculine subjects, as is, in fact, recurrently stressed in much of her fiction.

In short stories like "Cold" (from *Elementals* [1999]), "A Stone Woman" (from *Little Black Book of Stories* [2003]), or "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" (from the collection with the same title, 1995), we find portraits of women who can only come to life when they forsake their bodies, becoming disembodied statues, spiritual and rational beings, no longer afflicted by their bodily and sexual existence. These stories clearly stress the predominance of mind over body in Byatt's conceptualization of the feminine or, for that matter, of the human being. As Clare Hanson rightly stresses, Byatt's fiction is structured around the "mind/body dilemma", "the conflict which the 'educated woman' experiences between the claims of the intellect and the

experience of the body" (Hanson, 2000: 121);<sup>5</sup> and if in many of her novels, namely in the so-called Frederica Quartet,<sup>6</sup> we can see the heroines struggling to reconcile the demands of body and mind (not always successfully), in many of the more fantastic short stories, we see women clearly and happily discarding their bodies for what Frederica Potter (probably her most emblematic heroine) likes to call "the life of the mind". In many of these short stories, the woman's body is made the *locus* of denial, which enhances the difficulties of sustaining woman's *difference*. Moreover, many of these heroines undergo a metamorphic process that enables them to exist outside reality in a fantastic world of their own.

For example in "A Stone Woman", Byatt recounts the story of a woman who, after the death of her mother, with whom she has lived all her life, goes through a process of metamorphosis whereby her body develops a crust of stones. However, instead of dying from the immobility provoked by the complete petrification of her body, what happens is that during the metamorphic process she becomes more and more alive, as is stressed in the text: "After some time, she noticed that her patient and stoical expectation of final inertia was not being fulfilled. As she grew stonier, she felt a desire to move, to be out of doors" (Byatt, 2003: 143). It becomes clear, then, that although this woman is made of stone, she does not develop into a statue, but grows fully alive, now that her body has been metamorphosed into something other, something quite unidentifiable and separate from the world. This becomes apparent in the comparison the character makes between herself and the statues she finds at the local cemetery, where she goes in search of a place to rest after what she had previously thought of as a completed process of petrification:

She might take her place near them, she thought, but was dissuaded by the aspect of their neighbours, a group of the theological virtues, Faith, Hope

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<sup>5</sup> Byatt does mention this problem, showing that she is aware of the implications of biology for a woman who was so interested in pursuing an intellectual life. In an article published in *The Guardian* (14<sup>th</sup> February, 2004), she mentions that: "I see now, as I didn't dare to then, that the mind-body problem of an intellectual woman in the 1950s was also one of rigorous conflict. In those days the body required sex and childbearing, and quite likely the death of the mind alongside. My thesis supervisor, Helen Gardner, truly believed that women scholars should be nuns, renouncing the body for higher things" (Byatt, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> The Frederica Quartet comprises the novels *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002), the tetralogy that tells the story of the Potter family through the central consciousness of the novels, Frederica Potter, whom we accompany in her development, first as a teenager, then as a young student in Cambridge, and, finally as a married, divorced and independent woman in London. In a certain sense, Frederica Potter's development as woman throughout the second half of the twentieth century is illustrative of many women's lives in that period.



and Charity, simpering lifeless women clutching a stone cross, a stone anchor, and a fat stone helpless child. They had nothing to do with a woman who was made of volcanic glass and semi-precious stones, who needed a refuge for her end. (...) They were nothing to do with her, for they frightened her (*idem*: 150).

In the end, with the help of a stone carver she meets at the cemetery, the Icelander Thorsteinn Hallmundursson, the stone woman finds a place for her new stone self, together with the Trolls in the cold mountains of Iceland. The metamorphosis of the stone woman is clearly the metaphor for a new female identity, but this identity seems to be created at the expense of the female body, whose transformation seems to be the condition for female liberation.

The postmodernist fairy-tale "Cold" is related to the previous one for several reasons, the most striking being the ice/petrifying element that is common to both. In this sense, both stories can be associated with famous fairy tales that play with the idea of ice and snow and its associations with death, such as "Snow White" or the Andersen fairy tale "The Snow Queen". "Cold" tells the story of Princess Fiammarosa, who had been longed for by her parents, for although she was their thirtieth child, she was the first and only girl. Being a girl, she was raised with the utmost care and grew up to become a very frail and delicate child and a somnolent and lifeless adolescent. Until one day, she discovers the wonderfully revivifying effects of snow and cold upon her body. In contact with the snow and ice, she discovers her deepest identity, as described in the following words:

This is who I am, the cold princess thought to herself, wriggling for sheer pleasure in the snow-dust, this is what I want. And when she was quite cold, and completely alive and crackling with energy, she rose to her feet, and began a strange, leaping dance, pointing sharp fingers at the moon, tossing her long mane of silver hair, sparkling with white-crystals, circling and bending and finally turning cartwheels under the wheeling sky (Byatt, 2000: 126-7).

With this new insight into her identity, the Princess develops a whole new being which allows her to become a much more energetic and vital person, once she discovers that she is the descendent of an ice woman who had come from the North. In spite of this discovery, she cannot help falling in love with a Desert Prince and has to accompany him to his country of great deserts and excessive heat. Here, she would ultimately die were it not for the Prince, who, in face of his wife's agony, builds her a glass palace in the heart of the mountains, which means that her life is spared, but, more importantly for the moral of the story, that she can pursue a life of her own, in a palace of her own, and preserve her deepest identity.

Byatt explains the symbolism of the ice mountains that appear in this story, as well as in the story "The Stone Woman", as places of isolation where women are given the possibility of maintaining autonomous identities. The author has often spoken about this in published interviews, but it is in the essay "Ice, Snow, Glass", published in *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (2000), that we find a more detailed comment on the symbolism of these elements in her stories. Byatt states that the idea conveyed by these stories was appealing, in the sense that they portray women that live in isolation, protected from the normal cycles of life and death by the ice-hills and the glass barriers. Although as a child she could understand that the moral of the story was, precisely, to rescue the princesses from the living death to which the ice and glass elements had condemned them and restore them to life, that was not for her the most important issue in the stories. Thus, Byatt tries to deconstruct the dualism present in these fairy tales between heat/affections/life and ice/rationality/death, maintaining that women, and especially women-artists, need the isolation of the ice mountain and the framed reality of the glass coffins as a form of preserving their autonomy, as she states:

The frozen, stony women became my images of choosing the perfection of the work, rejecting (so it seemed to me then, though I have done my best to keep my apple and swallow it) the imposed biological cycle, blood, kiss, roses, birth, death, and the hungry generations (*idem*: 164).

What seems to be lost in the metamorphoses these women undergo is, as the author herself recognizes, a sexed subjectivity. By rejecting "the imposed biological cycle, blood, kiss, roses, birth, death", these women refuse a constrained destiny. By choosing to live outside their female bodies they find their own liberation. But is this not a refusal of womanhood itself? These women seem to inhabit a no man's land, a place not so much of annihilated gender, but of annihilated sex and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> In other short stories, this eradication is achieved through ageing. The protagonist of another of Byatt's post-modernist fairy tales, Gillian Perholt, from "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", is a case in point. The story begins when she is past her youth and has

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<sup>7</sup> I draw here a distinction between sex and sexuality rather than that between gender and sex, in line with theories that stress difference instead of equality. In this sense, I am in complete agreement with Rosi Braidotti when she states: "I want to keep clearly in view the enfleshed, sexed and contradictory nature of the human subject, where fantasies, desires and the pursuit of pleasure play as important a role as rational judgement and standard political action" (Braidotti 2000: vi). Thus, from the point of view of post-structuralist feminist critique, the emphasis that is placed on difference derives from a concern with the body as culturally inscribed. The body is, then, "seen as a situated self, as an embodied positioning of the self" (*idem*: vii).



been abandoned by her husband who has swapped her for a much younger woman. In spite of this, she does not seem unduly upset, for, as is stated in the text:

And although she was now redundant as a woman, being neither wife, mother or mistress, she was by no means redundant as a narratologist but on the contrary, in demand everywhere. For this was a time when women were privileged, when female narratologists had skills greatly revered, when they were pythonesses, abbesses and sibyls in the world of narratology, who revealed mysteries and kept watch at the boundaries of correctness (Byatt, 1995: 103).

The oppositional dualism body/mind gains relevance in such a display of the division between womanhood and professionalism, which confirms Byatt's uneasiness with the female body. It is true that as this rather long story develops, the professional side is somewhat discarded, as Gillian Perholt is confronted and haunted by images of death that remind her of her ageing body. Yet, even in the haunting images of a breastless and wombless crone – “The creature was flat-breasted and its withered skin was exposed above the emptiness, the windy hole that was its belly and womb” (*idem*: 117-8) – there seems to be a reminder that, when past their period of fertility, women cease to be sexed, or even more alarmingly, cease to have any function as women. She is, as the Miltonian phrase invoked by the character reminds us, “floating redundant”,<sup>8</sup> inhabiting an indefinable place outside sex and sexuality, that is, outside her deepest female identity.

In an interview, Byatt appropriates a comment made by Rebecca West, where she claims that “all women of fifty become men but they don't let anyone know”, and remarks that she herself used to be afraid of turning fifty, but has realised that, in fact, the menopause has allowed her to develop intellectually. She states: “Being fifty is the first time in my life I've been a primarily intellectual being” (Greenfield, 1989: 48). And yet, in some of her stories, such as “The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye”, “Medusa's Ankles” (from *The Matisse Stories*), or “The Dried Witch” (from *Sugar and other Stories*, an earlier collection of short stories) the image of ageing that comes to the surface reveals a clear anxiety in relation to physical decay, allied with a reasonably exultant perspective on the primarily intellectual woman. In all the stories, old age signals a demise, be it of sensuality, biology or, in the more extreme case of “The Dried Witch”, life itself. The evident anxiety about the role of woman outside her natural functions, associated with the maternal, perme-

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<sup>8</sup> The allusion, as is explained in the text of the narrative, is to Milton's “Paradise Lost”, and specifically to the description of the serpent “floating redundant”.

ates Byatt's narratives and indicates a certain inability, however much she tries, to think of a female identity outside the somewhat confining limits of the oppositional dualisms reason/ emotion, mind/ body, masculine/ feminine.

In her last novel, *A Whistling Woman*, we find a compelling metaphor for Byatt's fictional women's imprisoned bodies in the image of the bird-women (the characters in a children's narrative within the novel with which the novel begins). These are the whistling women – who give the title to the novel – who have been cast out from the city of men and punished with eternal silence, for, although they could communicate among themselves by means of a whistle, this sound was both unintelligible and fatal to those who heard it. They represent, then, a re-enactment of the myth of the sirens, for, like them, they are given destructive powers but are, simultaneously, imprisoned in a world of their own, from where they cannot escape, being unable to communicate. These metamorphosed women, who had wanted to transcend the limits of their female bodies in order to be able to become shape-shifters like men, are, in a way, allowed their freedom, but that also makes of them outcasts without a place in the social structure of their country, as they explain: "In Veralden, only men were shape-shifters. Women stayed in the valley, spinning and teaching, tending fruit-trees and flowers. They never left the valley. We wanted to go out, we wanted the speed and the danger of the wind and the snow and the dark" (Byatt, 2002: 6). If we relate the image of the outcast bird-women with some of the women that populate Byatt's fiction, we may come to the conclusion that they are a powerful image of Byatt's representation of women's need to transcend their bodies. Yet they are also a powerful image of the inevitable no man's land of women's transforming and transformed identities, as the explanation given by one of the whistling women seems to imply:

And an angry crowd burned our women's clothes outside the gates of Veralden, and almost burned us. But we put a little fear into them, and whistled in their minds, so that they merely drove us away like a flock of geese, calling us evil, and unclean. So we have lived here, where nothing lives, riding the winds, evading hunters and snow-eagles. We have grown angry because no one could hear our speech (*ibidem*).

In the Homeric myth of the sirens, Ulysses avoids death by preventing his men from hearing the sirens and by tying himself to the mast of his ship, so that he will not be lured to his death by the song of the sirens. In Byatt's narrative within the narrative, the hero, Artégall, will also evade death, but in this case by being able to understand the bird-women. It is because Artégall is so gifted with languages that he will be able to understand that these bird-women communicate in a kind of Ur-language, a hybrid made up of many different languages. Thus, he can act as the link between these whistling bird-



women and the rest of the world. But this does not mean that the women will then be able to recover their lost female identity, for, when asked if they desired to be women again, the leader of the bird-women answers: "(...) no, she could never forgo the wind in the wings, and the free racing through the stormskies. But she would like to be welcome in Veralden, to drink wine again, with her kinsfolk" (*idem*: 6-7). In this metaphor of the bird-women, therefore, Byatt seems to be opening up the possibility of a new "nomadic subject".<sup>9</sup> And yet, this more positive view of a new subjectivity seems to conflict with the more realistic and frightening accounts of femininity which recur so frequently in her fiction.

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<sup>9</sup> I am evidently borrowing from the theoretical claims to nomadic subjectivity, as theorised by Rosi Braidotti in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), where she argues for a female subject position that rests on difference and multiplicity. As the author states: "As opposed to the images of both the migrant and the exile, I want to emphasize that of the nomad. The nomad does not stand for homelessness or displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity" (Braidotti, 1994: 22).

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