

The Radiance of the
Short Story
Fiction from Around the Globe
Selected Conference Papers

Edited by Maurice A. Lee and Aaron Penn

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ISBN: 9781796854770

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First printing 2019

Lee and Penn Publishing
Printed by Kindle Direct Publishing

“Stories within Stories”: Fairy Tales as Intertextual Fragments in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance*

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A. S. Byatt’s collection of essays *On Histories and Stories* (2000) is illustrative of the author’s curiosity about stories and storytelling. In the essay “Old Tales, New Forms” she compellingly speaks about her interest in storytelling, linking it to her own doubts about the form of the novel and the direction it took in the twentieth century. She states:

A writer can rebel in various ways against the novel of sensibility, or the duty ... to report on, to criticise, contemporary actuality. You can write anti-novels, like the *nouveau roman*, deconstructing narrative and psychology. Or you can look back at forms in which stories are not about inner psychological subtleties, and truths are not connected immediately to contemporary circumstances. (*On Histories and Stories* 124)

She goes on to refer to the “great compendious storytelling collections” (124), like the “Arabian Nights, Boccaccio’s Decameron, the Canterbury Tales, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,” as well as “the fairy-tale collections of the Brothers Grimm, and Moe and Asbjørnsen in Norway” (124). In the rest of the essay, Byatt writes about stories that incorporate stories (and the way the realist novel also does it)¹, as well as about her own novels as doing the same. She states, in relation to the first novel of the tetralogy that came to be known as The Frederica Quartet, *The Virgin in the Garden*: “I found myself using stories within stories, rather than shape-shifting recurrent

¹ As she explains, “The novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has always incorporated forms of myths and fairy tales, working both with and against them” (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* 130).

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metaphors, to make meanings” (*On Histories and Stories* 131). But she might very well be speaking about any of her other novels.

Taking this idea into account, this paper focuses on the ways that in her novels and in her short stories A. S. Byatt incorporates shorter narratives that reinforce the meanings of both the plots and the themes of the narratives themselves. Byatt’s own interest in myth and old tales comes to light in her narratives in many ways, be it in tales that narrators and characters invoke, or more deeply in the creation of stories that are inserted in the narratives. This interest is rooted in her own conception of narrative as inherently human, as she has repeatedly argued in her essays. In “The Greatest Story Ever Told” (another essay from the same volume), she repeats this same idea which is present in “Old Tales, New Forms”:

Narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of blood. ... But storytelling is intrinsic to biological time, which we cannot escape. Life, Pascal once said, is like living in a prison, from which every day fellow prisoners are taken away to be executed. We are all, like Scheherazade, under sentence of death, and we all think of our lives as narrative, with beginnings, middles and ends. (*On Histories and Stories* 166).

If it is our nature as human beings to tell stories, an idea that is present in contemporary theories of narrative², it is also in the nature of stories to be infinite. When we look at the examples of collections of stories that Byatt chooses to illustrate her own idea of types of old tales, we will find out that many of them are narratives that are structured in layers, that is, narratives where there is a first, or extra-diegetical level (as arch-narrative) that gives a frame to the multiple internal (intra-diegetic) narratives, or second level

² The introductory chapter to *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* expounds this idea (Abbott 1-11). One of the arguments presented by Abbott, in accordance with other theorists, is: “The gift of narrative is so pervasive and universal that there are those who strongly suggest that narrative is a ‘deep structure,’ a human capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds in the same way as our capacity for grammar (according to some linguists) is something we are born with” (Abbott 3).

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narratives, to be found there (this is the case of *The Arabian Nights*, but also of the *Decameron* or *The Canterbury Tales*).

Given Byatt's concern with the never-ending quality of narratives, the reference in this essay to writers such as Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino will not come as a surprise. On the one hand, the Argentinian writer is evoked through the story "The Garden of Forking Paths," which is a powerful metaphor of the labyrinthine element of narratives³. Italo Calvino is evoked with reference to several of his works: namely, the essay "Cybernetics and Ghosts," but also his collection of *Italian Folktales* (2000). The idea of the infinite quality of narratives that you can find in many of the stories that are evoked in Byatt's own fiction is described in Italo Calvino's experimental hyper-novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, where, at a certain point one of the many narrators of the many novels that compose this hyper narrative states:

I'm producing too many stories at once because what I want is for you to feel, around the story, a saturation of other stories that I could tell and maybe will tell or who knows may already have told on some other occasion, a space full of stories that perhaps is simply my lifetime, where you can move in all directions, as in space, always finding stories that cannot be told until other stories are told first, and so, setting out from any moment or place, you encounter always the same density of material to be told. (*If on a Winter's Night* 108)

Very often, one feels when reading A. S. Byatt's narratives the same "saturation of other stories" that this narrator in *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller* writes about.

Another interesting fact in Byatt's discussion of "old tales" is that these stories, myths, legends are part of an old oral tradition that is linked to storytelling. The new forms of the novel or of the short story, which completely

³ For more about the relation between Byatt, Borges and Calvino and the way they treat the idea of infinity in literature cf. another article I wrote (in Portuguese) with the title "'O Jardim dos Caminhos que se Bifurcam,' ou a Narrativa Infinita de Borges, Calvino e Byatt" (Pereira 89-103).

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belong to a writing tradition, are set up against these old forms and are not viewed as tales of infinity. These instead are said to be the old tales, be they myth or fairy tale, as Byatt stresses: “A myth derives force from its endless repeatability” (*On Histories and Stories* 132).

INTERTEXTUALITY, OR THE TEXTUAL PRACTICE OF “LAMINATIONS”

All these questions present themselves very forcefully in any of A. S. Byatt’s longer or shorter narratives. They are present in the retelling and use of so many myths that emerge in novels and short stories alike; they are present in the continual recounting of all sorts of stories by the narrator and the characters of the narratives—namely, stories that are taken from the canon of world literature; and, most importantly, for the sake of this article, they are present in the creation of stories—namely, fairy tales—that are inserted in the frame of the novels. The fact that sometimes these tales find new lives as independent stories in published collections of short stories is indicative, it seems, of their own autonomous and independent status as narratives.

This happens specifically with the tales that are part of *Possession: A Romance*, first published in 1990. *Possession* is perhaps Byatt’s best-known novel, having won the Booker Prize in that year. In the manner of novels like *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979), by Italo Calvino, or *The Name of the Rose* (1980), by Umberto Eco, *Possession: A Romance* is a blatantly intertextual novel. It is composed of fragmented pastiches of different texts that range from poems, letters, journals, excerpts of literary criticism books, autobiographies and biographies, and fairy tales. Apart from these texts that find their way into the novel, it is also immersed in the myths and legends that are raised in the narrative. In several textual fragments of which *Possession: A Romance* is composed—from the poems written by the two Victorian protagonists of the novel, the poet Randolph Henry Ash and the poetess Christabel LaMotte to the letters that Ash and LaMotte exchange, from the fairy tales written by LaMotte to the pieces of criticism written by the contemporary protagonists of the novel—we will find a plethora of myths and legends that contribute to the sense of narrative saturation that infuses the novel. Set in two different time frames, the end of the twentieth century and the Victorian Era, this novel was considered from the moment

it came out a particularly “neo-Victorian” or “retro-Victorian” novel, as well as a fitting example of a postmodern novel⁴.

The intertextual aspect in her most unequivocally neo-Victorian—both *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and the two novellas that compose *Angels and Insects* (1994)—should not prevent us from perceiving this aspect in all her fiction, from the first novel to the last. One of her narrators even invents a term for this intertextual feature which we can discern in her writings: she calls it “laminations.” In *Babel Tower* (1996), the third novel of the Frederica Quartet (which also includes the novels *The Virgin in the Garden* [1978], *Still Life* [1985] and *A Whistling Woman* [2002]), this is defined by the narrator in the following terms:

Laminations. Cut-ups are part of it. It is a form that is made partly by cutting up, breaking up, rearranging things that already exist. ‘All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words read overheard’. These sentences of Burroughs sent a spiky thrill of recognition through her brain. The point of words is that they have to have already been used, they have not to be new, they have to be only re-arrangements, in order to have meaning (*Babel Tower* 384).

The intertextuality that is characteristic of A. S. Byatt’s novels and that can be found in the narratives as fragments of texts often takes the form of fictional quotations (but also real quotations). This prevalent practice of inserting quotations into her longer narratives contributes to an all-encompassing view of reality as constituted by different discourses. In this, Byatt comes close to the Barthesian notion of intertextuality, as described in, among others, the essay “The Death of the Author,” in which Roland Barthes puts forward the notion that “the text is a multi-dimensional place in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” or that “[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 146).

⁴ For a definition of “neo-Victorian” or “retro-Victorian” novel, please, cf. the following books and articles, among others: Flint (1997), Gilmour (2002), Gutleben (2001), Jukic (2000).

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Thus the “laminations,” fragments of texts, in A. S. Byatt’s fictions contribute to emphasize our immersion in a narrative that is pervaded by the discourses which are part of who we are, and constitute us. The texts that come up in her novels, very often in the form of quotations, can be scientific or juridical texts; they can also come from the apparatus of the literary institution in the form of biographies of authors or parts of critical texts⁵. And they are frequently parts of fictional texts or poetry that are created by the writer and inserted in the bigger frame of the narratives, so that they saturate the novel with a plurality of stories.

Stories within stories: fairy tales embedded in novels

Some of the stories that are embedded in A. S. Byatt’s novels are fairy tales, the case being that many of her female characters are fairy tale writers. We find fairy tale writers, namely, in Olivia Wellwood, the matriarch at the center of *The Children’s Book* (2009); in Agatha, Frederica’s house companion in the last novel of the Frederica’s Quartet, whose story, slightly reminiscent of *The Lord of the Rings*, is inscribed in the thread of the narrative of *A Whistling Woman* (2002); in Matty Crompton, the governess in the novella “Morpho Eugenia” (from *Angels and Insects*), whose fairy tale “Things Are Not What They Seem” is embedded in the main narrative; and, finally, in Christabel LaMotte, from *Possession*, whose poems and fairy tales are some of the texts that are woven into the fabric of the novel.

Fairy tales are, evidently, part of the traditional forms of storytelling that Byatt cherishes. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, she uses them abundantly in her fictional writings (Pereira, “Women of Stone and Ice”). We will find out that many of her short story collections are permeated by the fairy tale genre, and none as much as *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye*, whose subtitle is, precisely, “Five Fairy Stories.” Of these five stories, two were first published as stories within the novel *Possession* and find their way into this collection as autonomous texts. They are “The Glass Coffin” (Byatt, *Possession* 58-67), which in the novel is one of the fairy stories

⁵ Cf. Jack Stewart, in relation to the way Byatt’s *laminations* are extended to the visual arts and the ways in the novel *Babel Tower* pictorial and literary languages are juxtaposed to symbolize “a postmodern condition in which discursive systems and artistic media clash and compete” (Stewart 494).

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authored by Christabel LaMotte, and “Gode’s Story” (Byatt, *Possession* 356-362), a narrative with gothic undertones, that appears in the novel as a story told by the servant Gode, and is written down by Sabine de Kercoz in her “Journal Intime,” her diary.

The story of “The Glass Coffin” is a rewriting of a story with the same title from the Brothers Grimm’s *Household Tales* (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*). Byatt’s/Christabel LaMotte’s story is similar to the one of the Brothers Grimm, containing many parallel elements. Both stories are about a poor tailor who sets out on a journey, finds a man in a house in a forest and is set on a quest to restore a world that had been disrupted by a black magician. Byatt’s story contains many other elements that are not present in this particular Brothers Grimm’s tale, but are present in other folk stories, like the magic objects that are given to the tailor by the “little grey man,” which he has to choose from. Another important singularity of Byatt’s tale is the introduction of a slightly feminist twist in the tale by giving the princess a choice of marrying her rescuer or remaining single.

“Gode’s Story” is a more intriguing and gothic tale, which tells the story of a sailor who seduces girls in the ports he stops by. At the center of this particular tale is a very proud girl, who does not want to fall into the sailor’s seduction, but still ends up doing so. She promised to wait for the seductive sailor but ends up listening to the sounds of the little steps of a ghost that no one except her can hear. There is an implication in the story, but this is never stated, that she had been pregnant, and somehow the child dies (possibly by abortion). When the sailor returns to the village, he is stunned that the girl is not waiting for him and ends up marrying another girl. On the wedding day, the girl follows the stepping and dancing thing and ends up falling from a cliff to the sea. After her death it is the sailor who hears the sound of the little dancing feet. This will ultimately also lead him to his death.

Although these stories were later on published as autonomous narratives, in *Possession* they add meaning to the novel, as has been noticed by other critics. As Catherine Burgass rightly states in her study guide to *Possession*, “[s]ome of the inset fairy tales provide simpler allegories for the reader to decode” (55). Writing about “The Glass Coffin,” Helen Mundler stresses the “anticipatory role” played by the tale in relation to the events of the novel (cf. Mundler 9), stating that “[t]he tale can be seen, on a second reading of the novel, to fulfil an anticipatory role, conveying information in

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an enigmatic way. It is in fact a locus for the delivery of coded messages on the part of Christabel” (9). Alexa Alfer and Amy Edwards de Campos emphasize the parallels that exist between the characters in the fairy tales and the characters in the novel: “Roland, for example, bears more than a passing resemblance to LaMotte’s little tailor, while both Maud and LaMotte are explicitly compared to enchanted princesses” (106).

Thus, in the novel the tales are indeed intertextual pastiches that are to be read as providing meaning to the larger narrative. And this is true for all the fairy stories used in this novel (including “The Threshold”), as well as the stories that are inserted in other fictions where the same device is used, namely, in “Morpho Eugenia,” with the story “Things Are Not What They Seem.” However, when taken out of the context of the novel, and placed in a collection together with other short stories, the tales may gain a different significance. This is the case with “The Glass Coffin” and “Gode’s Story.” Thus, in the context of *Possession*, the stories are a reflection of and, more importantly, provide a clue to what may happen to the characters in the novel—be it the romance that is developing between Roland and Maud, or the love story of the Victorian characters, LaMotte and Ash. Thus, we can read the little tailor as a metaphor for Ash and the sleeping woman as symbolizing the “inviolable” Christabel, as is stressed by Mundler in her analysis of the fairy tale (cf. Mundler 11-12). In parallel, we can also see the little tailor as standing for Roland, and providing a clue to the type of relationship that may develop between Maud (his prize), whom he can only “keep” if he gives her the freedom she needs. In the same way, “Gode’s story” is related to the adulterous relation between Christabel and Ash, and the child that is born out of this relationship. A child that Randolph Henry Ash thinks, at a certain moment in the story, has died. Both stories provide coherent clues to the stories and are instrumental in creating added narrative meaning.

However, in the context of the book *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye*, they lose this particular function and have to be read as autonomous fairy tales. This collection has been assessed by several critics as providing a feminist revision of the fairy tale. For example, Jane Campbell states that “the tales it contains ... cleverly subvert the fairy-tale genre, subjugating the form to feminist revision” (Campbell 135). Kathleen Williams Renk argues that Byatt’s use of the fairy tale links it “to its matriarchal underpinnings,” saying that they have “much in common with the characters created

by German Romanticist Christine Benedikte Naubert” (Renk 617); Renk sees both Naubert and Byatt as resurrecting a medieval matriarchal mythology in the fairy tale. Areti Dragas dedicates a whole chapter of a book entitled *The Return of the Storyteller in Contemporary Fiction* to the analysis of the tale “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” as a story that postulates gender as being an important aspect in the creation of the storyteller. She argues that “Byatt’s storyteller is one that is not so much pitched against print culture, but against the authority of the male as dominant cultural producer of both oral and written narrative traditions” (Dragas 225).

I agree that Byatt has used many of her fairy tales to think about women’s lives and propose a vision of woman, and especially of the woman artist, as an autonomous and self-sufficient being that strives to, as she states in the essay “Ice, Snow, Glass,” escape a constricting “female destiny, the kiss, the marriage, the child-bearing, the death” (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* 156). And she does that in almost all her work, be it in the fairy stories, the short stories, or the novels⁶. As the author states in an interview to Nicholas Tredell, “[a]ll my books are about the woman artist—in that sense, they’re terribly feminist books—and they’re about what language is” (Tredell 66). However, the two particular fairy tales that I have been discussing here present a rather more classical view of both the gothic tale and the fairy tale in a way that is not clearly subversive or liberating to women.

In effect, when we compare these two particular tales with other stories in the same collection, we may find them lacking in this respect. For example, both in the stories “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” and “The Story of the Eldest Princess” we will find women that are much more liberated, and certainly much less tragic, than the ones in “The Glass Coffin” and “Gode’s Story.”

This may happen due to their link to a novel where Byatt presents the life of a particular Victorian female writer with all the limitations that women had at the time. Thus, I agree with Richard Todd when he argues that “‘The Glass Coffin’ and ‘Gode’s Story,’ even though reprinted word for word in *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye*, are quite different in nature from their incorporated or embedded ‘originals’ in *Possession*” (Todd 40).

⁶ In relation to this aspect see also the pioneering book by Christian Franken, *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* (2001).

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In *Possession*, Christabel LaMotte is presented in light feminist tones, in that she is a writer that holds steadfastly to her own individuality and tries to maintain her autonomy at all costs; simultaneously, she never disrupts stereotypical patterns of how we conceive of nineteenth-century women, showing her limitations in a society where women do not have the same rights and the same liberties of men. Byatt refers to this in the following terms in an interview to Nicholas Tredell:

I think Christabel’s feminism in the nineteenth century, which was partly instinctive, is a wonderful thing. And I’ve tried to reproduce the social circumstances which make her automatically abase herself as a poet before Randolph, though I think she secretly knows she might be better, but she only knows this intermittently (Tredell 60).

In “The Glass Coffin” the princess is indeed given the choice of not marrying the tailor if that is her wish, but the conclusion is nevertheless classical, in that she, having been saved by the tailor, not once, but twice, feels that he is more than entitled to have her hand. In “Gode’s Story” the tragic ending of the girl’s life is in tune with a nineteenth-century ending for a ‘fallen woman’ and, thus, contains no liberation at all. It is true that, as Jane Campbell states, “[b]y removing them from their original context and placing them in her new volume, Byatt makes them part of a history of women’s stories” (Campbell 136), however showing the limitations of their lives. In that sense, taken out of the context of *Possession*, the stories expose the types of constraints that afflict the lives of nineteenth century women, but do not clearly provide a way out of that stifling condition. Thus, in a way, they go against the grain of the other stories we can find in the same volume.

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