

## Authorship and Strategies of Representation in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayal of authorship in Byatt's novels with a particular focus on her use of character-authors as a site for the destabilisation of dominant literary and cultural paradigms. Byatt has been perceived as a liberal-humanist author, ambivalent to postmodern, post-structuralist and feminist literary theory. Whilst Byatt's frame narratives are realist and align with liberal-humanist values, she employs many different genres in the embedded texts written by her character-authors, including fairy-tale, life-writing and historical drama. The diverse representational practices in the novels construct a metafictional commentary on realism, undermining its conventions and conservative politics. My analysis focuses on the relationship between the embedded texts and the frame narrative to demonstrate that Byatt's strategies of representation enact a postmodern complicitous critique of literary conventions and grand narratives.

Many of the female protagonists and minor characters are authors, in the broad sense of cultural production, and Byatt uses their engagement with representation of women in literature to pose questions about how cultural narratives naturalise patriarchal definitions of femininity. That Byatt's female characters resist patriarchal power relations by undermining the cultural script of conventional femininity has been under-explored and consequently critics have overlooked significant instances of female agency.

Whilst some branches of postmodern and feminism literary theory have conceptualised agency differently, this thesis emphasises their shared analysis of the discursive construction of subjectivity, as it illuminates Byatt's disruption of literary conventions. My focus on the embedded texts and the discursive construction of authorship in Byatt's fiction enables me to address the

numerous paradoxes and inconsistencies in the novels as fertile sites that undermine Byatt's presumed politics.

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## Introduction

The novels of A. S. Byatt thematise the intersection between the contemporary period in which she published (1962 onwards) and the historical and literary antecedents that shaped the contemporary period. Her first two novels, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1962) and *The Game* (1967), are set largely contemporaneously to the time of publication. The Quartet, a Condition of England series, begins with *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (1985), set in the 1950s, concluding with *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002), set in the 1960s. Byatt's Booker Prize winning novel, *Possession* (1990), has generated the most critical attention and is a partly neo-Victorian work, following a double plot framed by the 1980s contemporary setting and the Victorian period. The doubled plot allows for reflections on and destabilisations of the ideological dominants of each period.

The two complementary novellas that comprise *Angels and Insects* (1992) are not considered here but continue Byatt's neo-Victorian experimentations. *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) has a contemporary setting and represents the effect of inherited forms of narrative and how the present is partly constructed through historical (specifically biographical) representations in narrative. Byatt's most recent long work of fiction, *The Children's Book* (2009) is set at the transformation of the Victorian epoch into the Edwardian, up to the First World War. The novel uses its historical context to build on Byatt's prior neo-Victorian concern with the lost voices of women, but also foregrounds the gaining momentum of emancipatory movements for gender, class and sexuality.

All of Byatt's novels feature characters who are authors, often portraying numerous authors of different genres and discourses, and she refers to their writing frequently, whether by description or embedding its text in the novels.

The texts by Byatt's authors are significantly informed by literary history and their authorial ancestors; she uses this to explore the discourse of literature and construct the relationship between the novel's setting and central themes.

Authorship in Byatt's major novels is the focus of this thesis. To take authorship as a theme is to draw attention to the key concerns of her fiction, the most prominent of which are evidence and truth, gender and subjectivity, as well as the practice of representation and its effects.

The image of the author in Byatt's novels has not been analysed in a long critical study that discusses *The Virgin in the Garden* through to *The Children's Book* as yet, and this has led to slippage in how Byatt's fiction engages with feminism and postmodernism. Critics of Byatt's fiction recognise that there are problems with relating these fields to the novels, as Byatt has a complex relation to both. This thesis engages with particular aspects of postmodernism's analysis of historical representation, particularly Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, as well as feminist theories of authorship, which will clarify the relevance of these fields of thought to Byatt's fiction. This thesis will show, without claiming Byatt unproblematically as a postmodern or feminist author, that feminism and postmodernism can help to analyse the fiction by clarifying the construction of the novels and the status of authorship within them. This then helps to indicate, without resolving, some of the apparent contradictions of Byatt's fiction, as the novels appear, at times, to equally endorse and criticise both postmodernism and feminism.

All of the novels discussed in this thesis feature texts-within-texts – in other words, invented forms of representation embedded within the primary or frame narrative. These are always the work of her various characters, such as Olive's fairy tales in *The Children's Book*, and they comprise various literary

modes from the play within a play of *Virgin* to the embedded poetry of *Possession* to the pages of life writing in *The Biographer's Tale*. The relationship between the texts attributed to Byatt's characters and the novels that contain them is used to challenge and question the realist form of those novels and to destabilise the conservative politics perceived as inherent to realism. However, the conventional, inherited plots of Victorian realism significantly inform Byatt's fiction, as does the deployment of characters that conform to the liberal-humanist definition of self, such as Roland in *Possession* and Phineas in *The Biographer's Tale*.

In his major study of subjectivity, *Inventing Our Selves*, Nikolas Rose notes that some thinkers reacted against the destabilisation of the core, stable, universal self in the twentieth-century and attempted to reassert a humanist selfhood against its detractors (5). However, as Rose states: "it has proved impossible convincingly to reuniversalize and renaturalize this image of the person as a stable, self-conscious, self-identical center of agency" (5). Part of the reason Byatt's fiction appears reactionary are its efforts to stabilise a liberal-humanist self through realism. As a literary form, realism is perceived as valorising a model of self prior to the twentieth-century developments that destabilise the self as a coherent core of identity in favour of a new understanding of the discursive nature of the subject and of subjectivity.

Catherine Belsey has noted that post-Saussurean linguistics questions expressive realism: "this is the theory that literature reflects the *reality* of experience, as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who *expresses* this perception in a text which enables other individuals to recognize its truth" (*Critical 6*; emphasis original). The use of realism and its conventional middle-class marriage plots, as well as of a stable liberal-humanist selfhood are,

however, complicated and undermined by Byatt's strategies of representation. Byatt defines her approach to literature as "self-conscious realism" (*Passions* 4). It is the interrogation of authorship through the relationship established by the texts attributed to the characters and the novels that contain them, as well as other strategies of representation that Byatt's employs, that makes her realism self-conscious.

To avoid slippage of meaning, I am designating the texts-within-the-texts written by Byatt's characters as "embedded texts," using Mieke Bal's definition: "a sequence can thus be said to be embedded when it is inserted in another sequence, whether it be narrative, descriptive, brief, long, personal or impersonal" (44). Following Bal, an embedded text can be a direct quotation of a text written by one of Byatt's characters, as in Ellen Ash's journal in *Possession*, or it can be a description of a text, as in Alexander's plays in the Quartet novels. By using embedded texts, Byatt can not only comment on realism and its presumed politics from within the novel, but also comment metafictionally on narrative generally as a constructed form. Jessica Tiffin notes in her article on fairy tales in Byatt's fiction: "embedded narratives are the perfect site for the interaction of reality and art: the realist frame text highlights the constructedness of the embedded tale, while meaning is able to resonate continually and richly between story and frame narrative" (49). Tiffin's term "frame narrative" is useful, as it can be used to indicate the novel which contains the embedded text.

However, embedded texts alone are not necessarily a site for the critique of realism. In this thesis I will argue that in some of Byatt's novels, it is the relationship between the embedded text and other devices that destabilises the realism of the frame narrative. Whilst the presence of an omniscient narrator is



a hallmark of realist literature, contributing to the construction of its transparent narration, Byatt uses the device to comment on the practices of realism. The use of a third person, or heterodiegetic narrator, in the frame narrative therefore can destabilise the presumed tendencies of realism to naturalise and consolidate social constructions of identity. The marriage plot that often structures realist fiction implies that women only attain true realisation as women through marriage. Byatt's narrator, however, comments ironically on these conventions and denaturalises them, noting that Frederica in *Still Life*, is influenced by society's prescriptions in her approach to relationships with men: "she came, after all, not in utter nakedness but cocooned by her culture in a web of amatory, social, and tribal expectations which was not even coherent and unitary" and she believed "that marriage was the end of every good story" (*Still Life* 127). Narratorial irony, then, is employed by Byatt to subvert the conventions of realism, in conjunction with the embedded text, which challenge realist conceptions of whole, core selves and the notion that the past is discoverable and imaginatively accessible in the frame narrative.

This thesis examines the function of authorship in Byatt's fiction and the representation of subjectivity by analysing the embedded texts and, crucially, their relationship to the framing narrative. Various critics cite Byatt as writing from a liberal-humanist position (Campbell, *Heliotropic* 25; Boccardi, *Byatt* 14). However, they do not perceive that the apparent liberalism is also challenged by the representation of subjectivity in the embedded texts. My contention is that the embedded texts work covertly to undermine or dismantle the position apparently established in the main story and that we need to read the relationship between the two in order to reach a full understanding of Byatt's position in all its complexity. Chapter 1 analyses in detail the major critics of

Byatt's fiction and how they have considered her relationship to postmodernist theories of literature and her construction of selfhood. I argue that the conceptualisation of self as a core that is expressed or reflected in narrative is demonstrated, in the embedded texts, as constructed through narrative. By reorienting the discussion of Byatt's fictions to consider the texts by Byatt's authors as a group and to analyse the novels from this position, this thesis shows that Byatt's fiction does not dismiss postmodernist positions that emphasise the construction of history and subjectivity.

The embedded texts range from historical plays, anti-teleological non-narrative cut-ups, fairy tales, television programmes, journals and biographies. The historical plays by Alexander in *Virgin* and *Still Life* are considered separately to the rest of the embedded texts, as Byatt constructs them as a near parody of realist and liberal-humanist values, in contrast to the strategies of representation in the frame narrative that destabilise those values. The embedded texts often question the politics of authorship, speaking from the margins, as in the case of Ellen Ash, Victorian diarist in *Possession*. Frederica's non-narrative cut-ups in *Babel Tower* destabilise the teleology of the ideological narrativisation of conventional femininity that she is subjected to in the legal narrative. The texts that Ellen and Frederica produce undermine fixed and whole selfhood, representing multiple subject positions that are each partial and none of which are a "true" self.

*A Biographer's Tale* poses interesting questions, given Byatt's focus on female characters, as the first person, or homodiegetic, narrator is male. The novel, however, continues Byatt's engagement with subjectivity, inherited literary forms and life-writing from a different perspective. Phineas attempts to write from a liberal-humanist perspective to enable him to discover the whole

man through factual biographical narration as a reaction to literary theory's deconstruction of liberal-humanism. Byatt destabilises the masculine subject of life-writing, as she represents Phineas's failure to discover the whole man – demonstrating that the whole man is illusory.

The embedded texts considered in this thesis are often forms of history (or historical literature) or life-writing (including biography and autobiography), or draw on the conventions of these genres. These genres have a part in constructing the historical record in Byatt's novels even when they are not directly historical in form. Neither life-writing nor history are what they appear to be in Byatt's fiction: documents in these genres have a convincing truth-effect and are often treated by the characters and critics of Byatt's fiction as transparently factual. History and life-writing misdirect the reader by concealing their representational practices. I read the embedded texts and the frame narratives as different layers of representation that are deliberately dissonant; that is, Byatt creates counter-narratives through the embedded texts that contradict the apparent values in the frame narratives. I therefore read Byatt's novels as constructing a dialectic space that is primed for critical interpretation.

On occasion, the implications of history and life-writing as representational practices are acknowledged in the novels and by critics of the novels, and so texts in these genres are treated as constructions rather than containers of facts. There is a tendency nonetheless to read the truth-effects of these genres as repositories of fact, as they play a part, particularly in *Possession*, in driving the realist plot. The force of Byatt's storytelling seduces the various readers of the embedded texts to treat these texts as devices that largely function to move the plot forward. This happens to Byatt's characters in all the novels and often leads critics to accept the apparent transparency of the

embedded text, causing a slippage in meaning, where the subversive potential is not recognised. In this thesis, I resist the temptation to read the embedded texts as transparent plot devices and I offer a critical analysis of the embedded texts, their (fictional) authors and readers, and consequently I interpret the frame narratives as destabilised by the subversive embedded texts.

Byatt's engagement with the postmodern conceptualisation of the mediation of reality through texts is more readily apparent when the embedded texts are considered as a strategy of representation with a common function across Byatt's fiction. Analysing the embedded texts as a strategy of representation reveals commonalities in the construction of Byatt's fiction that convincingly positions it within Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon emphasises the postmodern attention to the construction of history through narrative and the self-awareness of metafiction (*Poetics* 5), which denaturalises ideology and is therefore not apolitical (*Politics* 3). I will explore Hutcheon's conceptualisation of postmodernism in more detail throughout the thesis where relevant to Byatt's strategies of representation.

In Byatt's fiction, the embedded texts are a postmodern device that allows her to denaturalise the implicit ideology of literary conventions and historical representation, such as the realism that she employs in the frame narrative to construct the history of the periods she represents. Byatt's great respect for realism, in its nineteenth-century form, is particularly evident in her writings on the fiction of George Eliot.<sup>1</sup> Byatt's use of realism in her fiction, however, is complicated by the understanding that realism employs an ideological perspective. Throughout this thesis, my use of the term realism

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the two essays on George Eliot collected in *Passion of the Mind* (72-101).

follows Hutcheon's definition of realism as a transparent, documentary form (*Politics* 29; 34) that conceals its ideological basis.<sup>2</sup> Realism's representation of a liberal-humanist selfhood and history as an arrangement of facts into narrative has been undermined in the twentieth-century, as acknowledged by Byatt's embedded texts that engage with the discursive construction of subjectivity and history as a constructed narrative. I therefore read Byatt's novels as exploring and employing postmodernist literary devices that indicate "its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 4; emphasis original).

My analysis of authorship through the embedded texts, then, denaturalises the ideology of realism in the frame narratives. The embedded texts are a part of the broader intertextual matrix in Byatt's fiction. Byatt cites other fiction to comment on and critique the ways in which literature constructs meaning and sustains certain ideologies. For example, she indicts the implicit patriarchal discourse in literature by referencing extratextual male authors, whose female characters are often simply reflections of the male psyche. In *Virgin*, Bill and Winifred Potter discuss Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*; when Hermione turns back into a live woman after twenty years as a statue, Winifred says "all the years of her womanhood gone, and her children, one dead, one vanished, and no feelings required but gratitude and joy" (111).

The historical and material conditions that have limited women's opportunities are a significant theme in Byatt's fiction – conditions that consider biology as destiny and reduce women to their roles as wives and mothers. One of the major ways that Byatt explores the conditions that women are subjected

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the limitations of Hutcheon's use of realism.

to is through resistance to gender norms by reclaiming representational practices. Like the representations of female writers in fiction that Mary Eagleton studies, each of Byatt's female characters "has some issue with authorising and authority" (*Figuring 2*), as these risk replicating patriarchal strategies of representation. Female characters are presented as needing to resist patriarchal representations of femininity, as such representations inadequately describe their subjectivities and circumscribe their opportunities for agency. Byatt's female characters develop strategies of representation that subvert the ideology of gender and genre.

There are, however, difficulties in using feminism as an interpretative framework to analyse Byatt's fiction, as Byatt has voiced concerns about academic feminism, discussed further in Chapter 1, and satirised feminism in her novels. Despite the complexities of using feminism to analyse Byatt's fiction, particular feminist theorists, mainly published in the 1980s, provide interpretations of female inequality that are illuminating and relevant to the fiction, as they focus on both the necessary legal and socio-economic changes at the time that Byatt's books were produced and read, as well as issues surrounding the patriarchal imagery of women.

Despite the continual engagement with gender inequality in her fiction, some critical responses have found that the fiction is not emancipatory. Critical responses that consider Byatt's fiction to be anti-feminist are typified by Louise Yelin's article (1992) on *Possession* and in Lena Steveker's book on Byatt's fiction (2009). Yelin finds that the plot of *Possession* has "homophobic implications" (39) and Steveker notes that the end of the *Quartet* prevents female agency by subordinating Frederica's actions to a man (64). My reading of Byatt's fiction challenges the view that it is anti-feminist or non-emancipatory

by analysing how Byatt's strategies of representation, in the complex intertextual construction of the novels, destabilises the apparent politics in the conventional plots she uses.

Analysing the embedded texts clarifies Byatt's denaturalisation of ideological dominants, particularly patriarchal conceptualisations of femininity, and indicates the relevance of both feminism and postmodernism to the novels. Although Byatt portrays literary theory negatively in her fiction, criticism and interviews, the fiction itself represents literary theory in complex ways, as I will demonstrate through my discussion of the embedded texts. The assumption that Byatt rejects literary theory, as well as adopting a realism that contemporary literary theory discredits, has led to an understanding that she is a "traditional" humanist author, reacting against the developments in literary theory and subjectivity. This assumption has also led to the evacuation of politics from Byatt's novels.

My argument instead repositions Byatt's fiction as politically progressive, if complicated by her use of postmodern strategies of representation that both install and subvert conservative ideologies. By focusing on the embedded texts, I construct an analysis of Byatt's fiction that emphasises resistance to gender roles. My argument theorises the possibility of female agency through the appropriation of strategies of representation, where female characters can rewrite patriarchal scripts of femininity. Female characters can then undermine literary conventions that offer them limited agency and posit femininity as a projection of male psyches. Byatt demonstrates that literature is a discourse that implies power relations through the female characters and their engagement with literary representations of gender.

Representation is never politically neutral but is always already enmeshed in power relations, even when the politics of the novel are covert. The relationship between the embedded texts and the frame narrative constructs contradictions that point to hidden power relations and the discursive formation of subject positions. Byatt's fiction indicates that literature is a discourse, as much as the law and medicine. Discourses grant meaning and validity to dominant cultural paradigms, constructing the subject of medicine, for example, with certain attributes and regulate that subject's behaviour. The subject who does not conform faces penalties and re-education. This process is most visible in Byatt's representation of women who repeatedly encounter disciplines that attempt to subject them to the discipline's conceptualisation of femininity. The female characters, particularly Stephanie in *Still Life*, find that the discursive construction of femininity misrepresents their gendered subjectivity and they resist this misrepresentation in various ways.

Although resistance is always limited and local, it nonetheless allows them to protest and denaturalise the patriarchal construction of femininity. Byatt's female characters, such as Frederica throughout the *Quartet*, enact their protest through the reclamation of sexist language and representational practices. Not only does Byatt's fiction indicate that women can rewrite the patriarchal script of gender roles, but she also denaturalises patriarchal ideology through her male authors. Both Alexander in the *Quartet* and Phineas in *The Biographer's Tale* write from a liberal-humanist perspective and Byatt denaturalises the ideology implicit in the authorial identities they attempt to assume by making each an unsuccessful writer. Even Roland in *Possession*, whose poetic sensibility appears to be a reward for approaching literature in an appropriately reverent manner, one which valorises submitting to the author's



unique genius, is undermined by the destabilising representation of subjectivity in Ellen's journal.

The author is a discursive construction that is historically specific. Authorial identity is implicated in the ideology of its historical period, as well as the dominant power relations. The embedded texts are not necessarily "literature" or by writers assuming an authorial identity. This enables the producers of these texts to disrupt dominant ideology. The manifestation of patriarchal ideology and power relations differs depending on the historical context of the frame narrative and the embedded text. Byatt fastidiously constructs the historical context of the novels and comments on the dominant ideology of that era without reproducing it uncritically. She also shows that history is a narratively produced discourse and so is as much an indication of the ideology of when it is written as of the ideology of the period it represents. The meticulous representation of the history of its period and the author as a discursively and historically specific construct has meant that Byatt's fiction has been read as endorsing the dominant values of its historical setting and its method of representation.

Each chapter in this thesis analyses how Byatt constructs the historical context of her novels, whether this is through the representation of the history of the period or through an intertextual literary history. Chapter 1 analyses the major full-length critical works on Byatt's fiction, as well as assessing postmodernist and feminist criticism to situate my argument in relation to the relevant theoretical context. This chapter makes the case that the critics employ significant caveats when discussing Byatt's work in relation to postmodernism and feminism.

Chapter 2 analyses Byatt's juxtaposition of different methods of representing history in literature in *Virgin* and *Still Life*. The embedded texts are historical plays that represent their subjects as whole, unique liberal-humanist selves. The plays fail: their history is insularly English and personal (rather than political) and their method of representation is verse drama and psychological realism (seen as a dead-end). Byatt contrasts the failure of the plays with a metafictional destabilisation of historical literature and realism in two key ways: first, her use of prolepsis, or flash-forward, represents subjectivity and history as discursively constructed and multiple, and second, her representation of institutional power relations in the 1950s hospital undermines the cultural construction of femininity that identifies women with the body and defines them by their biological functions.

In Chapter 3 I argue that *Babel* and *A Whistling Woman* dispel the primacy of the myth of 1960s permissive society by displaying the endemic male bias in the law courts and scientific research community, as well as implicit sexism in the "progressive" counter-culture. Despite the ubiquity of patriarchal power relations, particularly in institutions such as the law, the female characters develop tactics of resistance. In *Babel* and *Whistling*, Byatt develops the representation of power relations and female resistance that she portrayed in *Still Life*. The latter two novels of the Quartet represent the female characters appropriating representational practices to rewrite femininity. *Whistling* has a doubled ending, as its conclusion is not only the culmination of the novel but also of the Quartet. The end of *Whistling* has been read negatively, eliding female agency, as discussed above. However, through my ironic reading, *Whistling* can be seen as continuing the open endings of the previous novels, rather than endorsing an anti-feminist subjugation of female agency.

Chapter 4 analyses the intertextual matrix in *Possession*, particularly Ellen Ash's rewritten journal, as it exposes the fallacy in perceiving history as the sum of "evidence" and foregrounds the process of interpretation that imposes order on past events. My analysis of Ellen's journal destabilises the apparent value accorded to texts and interpretative paradigms, such as postmodernism and feminism. Byatt's use of Ellen's journal to stage the policing of women authors through literary tropes of femininity has been underexplored; I compare the denaturalisation of conventional femininity and conventional literary tropes in Ellen's journal and Christabel's poetry. *Possession* has attracted more critical attention than Byatt's other fiction and the relationship of the novel to postmodernism and feminism is particularly contentious. The novel appears to endorse a humanist perspective, representing feminism and postmodernism negatively. My focus on Ellen's journal resolves the controversy as to whether *Possession* is postmodern and feminist, as the journal is a postmodern device that repositions feminist literary criticism.

Chapter 5 analyses *The Biographer's Tale* and its deconstruction of the subject of life-writing. The novel is figured as biographical quest for facts but the few instances of archival material found by the protagonist, Phineas, are described as tissues of lies and truth. The novel questions the possibility of gaining access to facts which are not conflicted by problems of representation and mediation. Phineas's rejection of literary theory's solipsism in favour of a biographical paradigm that seeks the liberal-humanist whole man appears, like *Possession*, to reject postmodernism. However, Phineas's quest fails and, like my reading of postmodernism in *Possession*, I argue that Byatt's decision to represent Phineas's failure indicates that the whole self and facts he seeks are illusory. Phineas, however, reads his failure as the inability of life-writing to

provide the unmediated access to facts and things he so desires, and therefore rejects biography for the analysis of the natural world. My argument suggests that Phineas is an unreliable narrator and his perspective is faulty, as neither facts nor things can be unmediated.

In the conclusion to the thesis, I analyse *The Children's Book* in the context of Byatt's portrayal of disempowered characters. Neo-Victorian fiction productively gives a voice to those who were silenced by dominant Victorian ideology. My analysis of *The Children's Book* considers the implicit power relations between different genders, classes and generations. Byatt represents interactions between contemporaries as enmeshed in differential power relations but also suggests that these power relations can be resisted through the denaturalisation of subject positions. In particular, in *The Children's Book*, Byatt portrays Elsie, a working class unmarried mother, as resisting the tropes of the Fallen Woman who is not respectable through ironic recognition of these tropes.

This thesis does not analyse Byatt's novels strictly in order of publication. Some of Byatt's critics report the perception of a new postmodern emphasis to the fiction from *Possession* onwards, considering the fiction published before *Possession* as strictly realist (Alfer and de Campos 64-5; Boccardi, *Byatt* 18). However, my argument suggests continuities between the work published before and after *Possession*, analysing the postmodern strategies of representation Byatt repeatedly uses. The Quartet novels are analysed in consecutive chapters, although *Babel Tower* was published after *Possession* and *A Whistling Woman* was published after *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*. Discussing the Quartet novels in Chapter 2 and 3 illuminates the developments in Byatt's representation of history, subjectivity and power

relations, particularly through her female characters. Although I analyse authorship in all of Byatt's novels, the analysis of *Possession* in Chapter 4 and *The Biographer's Tale* in Chapter 5 both focus on a character who is an author. *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale* are both "biographic metafiction" (Steveker 20) and considering the novels in consecutive chapters emphasises how Byatt recasts the themes and strategies of representation of *Possession* in *The Biographer's Tale*.

Neo-Victorian fiction and its theorists encapsulate the problematics of representation and history in a way that is also relevant to Byatt's novels that do not specifically represent the Victorian period. In Chapter 4, in my discussion of *Possession* I consider neo-Victorian theorists who counter the charge that neo-Victorian fiction is a reflection of 1980s conservative culture and politics. The revival of Victorian values in 1980s politics by Margaret Thatcher uncritically hailed the Victorian era as a past Golden Age to undo the destructive "permissiveness" of the 1960s. Louisa Hadley argues that the heritage film industry, exemplified by Merchant Ivory productions, focuses on the look of the Victorian period:

These films were part of a wider "heritage culture" in Britain during the 1980s which sought to bolster a sense of a fixed national identity; they offer a visual feast in their sumptuous display of Britain's cultural heritage as encoded in both its landscapes and its properties, particularly the country house estates, and the furnishings and costumes. (*Neo-Victorian* 10)

The point Hadley makes here is that some cultural products use the Victorian context to support contemporary priorities and ideologies. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn state, however, discussing what term to use for this kind of art

work and the implications of terminology, “these are crucial distinctions to make when discussing a genre that has the potential to descend into cliché or to be seen as pushing against received assumption within the larger cultural sphere” (6). The issue that these critics raise formulates a particular question in relation to the political implications of how Byatt’s fiction represents its historical context: “the divide between parody and innovation, pastiche and reinterpretation is an important demarcation that separates genres on the border between neo-Victorian texts and historical fiction set in the nineteenth century” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 6).

My argument across this thesis is that Byatt constructs the historical context of her fiction to unmask the period’s ideology. One of the ways that neo-Victorian fiction critiques the Victorian period is to represent voices that were silenced by the period’s authorisation of gender, class, race and sexuality in its male, white, middle and upper class speaking positions. Peter Middleton and Tim Woods analyse the function of history in postwar literature and Byatt’s fiction is illuminated by their sense of the ethical stance that is made possible through representations of history in literature:

Rather than something passively recorded, literature offers history as a permanent reactivation of the past in a critique of the present, and at the level of content offers a textual anamnesis for the hitherto ignored, unacknowledged or repressed pasts marginalised by the dominant histories – feminist narratives, ethnic narratives, non-heterosexual narratives. Literature can also act ethically by altering its form to put the “other” first, and in this way dominant aesthetic and cultural forms are reconfigured in order to make room for narrative modes and cultural forms which

stand in for the other, manifested as different “ways of telling”.

Lost, defeated, or unknown pasts emerge through forms of the “other” which have been suppressed. (77)

Whilst Byatt’s fiction is largely realist in form and would therefore be presumed to endorse the conservative politics associated with realism, this thesis will make clear that Byatt’s realism is “reconfigured” to represent the other. The argument of this thesis is that Byatt’s novels challenge the “dominant aesthetic” of realism and questions the dominant subject position of English identity through the strategies of representation she employs.

## Chapter 1: A. S. Byatt: Texts and Contexts

This thesis considers A. S. Byatt primarily as a writer of prose fiction, although her essays, criticism and poetry will also be considered, where

appropriate. In addition to the novels for which she is, perhaps, best known, Byatt's oeuvre includes critical studies of Iris Murdoch (1965) as well as of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1970), and conversations about literature with the psychologist Iqbal Zainab (1995). She has also written more broadly on history and literature, and art history. Byatt has edited many works include an anthology on memory and writings by George Eliot and Willa Cather and has written as a journalist for major UK newspapers. She is a regular contributor to radio programmes on the BBC. Alexis Alfer and Amy de Campos in *Critical Storytelling* see Byatt as a shaper of British intellectual life (8-9).

Byatt's publishing record for fiction alone is extensive and she has a significant reputation in the many fields she has explored, winning numerous awards, including the 1990 Booker prize for *Possession*. The reception of Byatt's fiction is mixed, though, both in reviews in the mainstream media and in critical works by academics. Reviewers sometimes cite an over-deterministic approach in her fiction and academics describe her novels as anti-feminist and anti-postmodern, noting that they are conservative, reactionary and nostalgic. Although there has been only a handful of full-length studies of Byatt's fiction, her work is mentioned in many critical surveys of post-war fiction. What some critics perceive as failings in Byatt's fiction, others cite as strengths, such as the unapologetic intellectualism, abundance of detail and dense intertextuality. Alfer and De Campos note that eleven reviewers name Byatt's fiction as "masterpieces," and a further twelve "dismissed them as rather papery achievements which offer little more than self-regarding displays of erudition and literary self-consciousness" (4). Olga Kenyon observes that, in reviews of



*Still Life*, “a few critics consider that she included too much of her wide reading” (54).

I will discuss Byatt’s early novels, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) and *The Game* (1967) here as an introduction to the concepts that recur and are developed throughout her writing career. *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game* are not only early explorations of themes that will be developed in later novels but also initial attempts to find a suitable fictional form. The themes that Byatt’s fiction represents are intimately connected to how forms and genres are gendered. From the very beginning of her career in fiction writing, Byatt concerns herself with not only the representation of women but whether certain canonical representational forms assume a male perspective and so cannot represent female experiences and subjectivity. The discussion of *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game* begins the conceptualisation of the politics of representation in the novels and will lead on, in the rest of the chapter, to an analysis of the different theories that illuminate and contextualise Byatt’s fiction.

In her introduction to the 1991 reissue of *Shadow*, Byatt states:

I had awful problems with the form of the novel. I had no model I found at all satisfactory. I should say now that the available models, Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, Forster, Woolf, were all too suffused with “sensibility” but that I disliked the joky social comedy of Amis and Wain considerably more than I disliked “sensibility.” (xi)

The later fiction establishes a “satisfactory” form that Byatt attempts to construct in her early fiction and continues to develop throughout her writing career. Her strategies of representation construct the critique of inherited literary conventions, such as realism, and institute the cultural commentary

characteristic of the later fiction, such as *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Possession* (1990). In *Shadow* and *The Game*, a critique of literary conventions is present, but the characters are scripted by conventions, unable to resist them. Byatt's acknowledgement that patriarchal representations of women are naturalised ideologies informs the novels subsequent to *Shadow* and *The Game*, and her later characters resist patriarchal representations by reworking genres and rewriting inherited cultural paradigms, such as Frederica in *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002) and Ellen in *Possession*.

*Shadow* and *The Game* reflect on inherited literary paradigms metafictionally. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (*Metafiction* 2). Both *Shadow* and *The Game* pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality by thematically exploring how inherited literary paradigms determine perception and how that perception constructs the world. By foregrounding the status and process of perception in the novels, Byatt is able to suggest that meaning does not follow directly from the world, but is always mediated. As Waugh states: "the metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to 'represent' the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be 'represented'. In literary fiction, it is, in fact, possible only to 'represent' the *discourses* of that world" (3). That the world, or individual subjectivities, cannot be directly represented but are mediated by discourse is a theme that Byatt returns to in her fiction, particularly in her use of life-writing in *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000).

The major difference between male and female characters in *Shadow* and *The Game* is in their uneven access to authorial identity, which excludes

female subjectivities from its universalised masculine identity. The tradition of authorial identity and artistic production represented in both novels is that of the visionary artist, derived from the Romantics. Anna in *Shadow*, along with Julia and Cassandra in *The Game* are represented as failed visionaries. Anna cannot make the connection between her partial visionary experiences and the construction of art (*Shadow* 132-4, 235). Cassandra is a Medievalist Don at Cambridge and is unable to develop her journal into the larger imaginative project she had hoped (*Game* 24) and carries on a fantasy life with childhood friend and beloved Simon. As a metropolitan London novelist, Julia produces successful novels but they are not the serious work she had hoped to write. When Julia produces a novel that is more serious, it is a form of biographical representation with her sister Cassandra as its subject and is ethically compromised. The visionary author derived from Romantic art presumes a male identity and so is ineffective for representing female subjectivity. Byatt represents her female characters as failed visionaries to demonstrate the difficulty female writers experience when attempting to appropriate male traditions.

The women in *Shadow* and *The Game* attempt to conceptualise female subjectivity in *contrast* to masculine models of authorship. In *Shadow*, Anna begins to explore the way in which subjectivity is constructed, rather than emerging as an identity that exists outside of discourse. Focalising the narrative through Anna, the narrator reports Anna's initial realisations that meaning is always already mediated and starts to distrust the visionary model for art that her father, Henry, practices: "to build oneself, it was maybe more important to remember a whole vision, than to actually have one. Or maybe, on the other hand, to build on that was a lie. It was certain that to care for things seen was

important, but how seen? If the way of seeing was artificial, a construct, what then?" (*Shadow* 105). Byatt does not present Anna developing her thoughts on the construction of reality and subjectivity, as Anna becomes a battleground between two men in her life. Her father Henry and his critic Oliver each require that Anna validate their world views by patterning her life after their model. Henry's identity as a visionary artist and producer of art are contrasted to Oliver's social realism. Oliver's admiration for Henry's work is complicated by his belief that Henry's world view does not take account of the socio-economic realities of the world.

Both Henry and Oliver profess that they want Anna to choose an appropriate life for herself, seeing the other's view as a lie (205, 227). Neither recognises that each view could represent a partial truth, considering both perspectives as absolute. Each tries to achieve primacy but both views are subject positions within a literary context, that of the visionary author and the socially-committed critic. The visionary artist constructs literature as the product of authors who experience things first-hand, believing they have access to a transcendental meaning beyond the everyday, and the socially-committed critic considers the representation of social reality as part of literature's social commentary and the author's duty to address complex issues, rather than seeing beyond them. Although Henry's position appears to be the more valuable position, Alfer and de Campos argue that his visions are imitations of a visionary textuality that precedes and conditions his perception, as well as imitating "an unmediated 'real' posited by precisely these textual predecessors as apprehended through, but ultimately remaining beyond, textual structure" (17). Henry has, nonetheless, the ability to access such visions to produce great art, or so Oliver concludes (*Shadow* 228).

The problem for Anna is that the choice Henry and Oliver present is a false dichotomy. Because of her gender, she is an object constructed by competing male discourses in the novel. Although Henry and Oliver are unable to perceive the significance of Anna's gender, her body reifies gender difference when she becomes pregnant, disrupting the alternatives Henry and Oliver offer. However, the reification of gender difference does not deliver Anna from patriarchal discourse. When she tries to escape the dichotomy Henry and Oliver represent, she remains an object of male discourse. Her decision to marry Peter Hughes-Winterson simply fulfils a conventional female plot, rather than developing a subjectivity that is not male-defined. Byatt metafictionally draws the reader's attention to the conventionality of Anna's choice by representing the encounter between Anna and her future mother-in-law as scripted: "Anna thought, seeing her lucidly during this first meeting only, that she had had all this scene neatly staged before they ever arrived, and wondered how much more of her stay would be simply a matter of finding her own predetermined lines at the right moment, and speaking them" (282). In the last pages of the novel, Anna attempts to exert a form of agency; firstly, against Peter by going to meet Oliver, and second, when it appears Oliver is not going to arrive, by deciding to leave and construct her life separately from the men in it. In the end, however, Anna cannot avoid the various patriarchal scripts that write her and she is not able to connect her thinking on the construction of subjectivity and perception to a recognition of how constructed patriarchal scripts provide her plots.

Byatt's nascent exploration of subject positions continues in *The Game*, in her representation of the sisters, Cassandra and Julia. The sisters are failed visionaries, but like Anna their portraits demonstrate that the figure of the

visionary male artist is incompatible with female subjectivity. The sisters' subjectivities are partly constructed from what they believe the other thinks of them and so are not properly differentiated from each other. As Christien Franken observes, "they differ by two years in age – Julia is the younger sister – and find it extremely difficult to become separate individuals instead of reflections in each other's eyes" (61). The role of the imagination and the fictionalisation of the other demonstrate that subjectivity is constructed from various and often conflicting subject positions.

*The Game* explores authorship from a slightly different perspective to *Shadow*, as *The Game* represents Cassandra and Julia attempting to come to terms with the primacy of their imaginary world in the game they make in childhood. The game began with playing cards but a narrative component was added when Cassandra encountered "Morris, Tennyson and the *Morte d'Arthur*" (*Game* 46). Although the sisters tell the story of Queen Morgan and Elaine of Astolat, the female is represented within a masculine romance plot. Franken compares the plots of *Shadow* and *The Game*: "both novels do not give in too easily to the marriage plot and to romance" (67). Byatt partly denaturalises the romantic plot that constructs the female subject as its object by reversing subject and object, as Julia and Cassandra write romances in their imagination about Simon. When Simon meets Julia again after a long separation, he says: "I always felt – both of you – were trying to make something of me. There wasn't enough of me to stand up to it" (*Game* 167). The reversal of subject and object does not, however, allow for female agency in the end, as both sisters remain subjected to the romance plot throughout the novel.

The romance plot is not denaturalised for the sisters, who remain inscribed within it and unable to rewrite it. Although Julia tries to acknowledge

the plot that has been driving her, derived from the game and her relationship with Cassandra, the novel she produces does not effect a rewriting of her plot. Julia's novel, *A Sense of Glory*, uses Cassandra's life as its material and represents her love for Simon, although the protagonist is "a composite creature" (146) of Cassandra and Julia, as neither has stopped loving Simon. Mariadele Boccardi observes that "the Romantic and romantic vision Anna and Cassandra aspired to may have been unachievable, but for both, with the recognition comes a moment of revelation of other possibilities, even though neither woman pursues this insight" (*Byatt* 39). I agree with Boccardi and would add that her analysis can be extended as Byatt's female characters in later novels develop these possibilities, rewriting genres and plots, and denaturalising the patriarchal scripts that are imposed on women.

Franken finds that Julia encapsulates possibilities for the female author in the open ending of *The Game*: "as such, her portrait both replaces the myth of the male genius, fulfils the narrative promise which I saw exemplified in Anna Severall, and acts as a foil to Cassandra" (73-4). In Byatt's fiction from *Virgin* onwards, the female characters begin to recognise more consciously the ways in which culture naturalises a masculine perspective as universal. In *Still Life* (1985), the characters start to resist gender roles in subtle ways, as will be discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the birth narrative. However, it is from *Possession* onwards that the female characters resist gender roles through appropriating representational practices, especially writing, and rewrite patriarchal scripts. The development of feminist theories of authorship in the 1970s and 1980s provides Byatt's later writing with a conceptual framework and a language with which to challenge patriarchal representations of women, particularly in the reworking of genre conventions.

## 1. Byatt Studies and the Politics of the Novel

A number of major studies have proved pertinent to the argument of this thesis, in particular its interest in gendered subjectivity, authorship and postmodern strategies of representation. These include Christien Franken's *Art, Authorship, Creativity* (2001), Jane Campbell's *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*, Lena Steveker's *Knitting the Net of Culture* (2009), Alexa Alfer and Amy de Campos's *A.S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling* (2010) and Mariadele Boccardi's *A. S. Byatt* (2013).<sup>3</sup> All five studies situate Byatt's work in relation to postmodernist and feminist theories, as well as approaching authorship and subjectivity from different perspectives.

Franken's study positions Byatt's early novels, *Shadow* and *The Game*, as well as *Possession*, in relation to Byatt's own critical work. Franken proposes that in her role as writer, Byatt feels threatened by developments in twentieth-century critical theories that erode the centrality of the author in the interpretation of literature, whilst the intellectual in Byatt acknowledges the influence of twentieth-century critical theories on her work. However, Franken finds that the fiction stages and responds to concepts of authorship developed from feminism, postmodernism and post-structuralism: "my discussion of the polyvocal aspects of Byatt's critical ideas about authorship and creativity does indeed lead to a notion of writing and the writing subject which depends on concepts such as fragmentation, ambivalence, complexity and gender" (32). Continuing Franken's position, attending to the writers in Byatt's fiction helps to resolve the tension between feminist and postmodern theories of authorship

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<sup>3</sup> Other full-length studies on Byatt's fiction include Kathleen Coyne Kelly's *A.S. Byatt* (1996) and *The Still Life in Byatt's Fiction* by Elizabeth Hicks (2010), as well as the essay collection, *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real*, edited by Alexa Alfer (2001).



and Byatt's use of realism as she plays out this conflict through her authors. I build on Franken's argument by considering authorship across all of Byatt's major novels.

Jane Campbell focuses on the creativity of Byatt's female characters and their role in representing "more and more of the interest and variety of lived experience" (*Heliotropic* 25) in all of her fiction up to *The Biographer's Tale*. Campbell emphasises a balanced approach to Byatt's fiction, locating Byatt's feminism in the creativity ascribed to the female characters rather than in a dogmatic promulgation of feminist theories: "[Byatt] worries that the ideology of sisterhood and the focus on women's texts may stand in the way of the universality and objectivity she stubbornly cherishes" (17). Considering postmodernism, Campbell notes a development from a "characteristic blend of traditional and postmodern techniques" in *Virgin and Still Life*, to historiographic metafiction in *Possession*, to the "more fragmented, many faceted, idea-laden narratives of *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*" (5). However, *The Biographer's Tale* "paradoxically presents Byatt's most explicit critique of postmodernism within a structure that is itself heavily postmodernist" (5). Whilst I agree that some of Byatt's novels use more postmodern techniques than others, my analysis of the author in Byatt's fiction reveals the continuities between the novels in the use by Byatt's characters of postmodernist devices. Campbell's argument pays close attention to female creativity, although she finds that it is the male characters who carry out Byatt's debates about authorship. It is the men "through whom Byatt reflects on her own artistic problems; they often act and speak for her, in a way that shows Byatt's implicit refusal of rigid gender differences and her wariness of all forms of essentialism" (23). Campbell is correct to ascribe this tendency to a refusal of gender

difference. However, Campbell's argument can be extended to include Byatt's female authors as Byatt no less works through different positions on authorship through these characters. My argument takes into account both female and male authors in Byatt's fiction, positioning the authors in relation to the various genres the authors engage with in their texts.

The key concerns of Steveker's work are "identity, literature, and cultural memory" (1) in the Quartet, *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*. Steveker emphasises a longing for identity that "can never be fully realized" (2), identifying this trait as an aspect of postmodern subjectivity and an illusion necessary for the person to see themselves as "a continuous and coherent self" (2). She finds that *Possession*, in particular, is not postmodern "precisely because it emphasizes the hope that it is possible to gain knowledge of an individual as a unique person" (26) through Maud and Roland's biographical quest. I aim to show, through my focus on the writer in *Possession*, that this conclusion is destabilised through the complex presentation of subjectivity in the various journals in the novel.

Steveker states that "each of the six novels I discuss conceptualizes literature as a medium of British cultural memory which serves as a stabilizing force for individual identities that have to be negotiated within an arena of competing categories of difference" (5). There is a substantial amount of evidence for such an argument, which Steveker refers to with insight, particularly in relation to Byatt's use of Shakespeare and Elizabeth I. My argument shows that there is also a wealth of evidence that the characters find English cultural history challenging, as dominant paradigms of English subjectivity as male, upper class and imperial are represented as increasingly problematic. Furthermore, the female characters are required to negotiate

cultural representations of women that are restrictive and do not fit their perception of their multiple subjectivities.

Both continuities and ruptures within English cultural heritage are evident in the use of various literary genres by Byatt's authors, who respond to the history of those genres and point to their limitations. The lady's journal is deliberately simulated and partly parodied in *Possession* in order to question prescriptive definitions of female writing and subjectivity. The male quest narrative as a dominant form of British literature is deconstructed in *The Biographer's Tale* as a quest without a subject. The texts Byatt's authors produce therefore negotiate both continuities and departures from British cultural heritage, and so my discussion develops Steveker's analysis of British cultural memory in this context.

Alexa Alfer and Amy de Campos regard Byatt's role as a storyteller as primary; they consider this aspect of her writing in relation to "the wider cultural and critical contexts with which Byatt's work grapples, engages and indeed intersects" (2). Rather than focusing specifically on postmodernist or feminist issues, Alfer and de Campos find that it is "within Byatt's fictions that her own emphasis on the necessary interplay between fiction and criticism, reading and writing, body and mind, tradition and transformation unfolds its fullest potential" (10). Alfer and de Campos aptly summarise the effects of the postmodernism versus realism debate:

And while the works of a substantial number of mid- to late twentieth century writers cast significant doubt on the notion of a categorical opposition between "old realism and new experiment," literary criticism for its part nevertheless largely accepted and indeed perpetuated this dichotomy. Its echoes continue to haunt

the academy to the present day, as recent debates over the relative merits of postmodernism as an aesthetic and/or critical paradigm attest. (36-7)

Whilst Alfer and de Campos are correct in their characterisation, accepting the dichotomy they indicate could risk eliding the subversive potential of Byatt's fiction – a point that they concede:

and yet, if Byatt's fiction – and perhaps late twentieth-century writing in general – has increasingly freed itself from the constraints imposed by the realism/experiment dichotomy, the variety of possible forms recovered and (re)invented in the process nevertheless reflect a continued and undiminished preoccupation with “the problem of the ‘real’ in fiction, and the adequacy of words to describe it.” (38)

My own study sees the realism / experimentation, or realism / postmodernism, dichotomy not as constraining but as useful, in that it can provide a conceptual basis for approaching Byatt's fiction and in turn elucidating the political position of the novels.

In her 2013 book *A. S. Byatt in the New British Fiction Series*, Mariadele Boccardi situates Byatt's fiction in relation to three periods of post-war British fiction and in relation to postmodernism. The first is Margaret Thatcher's prime ministership in 1979 and “the consequent shifts in ideology, rhetoric and policy away from the consensus that had until then characterised post-war British politics” (*Byatt* 15). The second considers the 1970s, when the group of writers who had lived through the Second World War and were established writers were contrasted with a new group, only beginning their careers when Thatcher was elected: “the former group were socially and ethnically homogenous (white,

middle class, Oxbridge educated), the latter were more diverse; as a result, the range of subjects deemed suitable for treatment in fiction widened, while the strategies for the representation of those subjects varied too" (16). The third periodisation is organised in relation to critical theory rather than by politics or generation and notes: "the extent to which novels began to engage with, reflect on and articulate aspects of critical theory (from structuralism to feminism, from Lacanian psychoanalysis to post-structuralism) that had been developed in continental Europe" (17). Boccardi finds that Byatt does not fit exactly with any of these conceptual periods: her age and education emphasise similarities to the older group of writers, although her fiction, particularly *Possession*, aligns her with the younger group.

In summary, Boccardi proposes that "Byatt's claim to novelty reverberates to a considerable extent from one novel, whereas when her career is taken in its entirety it stretches across and therefore undermines the distinctions which have become part of the critical consensus on the periodisation of the contemporary" (18). Boccardi follows that this should be seen as a positive attribute, as it allows critics to challenge the rigid boundaries of such periodisations (20). Postmodernism is acknowledged as an important context for Byatt's fiction, although Boccardi finds that her fiction is ambivalent towards it. Boccardi makes the important point, through a discussion of Iris Murdoch and liberalism, that British postmodernism, is only partially in line with the international development of postmodernism (22-23), and that Byatt's fiction evinces a similar standpoint.

Boccardi concludes her introduction by finding

That Byatt's protagonists all seek to recapture that paradisaal state of wholeness of word and thing and that some, most notably

Roland Mitchell in *Possession*, are granted it, once again points to the author's ambivalence towards what is philosophically accepted, on the one hand, and what is imaginatively possible in the forms of the novel and the short story on the other. (28)

She finds that Byatt's liberal-humanism is most evident through the characters who are able to bridge the separation of word and thing through the imagination (28). However, I intend to show that Byatt continually destabilises the liberal-humanist self in the novels and that the characters who are able to bridge the gap between word and thing are undermined by the existence of other characters whose writing exploit the advantages of the separation of word and thing.

My argument addresses these contradictory critical assessments of Byatt's fiction by analysing closely the way in which she attends to the various problems implicit in the writing of fiction. Byatt engages with important and contentious critical debates about the appropriate concerns of fiction and apposite methods of representing those concerns. Byatt discusses these concerns at length in various critical works and articles both scholarly and journalistic, as well as in interviews. Franken finds a split in Byatt's identity when she engages with critical ideas on the concept of authorship and its relevance in a theoretical landscape that has proclaimed, with Roland Barthes, the death of the author: "the *critic* in A. S. Byatt begins her lecture 'Identity and the Writer' with a recognition of her own intellectual affinity with post-structuralist theories which criticize the paramount importance of 'the author'. The *writer* in Byatt feels threatened by the same poststructuralist criticism" (17; emphasis original). Franken finds that Byatt's critical position is trapped into endorsing the views of F.R. Leavis, her influential lecturer at Cambridge in the 1950s even though

Byatt is troubled by the limitations of Leavisite views: “on the one hand, Byatt's critical work testifies to the attraction she feels towards Leavisite criticism and, on the other hand, it speaks of the difficulties she has in accepting Leavis's devaluation of ‘femininity’ and the personal” (2-3). Campbell agrees with Franken’s identification of Byatt’s missed opportunity in “Identity and the Writer,” in that her lecture would have been successful if she had conceptualised her objections to Leavisite and post-structuralist concepts of the author from a perspective of female identity (*Heliotropic* 20). However, Campbell differentiates her analysis from Franken’s, finding that it is in her fiction (rather than her critical work) that Byatt makes an effective critique of both Leavisite and post-structuralist conceptualisations of authorship (*Heliotropic* 20). I am in agreement with Campbell and I add that Byatt stages the contentious issues surrounding authorship through the authors she creates in her fiction. In Byatt's fiction, the authors' texts not only question appropriate practices of representation and interrogate traditions of literature, but also challenge the way in which subjectivity is constructed through narrative.

There is another element to the questioning of the Leavisite tenets in Byatt's fiction, which is part of but wider than the devaluation of feminine writing as noted above. The Leavisite rejection of analysing the socio-economic and political context of literature is problematic for Byatt. Alan Sinfield emphasises the political context of literature and literary history in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, and discusses Leavis’s programme for English literature in this context: “F. R. Leavis wanted literature to be culturally central in an English Tradition, and was concerned with positive moral values. Even so, he was opposed to relating literature to economic, social and political forces” (104). For Byatt's fiction, however, politics are inherent in the representation of

subjectivity and these politics are constructed through the cultural context of the novels as well as through engagement with writing traditions and genres. There is a questioning, and in some cases a rejection, of certain forms of writing traditions that entails a questioning and rejection of the liberal-humanist self underpinning the assumptions of those traditions.

Whilst Byatt's fiction is largely realist, in her novels various genres and traditions are engaged with through the device of the embedded texts. This allows Byatt to interrogate the appropriateness of different novelistic traditions and question the liberal-humanist selfhood that these traditions establish and perpetuate. In Byatt's earlier novels in her Quartet, following English social and intellectual life in the 1950s, *Virgin* and *Still Life* question how historical literature and the realist tradition imply the concept of a stable, core identity that is inalienable, derived from upper class, white and male markers in English society. The concluding novels of the Quartet, *Babel* and *Whistling*, integrate numerous embedded texts to question further the way representational practices privilege the dominant markers of identity in English society and permeate institutions such as the law courts and cult religions. These dominant markers are shown to be subject positions rather than a core of identity and draw on conventional and patriarchal images of femininity to consolidate their supremacy. However, these two later novels make clear, through practices of representation such as experimental non-narrative techniques and television as a medium that it is possible to resist conventional gender ideology through alternative practices of representation.

In *Possession*, the Romantic cult of the poetic, male, individual genius appears, on one level, to be set against and privileged over female creativity. The author as male genius can be read as the greatest good of literature,



achieved and endorsed by the discovery of Roland's poetic gift towards the end of the novel. However, the various journals in *Possession* destabilise the identity of the genius male poet by representing a subversive female creativity, although the journals' contribution to the model of female creativity are largely unacknowledged in the literary economy of value in the novel. Nonetheless, the journals provide a complex representation of female creativity. The journals in *Possession* also complicate the concept of truth in autobiographical narratives, implying that such narratives have a truth *effect*. This has implications for the way in which autobiography not only represents but also constructs subjectivity, instead of mimetically transcribing that subject. These implications are developed further in *The Biographer's Tale*, as the novel details the search for a biographical subject who *cannot* be represented mimetically due to a lack of biographical information. In attempting to write a biography of a biographer, the protagonist Phineas, seeks to engage with the heroic tradition of narrating a life, as a rejection of postmodernist and poststructuralist criticism. However, whilst the novel is critical of postmodernist criticism, Phineas writes a narrative of his abortive search for a liberal-humanist whole self, a narrative that is postmodernist as it cannot discover that self: Phineas can only find fragments of his subject that cannot be shaped into a whole.

Byatt's most recent full-length novel, *The Children's Book* (2009), engages with the generic conventions of late Victorian children's literature and is her most sustained representation of the way that literature can be damaging. One of the central protagonists, Olive Wellwood, writes successful children's stories. On the one hand, Olive's writing is part of the Victorian tradition of social realism that represents the horrific conditions of the working class, although transformed into fantasy ostensibly for children. On the other hand, by using

themes from her own life to structure her stories, Olive appropriates the experiences of her children to disastrous effect. Byatt continues her engagement with the discursive construction of subjectivity, with special attention to literary discourse, although Olive is largely unaware of the effect of her stories on her son Tom, who feels entirely *constructed* by them, or her daughter Dorothy, who feels excluded from them.

Byatt's characters who are authors, for example Agatha and Frederica in *Babel*, produce texts in a variety of genres that are ideally placed to metafictionally question the presumed mimetic function of realism and the conservatism attributed to it, through characters who write fantasy and fairy tales, as well as non-narrative cut-ups in the style of William S. Burroughs. Some texts by Byatt's authors, as with the historical plays in *Virgin* and *Still Life*, function as examples of how realism can fail when it is not self-conscious. Byatt instead produces a self-conscious realism in *Virgin* and *Still Life* by using postmodern strategies of representation to comment on the failures of the plays and to question the presentation of history as a purely factual discourse. Similarly, various forms of life-writing by Byatt's authors in her other novels destabilise the presentation of autobiographical and biographical narratives as a factual reflection of a life and demonstrate that life-writing is a narrative that constructs subjectivity.

For Byatt, the processes that form gendered subjectivity are not separable from subject formation more generally, as subjectivity is always embodied. Gendered subjectivity is significant for Byatt's authors and is interrogated through their texts, particularly through the different writing traditions available to them. Whilst traditions of genre are not segregated along gender lines in Byatt's fiction, she emphasises the ways in which access to

paradigms of authorship and genres imply gender bias. Particular genres that Byatt employs in the embedded texts do have specific gender alignments, such as the male biography of heroic deeds in *The Biographer's Tale* and the nineteenth-century lady's journal in *Possession*. Paradigms of gender in cultural products, such as narrative, affect the way characters conceptualise their subjectivities. The novels demonstrate the limitations of traditional gender roles when they are projected onto characters through narratives that do not adequately fit the characters' experiences. Byatt's novels show that narrative is not only a medium for challenging conservative politics; it can also be used against the protagonists as a regulatory tool to uphold conservative values, as, for example, in the case of *Possession* where the femininity of the angel in the house trope is used to police women's writing. The characters can, however, use narrative to write back against genre constrictions and imposed narratives, constructing a voice for themselves.

Although Byatt's fiction constructs a destabilising critique of the certainties and politics of realism, this critique comes from the margins of her fiction and does not appear to be part of the central realist plots. The use of realism is sometimes perceived by commentators as an impediment to placing Byatt's fiction within postmodern (Alfer and de Campos 36-8) and feminist canons (Franken xii-xv), as realism is seen as conservative. Postmodernism and feminism are generally perceived as radical destabilisations of conservative politics, although sometimes postmodernism is seen as apolitical or ahistorical (Hutcheon, *Politics* 2-4) and certain types of feminism that assume a white middle class perspective therefore exclude the other of class and race (Rowbotham 282). However, there is also tension between postmodernism and some feminisms, as postmodernism is judged as rejecting the concept of the

self upon which authorship is based, replacing that autonomous self with multiple subject positions, whereas liberal-humanist feminism has needed a sense of the female autonomous self upon which to base its challenge to patriarchal dictates.

As both postmodernism and feminism contain political critiques, it can be difficult to use either to analyse Byatt's fiction, as she says that "my temperament is agnostic, and I am a non-believer and a non-belonger to schools of thought" (*Passions* 2). Byatt also directly condemns academic feminism and postmodernism in *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*, although my analysis will show that these criticisms are not as straightforward as they appear. Nonetheless, Byatt's fiction is not only difficult to place in relation to various modes of criticism but also in terms of defining the political and socio-economic sympathies evinced in the fiction. Boccardi contemplates the difficulty of identifying the politics of Byatt's novels, arguing that because Byatt largely focuses on recent history and the Victorian period, and does not represent the 1980s, her work is neither overtly nor implicitly political. Furthermore, "the very refusal to represent the present of the novel's writing can be taken as an implicit endorsement for the Conservative ideology of Victorian values and of nostalgia for a time before the permissiveness of the 1960s" (Boccardi, *Byatt* 18). Boccardi does qualify this broad view, as such a perspective does not take into account the critique of nineteenth-century society in *Angels and Insects* or "the Quartet's ambivalence towards the social conflict of postwar life" (18-19).

However, Boccardi summarises that Byatt's fiction is not "inspired, motivated and sustained by opposition to the prevailing socio-economic conditions of the period. Rather, the concern that emerges most consistently is

with the probing of the nature, means and outcomes of the representation of reality” (19). Her fiction certainly features the representation of reality as a recurrent and important concern, and any study of Byatt needs to address representation carefully. It is true that she does not represent the 1980s, except in *Possession*, where she engages with the perception that market forces determine the importance of culture and the effect of capitalism on the cultural heritage industry, as well as the diminishing availability of academic jobs (possibility reflective of the decrease of available jobs more widely throughout the decade). However, I do not think that the lack of direct attention to the socio-economic climate of the 1980s means Byatt is apolitical. I argue instead that politics in her fiction may be implicit or evoked as part of her more visible concern with the representation of subjectivity and history.

Sinfield makes clear that the analysis of a novel’s politics needs to be apt and relevant to the particular novel considered:

As with any mode of communication, literary texts make best immediate sense when read in ways that are appropriate to them (it would be a mistake to take an Absurdist play as “slice of life” naturalism). But when we have done this the text is still, in the larger analysis, telling a story about the world, and therefore it has a politics. (30)

The challenge that critics face when attempting to analyse Byatt’s fiction is how to choose an appropriate analytical framework for not only is her writing ambivalent in many respects, the choice of framework may be determined by her statements in her critical works and interviews. Byatt’s negative comments on the politicisation of literary criticism are persuasive (*Histories 2*) and could,

along with her use of realism, encourage critics to avoid reading Byatt's fiction through a political lens.

Byatt's use of realist representation could seem as though it valorises the conservative ideals of historical periods prior to the 1960s. The novels not only represent Victorian and 1950s society rather than the contemporary period but also appear to prioritise the values of those societies over contemporary issues. The fiction Byatt produces therefore seems in-line with the social conservatism of Margaret Thatcher's reign in the Conservative Party. In Byatt's use of realism and apparent lack of overt experimentation, as well as the seeming precedence of the values of the past, it is possible to align her with conservatism. Arthur Marwick states that "much art and literature was clearly critical of the kind of selfish, divided society, where money is God, associated with Thatcherism" (*Culture* 141). Byatt's fiction makes this kind of criticism through its representation of the construction of history and subjectivity. The focus on the imperial legacy, class and gender as determinants that shape national stories and subject positions are continually, if subtly, probed in her fiction.

However, the politics of Byatt's fiction are diffuse and often implicit in the cultural context of the novels. Edward Said's influential analysis of imperialism is a useful paradigm for clarifying the politics of Byatt's novels:

As a reference, as a point of definition, as an easily assumed place of travel, wealth, and service, the empire functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction, very much like the servants in grand households and in novels, whose work is taken for

granted but scarcely ever more than named, rarely studied [. . .] or given density. (62)

Politics in Byatt's fiction may be implicit and determined through the cultural context, but what Said makes clear is that however codified the empire might be in nineteenth-century fiction, its importance should not be overlooked. Similarly, politics in Byatt's fiction should not be overlooked, even when they are situated at the margins of the novel.

## 2. Postmodernism and Byatt's Fiction

When Frederic Jameson states that "there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism" (*Consumer* 20), it is clear that Byatt's fiction does not directly engage with this element of postmodernism. Her fiction engages with postmodernism in its questioning of the organisation of history through metanarratives, or grand narratives. The destabilisation of metanarratives often takes place in the embedded texts, or in their relationship with the frame narrative. Although I consider the embedded texts to be vital to understanding Byatt's fiction, critics up to this point have not systematically analysed the embedded texts. As a result, the extent to which Byatt undermines the metanarratives of history has not been recognised and some of the most significant postmodern features of Byatt's work have been marginalised.

Jean-Francois Lyotard delineates what he means by metanarratives in the context of the terms modern and postmodern: "I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind by making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the

rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (xxiii). He then determines the postmodern:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. (xxiv)

The rejection of scientific and historical metanarratives of progress suggests to some critics that postmodernism signals “the end of history.” Jameson indicates that the concept of the end of history as constructed by postmodernism is negative, concluding that there is a

disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have in one way or another to preserve. (*Consumer* 20)

However, his later view of postmodernism is more nuanced in its understanding of how history has been conceptualised through a postmodernist lens:

But it is hard to discuss “Postmodernism theory” in any general way without having to recourse to the matter of historical deafness, an exasperating condition (providing you are aware of it) that determines a series of spasmodic and intermittent, but



desperate, attempts at recuperation. Postmodernism theory is one of those attempts: the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an “age,” or zeitgeist or “system” or “current situation” any longer. (*Postmodernism* x-xi)

What is particularly useful for my consideration of Byatt here is the way in which the postmodern era has destabilised metanarratives and the dominant identities that are supported by and constructed from those metanarratives. In Byatt’s authors’ texts, historical metanarratives are continually destabilised, as can be seen from the discussion of genres in the novels above. Postmodernism also makes clear that the claim to the status of truth in historical discourse is problematic; this is also a priority for Byatt, in the way that the embedded texts function. *Possession* is perceived as validating the idea that the truth of past events could be discovered, if only from the point of view of the reader.

Boccardi argues that “questions are answered fully, doubters are silenced or converted into willing participants, knowledge is made possible by romantic sleight-of-hand” (*Byatt* 73). However, my analysis shows the importance of the rewriting of Ellen’s journal, an act that complicates the reliability and accuracy of the historical record in the novel, producing a truth effect and emphasising the textuality of historical accounts.

Linda Hutcheon’s adept account of postmodernism and, in particular, her emphasis on history in the contemporary novel is useful here. Hutcheon’s concept of a particular kind of postmodern fiction, historiographic metafiction, or “the self-conscious presentation of the fictionality, the lack of the familiar presence of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history writing” (*Politics* 35), is fertile ground for understanding how Byatt’s

novels challenge their realism. As Hutcheon explains: “postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge” (1-2). Hutcheon’s specific focus on history is useful for thinking about the ways in which Byatt’s authors approach representation. Despite the largely realist form of her novels, the texts by the authors question the status of history and life-writing as fact, emphasising the extent of the interpretative function and representation practices employed in seemingly factual narratives.

Whilst Hutcheon’s theory, as well as the insights of other theorists of postmodernism, can be useful, the limitations of postmodernist theory can be addressed through the reappraisal of realism. As John J. Su notes in his work *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel*, “while the disappearance of postmodernism from academic discourses may be cause for relief, if not celebration, in many circles, it has left a theoretical vacuum for the analysis of many contemporary literary texts and broader shifts in literary history” (55). This vacuum is filled by recent discussions of realism, such as in *Adventures in Realism* (edited by Matthew Beaumont), which suggest that texts such as *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader* portrays a caricature of realism and that

it implies that all realism is a species of trompe l’oeil, an art of representation that, in replicating empirical reality as exactly as possible, dreams of attaining a complete correspondence to it. It is a conception of realism that at the same time overstates its mimetic ambitions and dramatically undervalues its ability to exhibit and examine the formal limitations that shape it. (4)

Hutcheon makes a similar evaluation of realism in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, emphasising the documentary function of realism, in contrast to postmodernism's destabilising tendencies: "many postmodern strategies are openly premised on a challenge to the realist notion that presumes the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and natural link between sign and referent or word and world" (34). However, as George Levine states in his major study of realism in 1981,

no major Victorian novelists were deluded into believing that they were in fact offering an unmediated reality; but all of them struggled to make contact with the world out there, and even with their knowledge of their own subjectivity, to break from the threatening limits of solipsism, of convention, and of language. (8)

One of the most productive perspectives for the post-postmodernist age of literary criticism, if it can be called that, is Irmtraud Huber's sense that a new trend in novels and criticism has more recently combined elements of those attributes conventionally attributed to realism and postmodernism. Huber situates her argument in relation to postmodernism, but with an awareness, like Su, that postmodernism has passed, or was ending as it began (2) and finds that new trends towards realism are combined, in the novels she goes on to analyse, with fantasy. Huber notes that there are a variety of labels, such as "neo-realism" and "speculative realism" amongst others, to denote this new trend:

Another point of general agreement is that these labels describe a shift of interest, rather than a rupture, that the literature they are concerned with holds on to much of what was postmodernist but looks beyond postmodernism's constant endeavours to disrupt, to

alienate and to subvert. It attempts to bridge the rupture (not to cover it), to be accessible (though not transparent), to create (but not to posit). After and because of deconstruction, it seeks to reconstruct. (6-7)

It is worth mentioning here that, although it is not one of the main novels Huber considers, she writes about *The Biographer's Tale* towards the end of her book. Huber's characterisation of the new trends in novels and criticism is particularly useful as it provides the step on from postmodernism, going some way to remedy the problems with postmodernism, and the criticisms of postmodernism from within Byatt's novels. However, this does not invalidate postmodernism as a useful tool with which to interpret Byatt's novels, but it does require a caveat of treating the material carefully.

Huber emphasises the reconstruction possible after postmodernism but without diminishing or ignoring the insights gained through postmodernist theories. Peter Middleton and Tim Woods similarly look beyond postmodernist theory in considering the way in which fiction that treats history can have an ethical dimension. Postmodernism does not have to mean the end of history, although it may trouble the conceptualisation of history and how literature represents history. This is a valuable insight for Byatt's fiction as it points to a way of attending to her commitment to the moral function of literature but provides a solution to the problem of the limitations of the Leavisite critical paradigm and postmodern theories, as well as Byatt's complex engagement with these fields of thought. Middleton and Woods want to make clear that considering history in literature after postmodernism does not seek a return to universalities prior to postmodernism as a basis for ethics: "treating literary practice as ethical does not, however, mean assuming that self-consciousness

is a sovereign agency which transcends discourse and history” (14). Middleton and Woods emphasise that they “are not just using the word [ethics] as a shorthand for essential human values. Rather, we tend to use this word as a sign of commitment to and responsibility for justice, often as a means of empowering hitherto underprivileged, silenced or marginalised voices” (14). Middleton and Woods’s emphasis on an ethics that is not based on a reproduction of the essentialisms prior to postmodernism but represents the marginalised, as well as Huber’s focus on reconstruction as a concept, suggests directions for the ethical development of post-postmodern criticism. For Byatt’s fiction, this provides a way to consider ethics in a context that considers the advances made by postmodernist theories of history and the subject, meaning that ethics can be accounted for without relying on Leavisite conceptions of morality. By considering Byatt’s fiction in the context of historical literature that represents the marginalised voice, a bridge can be made between feminism and postmodernism. Postmodernism discredits the liberal-humanist self in its rejection of essentialism and the afterlife of postmodernist theory in its ethical turn does not seek to re-universalise the subject. Similarly, feminist theories of authorship challenge the liberal-humanist self, as that model of self is predicated on a male perspective.

### 3. Feminism and Byatt’s Female Characters

Byatt’s novels emphasise the mediation of reality and the naturalisation of what are in fact cultural constructions rather than natural facts, such as the idea that women can only be fulfilled by marriage. Hutcheon’s understanding of postmodern theory argues that the effect of postmodernism “is to denaturalise some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ (they might even include capitalism,

patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us" (*Politics 2*). The naturalisation of cultural concerns is one of the areas where postmodernism and feminism coincide; this is productive for Byatt's fiction as one of the effects of the embedded texts and Byatt's narratorial irony is that both denaturalise elements of inherited novelistic conventions.

The liberal humanist concept of self poses a problem for the female writer, as it arguably assumes a male self. As Toril Moi explains:

In humanist ideology the self is the sole author of history and of the literary text: the humanist creator is potent, phallic and male – God in relation to his world, the author in relation to his text. History or the text become nothing but the "expression" of this unique individual: all art becomes autobiography, a mere window on to the self and the world, with no reality of its own. The text is reduced to a passive, "feminist" reflection of an unproblematic "given," "masculine" world or self. (*Sexual 8*)

Moi indicates here what happens when a feminist writer adopts the liberal humanist self as the basis for her feminism: the feminist text becomes the reflection of a masculine perspective. Byatt's novels avoid such a trap by staging her critique of the liberal-humanist self through her representation of women and their engagement with naturalised tropes of femininity in canonical texts.

My analysis of female authors in Byatt's fiction broadens Campbell's statement, quoted above, that Byatt's male characters speak for her. However, Campbell's conceptualisation of authorship in the novels is also complicated by Byatt's destabilisation of the liberal-humanist self in the frame narratives by the representation of subjectivity in the embedded texts. The identification of Byatt's

novels as liberal-humanist largely arises from the slippage caused by eliding the destabilising effects of the embedded texts, as does the undermining of feminism in the novels and the association of Byatt with her male characters. The male literary canon is, however, prominent in Byatt's novels. Repeated intertextual references to T. S. Eliot, Shakespeare, D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster occur through the Quartet; Randolph in *Possession* is based on Robert Browning and influences Roland's conceptualisation of poetic genius; male biographers structure *The Biographer's Tale*.

Despite the importance of male canonical authors in her fiction, Byatt destabilises the values attached to the canon, as both Alexander in the Quartet and Phineas in *The Biographer's Tale* write unsuccessful texts. As I will show, in Chapter 2 on *Virgin and Still Life* and Chapter 5 on *The Biographer's Tale*, the writing of Alexander and Phineas fails because of its attempt to represent the liberal-humanist self. The apparently high value placed on Roland's development of his poetic voice in *Possession* has been perceived as the reassertion of the values of the male canon and a foil to the success of the post-structuralist academic feminists (Adams, "Dead"). Roland's poetic sensibility has been seen as a valorisation of the marriage of two masculine traditions: Romanticism and liberal-humanism (Steveker 45). However, the representation of Roland's selfhood as resisting the postmodern destabilisation of liberal-humanism is complicated by Ellen's journal and Byatt's use of postmodern strategies of representation, which in fact undermine the characterisation of Roland. And, as I will discuss in Chapter 4 on *Possession*, a careful interpretation of Ellen's journal affects the negative representation of feminism as a discourse that distorts what it analyses, projecting a feminist perspective

onto texts regardless of its uniqueness, whereas feminism accurately interprets the journal and constructs a framework that would value it.

Byatt's stated ambivalence towards feminism, summarised effectively by Campbell (16-25), has therefore affected how a feminist critique is used to interpret the novels. The perceived liberal-humanism of Byatt's novels is incompatible with some branches of feminism, particularly those influenced by post-structuralism, and feminism itself is visibly critiqued within the novels, especially in *Possession*. The novels also represent women who are unable to reconcile intellectual pursuits, the cultural construction of femininity and female biology. These points therefore reinforce the apparent ambivalence of feminism as an interpretative framework for Byatt's fiction. However, my argument will demonstrate that the apparent ambivalence towards feminism is undermined through Byatt's use of postmodern strategies of representation in the embedded texts and the sites of resistance to patriarchal power relations, including commentary on femininity conceptualised as a discursively constructed reflection of patriarchal values and its effect on women's writing.

My analysis of Byatt's women characters is illuminated by a cross-section of different feminist theories, including works on feminist theories of authorship and Foucauldian feminism. Much of the feminist theory I used to contextualise Byatt's fiction was published in the 1970s and 1980s, and although feminist debates have progressed beyond the concerns of this era, these texts share the interests of the novels. One of my interests throughout, as I explain below, is in what feminist theories can tell us about power relations in Byatt's work. In Chapter 2 and 3, I analyse the way the female characters are subject to power relations and identify Byatt's representation of how subjectivity is discursively constructed. I draw extensively on Foucault's work, particularly



*Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*; although Foucault has been accused of androcentricism, Foucauldian feminists extend his analytics to include feminist issues. I cite Jana Sawicki, Sandra Bartky and Margaret McLaren, and I use their perspectives on Foucault to illuminate Byatt's representation of resistance to power relations.

The major studies of Byatt's fiction analyse her representation of women and refer implicitly to power relations. Campbell's analysis of *Shadow* is a sophisticated example of this, where she discusses the male gaze (*Heliotropic* 37). However, whilst Foucault's *The Order of Things* is referenced by major critics of Byatt's fiction (Alfer and de Campos 44; Campbell, *Heliotropic* 219), as are his post-structuralist perspectives on authorship (Franken 16-17), his analysis of power relations and resistance have not been explicitly applied to Byatt's fiction. The character of Stephanie in the *Quartet* has been read by critics, whose views are detailed in Chapter 2 on *Virgin* and *Still Life*, as a largely negative portrayal, where Stephanie is unable to reconcile intellectual pursuits with the demands of domesticity and childrearing. She is subject to medical discourse in the institutionalised setting of the hospital during her pregnancy and labour. However, Byatt represents instances of local and limited resistance by Stephanie and undermines the association of femininity with the body in the body / mind split.

My analysis of power relations and resistance in Stephanie's narrative is juxtaposed with Frederica's objections to the representation of female characters in *Lucky Jim* (1954) as ciphers and projections of male desire. Frederica's criticism of *Lucky Jim* in *Still Life*, published in 1985, shares the concerns of contemporary feminism; Gilbert and Gubar in 1979 state that "women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to *mere*

properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because generated solely, as Anne Elliot and Anne Finch observe, by male expectations and designs” (12).<sup>4</sup> Byatt continues her exploration of the cultural construction of femininity as a projection of male desire through her fiction, particularly in the use of fairy tale tropes in *Babel Tower* and in the Victorian embedded texts in *Possession*. In the Quartet and *Possession*, Byatt stages resistance to patriarchal images of women through the female characters: by resistance to power relations in Stephanie’s narrative and the critique of women as ciphers in Frederica’s narrative, as well as rewriting tropes of femininity in *Possession* and *A Whistling Woman*.

In the final two chapters of the thesis, on *Possession* and *The Biographer’s Tale*, I use feminist life-writing theorists to illuminate Byatt’s use of autobiographical narratives to stage her examination of subjectivity and authorship. In *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, Sidonie Smith writes that

Western autobiographical practices flourished because there seemed to be a self to represent, a unique and unified story to tell that bore common ground with the reader, a mimetic medium for self-representation that guaranteed the epistemological correspondence between narrative and lived life, a self-consciousness capable of discovering, uncovering, recapturing that hard core at the centre. (*Subjectivity* 17)

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<sup>4</sup> Whilst Gilbert and Gubar are relevant for my argument, it is worth identifying that other feminists, like Toril Moi, have raised issues with their conceptualisation of the female author and unintentionally use a patriarchal construct: “it is surely not enough to reject the patriarchal ideology implied in the paternal metaphor. It is equally necessary to reject the *critical practice* it leads to, a critical practice that relies on the author as the transcendental signified of his or her text” (Moi, *Sexual* 62).

Smith finds that despite the general basis of autobiographical practices upon forms of identity that coincide with the liberal humanist self, there are some elements of autobiographies that speak out from a different position: "I want to explore how the excluded and colorful have used autobiography as a means of 'talking back.' For the official histories of the subject remain vulnerable to the destabilizing strategies of the 'others' who have been only inexactly excluded, all those who have been identified with the carnivalesque or grotesque" (20). For Byatt's fiction, Smith's delineation of the possibilities for female authors to write back and challenge patriarchal scripts provides a positive paradigm in which Byatt's authors can be read and recognised as challenging those scripts.

In Chapter 4, I analyse Ellen's journal and how Byatt stages life-writing tropes to undermine conventional femininity and to interrogate the concept of the woman author. Byatt uses autobiographical narration in Ellen's journal to "talk back," to use Smith's language, as she is excluded from the patrilineage of masculine canonical tradition from Randolph to Roland in the frame narrative. My argument undermines the intratextual judgement that the journal is a minor literary artefact, primarily useful because of its portrayal of Randolph, and identifies Byatt's use of postmodern strategies of representation and denaturalisation of conventional imagery of femininity. I also identify Christabel's poetry as another marginalised autobiographical narrative, as the poetry has not been analysed in terms of autobiographical concepts to date, although Franken's argument that *The Fairy Melusine* is a portrait of the struggles of women artists implies it has an autobiographical content.

Byatt's use of an unreliable narrator in her representation of Ellen's journal has to date not been discussed and focusing on this device effects a further productive complication in the construction of subjectivity and truth in the

journal as a postmodern strategy of representation. *The Biographer's Tale* revisits and develops many of the major themes in *Possession*, including the use of the unreliable narrator as a postmodern literary device to comment on the construction of subjectivity and truth in fictionalised life-writing narratives. However, in *The Biographer's Tale*, Byatt uses a homodiegetic male narrator for the entirety of the novel – a perspective she has not previously employed in the narration of a novel.<sup>5</sup> Phineas's liberal-humanist quest for identity and truth through conventional biography is destabilised from within by the unreliable narration. Byatt installs and subverts the conventions and ideology of life-writing; "the overrepresented Western white male" in canonical life-writing texts is acknowledged and undermined (Gilmore, *Autobiographics* 17). Phineas's narrative, like Ellen's journal, is not an autobiography but employs tropes from autobiographical narratives; Byatt's use of these forms points to the unstable boundary between fact and fiction, as well as deliberate complications in the portrait of authorship.

Byatt addresses the discursive construction of gendered subjectivity through the use of the conventions and tropes of life-writing in the embedded texts and the problems that face women authors. Carolyn G. Heilbrun considers the position of the female author whose subject matter and mode of writing are subject to patriarchal discourse and asks "how can we find narratives of female plots, stories that will affect other stories and, eventually, lives, that will cause us neither to bury Shakespeare's sister nor to throw up our hands in describing George Sand because we are unwilling to call her either a woman (under the

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<sup>5</sup> Previously, Byatt has only used homodiegetic narrators for embedded narratives, such as Ellen's journal, or in her short stories, such as "Sugar" and "Jael." Byatt refers to this fact in a note in *On Histories and Stories* (178).

old plot) or a man when she isn't one?" (42). Byatt's female authors are often marginalised, but when authorship is considered as a theme across the novels and the embedded texts are read within the possibilities opened by theorists such as Smith, the recurrent and pervasive construction of gender subjectivity through narrative can be established.

Mary Eagleton, in *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*, considers the way feminists have responded to post-structuralist theories of authorship, particularly in relation to Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* and Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?* Eagleton weighs the importance of these theories and authorial response: "generally, authors wanted to reaffirm a role - definitely more living than dead - and there was a particular disquiet about the author's ethical responsibility; in this respect the signature of the author is crucial" (*Figuring* 4). In considering authorship in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Eagleton provides a solution to the problem of authorship for feminists. Discussing the plight of one of the central characters, Offred, she argues that: "the job of the critic must be to reinstate the woman author, but without making her into an icon, and to reaffirm the woman's story, but without making it into a sacred text" (28-9).

Following Eagleton, the critic of Byatt's fiction should avoid imposing reductive readings that sacralise the novels. My analysis of Byatt's fiction draws from a diverse range of critical theories of authorship, employing them where they illuminate Byatt's fiction. The quotation by Eagleton above provides a way of conceptualising the work of the critic within an ethical context, by focusing on the woman author without sacralising her authorship. This is where the various fields that this thesis uses to interpret Byatt's fiction converge productively. Although there are contradictions between postmodernism and feminism,

postmodern concepts of history and its afterlife and feminist theories of authorship both work to destabilise the universality of the liberal-humanist self. Although Byatt's fiction is widely considered to be liberal-humanist, the embedded texts challenge the dominant subject position of English history and its liberal-humanist presumptions. This thesis will therefore emphasise the political elements of Byatt's fiction through the examination of authorship and subjectivity.

## Chapter 2: History and Narrative in *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*

This chapter argues that Byatt's use of narrative techniques unsettles concepts of history and subjectivity in *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (1985). The embedded texts in both novels are historical plays ostensibly written in the early to mid-1950s and represent a type of historical literature that is predicated on nostalgia for the past. The embedded texts draw on grand narratives of British glory through the representation of Elizabeth I in *Virgin* and cultural grand narratives in *Still Life* through the appropriation of Vincent Van

Gogh into the traditions of English literature. The representation of the identity of the historical figures in the embedded texts is predicated on a set of assumptions about the liberal-humanist whole self, which considers the self to exist outside of and prior to social relations as an inalienable entity, rather than constructed through social discourse. The embedded narratives are shown to be failures as literature and history, as well as inadequate representations of identity, when contrasted with Byatt's representation of subjectivity and history as constructed through discourse.

*Virgin* and *Still Life* present alternative ways of understanding history and subjectivity through the proleptic structure of the novels.<sup>6</sup> Byatt disrupts the chronological progression of the novels by juxtaposing contemporary insights in the frame narratives with later meanings in the proleptic sections that flash-forward to the future of the text. The novels demonstrate that history is constructed through the selection, organisation and interpretation of facts rather than through the neutral accumulation of facts that speak for themselves. It is also demonstrated in the novels, through various strategies of representation, that identity is not a natural core but is constructed through social and cultural institutions and discourses. *Virgin* and *Still Life* represent subjectivity and history as processes rather than static products.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Currie defines prolepsis as: "a term used by [Gerard] Genette and others to describe flashforward. Prolepsis, for Genette, is a moment in a narrative in which the chronological order of story events is disturbed and the narrator narrates future events out of turn. The narrative takes an excursion into its own future to reveal later events before returning to the present of the tale to proceed with the sequence. As Genette makes clear, this is far less common in narrative fiction than its counterpart, analepsis, or flashback" (*About* 29).

The frame narratives of *Virgin* and *Still Life* are set in the 1950s and the prolepses are sections of the novel that narrate future events out of turn. The prolepses include the prologues, set in 1968 in *Virgin* and 1980 in *Still Life*, narrating events that take place beyond the end of each novel. Both prologues represent the point of view of three protagonists reflecting on certain events which take place in the frame narratives. One of these protagonists is Alexander, the playwright. Alexander's nostalgic historical plays are contrasted with the dynamic history constructed through the prolepses. The prologues historicise the events of the frame narratives before the reader has encountered those events, such as Alexander's reflections on how his plays failed. Both the prologues and prolepsis, then, points the reader to history as narrative representation by emphasising the *process* of historicisation at work in the novels.

Although written just before the death of the King in 1952 and therefore preceding the coronation of Elizabeth II, Alexander's play *Astraea*, in *Virgin*, is incorporated into local celebrations for the coronation. The play's themes are merged with the national imperative of a new Renaissance, where the attempts to inculcate English international power, coupled with advances in technology, are constructed from imagined continuities with the first Elizabethan "golden age". *Astraea* is part of, and comes in later periods to stand for, nostalgic historical machinations, forging a sense of continuity with past and present. *Astraea* stands for a view of history and identity that is becoming increasingly irrelevant, as changes in society affect the conceptualisation of history and subjectivity. Despite the egalitarian aims of the British post-war welfare state, as the historian Phillip Harling states, Britain in the 1950s was "still a markedly class-conscious and hierarchical society" (170). However, Byatt's novels portray



the growing destabilisation of the dominant subject position of English identity as male and upper-class, reinforced by a nostalgic history that supports the *status quo*.

The first section of this chapter discusses Byatt's initial rejection of the liberal-humanist self through her depiction of Alexander's failure to write effective history and literature, analysing the premise of each play and its critical reception. The second section continues the analysis of the rejection of the "whole" self by analysing the way in which Byatt represents the increasing questioning of the dominant and accepted British subject position, as male and upper class, through alternative models of history established by prolepsis. She undermines the dominant subject position further by her representation of the mind / body split that associates female bodies with intellectual inferiority to men. In *Still Life*, the institutional disciplinary techniques in the ante-natal clinic and hospital mediate childbirth, policing female behaviour through practices that aim to produce docile female bodies and that, in turn, exemplify patriarchal ideology. Following the possibilities suggested by the analysis of prolepsis, the final section of the chapter analyses Stephanie's experience in the birth narrative in *Still Life*. Stephanie is dehumanised by the institutional practices of the hospital and the birth narrative is a synecdoche, standing for societal marginalisation of women, their subjectivities and their role in history. By representing Stephanie's labour in this way, Byatt critiques the position offered to women under patriarchy.

This chapter draws on a variety of critical approaches that question liberal-humanist paradigms of identity and history. Linda Hutcheon's work on postmodernism provides a conceptualisation of history that resonates with Byatt's treatment of historical discourse and destabilisation of grand narratives.

The chapter will also draw on theories that discuss the representation of the British empire, commonwealth and imperialism, such as the work of Wendy Webster and Edward Said. Webster charts the changes in representations of masculinity in relation to empire and commonwealth in the early twentieth-century; this has relevance for Byatt's use of history and challenges to the dominant narratives of British identity. Said's work on the conceptualisation of imperialism is illuminating in its analysis of how imperialism is tacitly present in works of literature that do not appear to represent imperialism and empire directly.

An important aspect of Byatt's questioning of liberal-humanist paradigms of identity and the dominant markers of Englishness is constructed through her female characters and their engagement with cultural representations of women. Feminist critics are therefore relevant to the analysis of subjectivity, although feminism and postmodernism have been perceived as incompatible by some critics. This incompatibility will be addressed in several ways. Firstly, I draw on the work of Patricia Waugh who evaluates commonalities and disjunctions between feminism and postmodernism. Second, I use a Foucauldian perspective to analyse the representation of women in the novels, particularly in relation to Foucault's analysis of power and discipline. Like postmodernism, Foucault's work has sometimes been seen as incompatible with the emancipatory politics of feminism. However, much good work has been done by Foucauldian feminists, such as Jana Sawicki and Margaret A. McLaren, to demonstrate the aspects of Foucault's work that are compatible with feminism and also to point to deficiencies in feminist theory.

Linda Hutcheon's work on history in postmodern fiction is useful for the reader of Byatt's fiction, as Hutcheon's definitions of history can be used to

interpret the effects of prolepsis and Byatt's challenges to the liberal-humanist whole subject. Hutcheon writes that in postmodern fiction: "the narrativisation of past events is not hidden; the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed – not found – order is imposed on them, often overtly by the narrating figure" (*Politics* 66). The narrativisation of past events is overtly woven into *Virgin* and *Still Life* by the narrating figure, as prolepsis is used by the narrator to expose the order imposed on past events by the juxtaposition of interpretation and later interpretation.

Hutcheon continues: "the process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences, is what postmodern fiction underlines. This does not in any way deny the existence of the past real, but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of finding strategies of meaning-making through representation" (*Politics* 66-7). Prolepsis is a strategy of "meaning-making" by representing the process of how plots are constructed from sequences by disrupting that sequence. Prolepsis subverts the realism in Byatt's novels, forming a self-reflexive counter-narrative which comments on the way in which realism and history are constructed narratives. As both realism and history have a truth-effect, prolepsis exposes this truth effect, demonstrating the "transparency" of both. Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism is useful as it foregrounds the process of revealing the construction inherent in texts, rather than assuming a simple mimetic function.

In Chapter 1, I made reference to the different conceptualisations of the subject in postmodernist and feminist criticism, as some branches of feminism argue that the liberal-humanist self, destabilised by postmodernism, is necessary for agency. Patricia Waugh's juxtaposition of postmodernism and

feminism is useful for thinking through the postmodern aspects of Byatt's fiction, as well as its feminist ideas, as Waugh theorises the similarities without eliding the possibilities for agency or the wholesale adherence to postmodern tenets. Waugh notes that post-war women writers effectively reverse the position of women under patriarchy, seeking the previously denied unified self of liberal-humanism for women (*Feminine* 10). The feminist study of Foucault can add to this in that his "deconstructive methodology provides an immanent critique of such a search for *the* authentic female voice or *the* sexuality" (Martin 15) and that "our task is to deconstruct, to undo our own meanings and categories, the identities and the positions from which we can intervene at any given point so as to not close the question of woman and discourse around new certainties and absolutes" (16).

This chapter uses Foucault's work to deconstruct the position of women in *Virgin* and *Still Life*, following Jana Sawicki's development of Foucault's work where she "attempt[s] to flesh out Foucault's undeveloped remarks about resistance and struggle to show how his discourse can be used to support specific liberatory political struggles, namely, struggles for sexual and reproductive freedom" (8).<sup>7</sup> Foucault's work is illuminating for Byatt's

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<sup>7</sup> Sawicki does state that there are, however, problems for feminism in Foucault's work, although she makes clear these problems can be addressed: "in my own work, I have reconstructed a version of Foucault that I find useful for addressing issues in American feminist theory and practice. Sometimes this has meant emphasizing aspects of his discourse that he did not develop sufficiently, and de-emphasizing others. For instance, I have continually stressed and attempted to develop his remarks about resistance and struggle found in later interviews and in *The History of Sexuality* and de-emphasized or dismissed the totalistic rhetoric of decline found in *Discipline and Punish*" (98). The argument of this chapter holds that *Discipline and Punish* is particularly relevant in determining disciplinary practices in the medical discourse in *Still Life* and uses feminist extensions of Foucault, such

representation of women, particularly Stephanie in the birth narrative. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's genealogy of the birth of the prison goes further than the specifics of the formation of the prison system in eighteenth-century France.<sup>8</sup> Foucault identifies the ways in which society interpellates human beings by individuating them through knowledge produced by measurement and evaluation in disciplinary institutions. The subjects are continually observed and as the surveillance is incorporated into their subjectivities, they become the means of their own subjection: "he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (*Discipline* 202-3). In the birth narrative in *Still Life*, the methods of surveillance and discipline at the hospital

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as Sawicki's, to support my identification of resistance to those practices in the novel. My aim is to use the analysis of the birth narrative and medical discourse in *Still Life* to deconstruct Byatt's apparent endorsement, *pace* Lena Steveker, of the patriarchal association of women with the body and not the intellect. The chapter will discuss Steveker's understanding of the mind / body split in Byatt's fiction later in the chapter.

<sup>8</sup> *Discipline and Punish* is particularly relevant here as this chapter analyses the disciplinary aspects of the hospital in *Still Life*. Although Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* is enlightening on the development of classification in medicine, this chapter is less focused on the history of medicine than the way female bodies are regulated in Byatt's fiction. However, *The Birth of the Clinic* prefigures Foucault's development of the way in which surveillance maintains the carceral society in *Discipline and Punish*. This is evident in the way the medical gaze is represented in *The Birth of the Clinic*: "the gaze is not faithful to truth, not subject to it, without asserting, at the same time, a supreme mastery: the gaze that sees is a gaze that dominates; and although it also knows how to subject itself, it dominates its masters" (39).

become incorporated into the women's subjectivities and have various effects on their behaviour. The operation of power in the hospital analysed in this chapter allows for a critique of the liberal-humanist paradigm that conceptualises identity as a core and associates femininity with the body rather than mind. The analysis of the birth narrative locates sites of resistance to the hospital's disciplinary practices and also provides a platform from which to critique the association of femininity with the body, as Stephanie uses her eloquence and logic to counter the hospital's disciplinary practices.

The models for history and subjectivity developed in *Virgin and Still Life* are represented within the limits of the possible options available for middle-class women in the 1950s. The restrictions women face in this period are clearly articulated through Frederica's experience at Cambridge, as well as through the experiences of other female characters in both novels, typified by Stephanie, who must leave her teaching job when she marries Daniel. Despite the numerous observations of the situation of women in the 1950s, there is, finally, little that can be done politically to improve the position of women at this point, as the historical setting of the novels predates second-wave feminism. As Mary Eagleton points out: "feminism is a glow on the horizon, nascent in the aspirations and needs of the women, but it is not a developed discourse, and part of the women's problem is the absence of either the political analysis or the supportive networks that feminism was about to bring" (*Anxious* 106).

However, this does not mean – despite the limitations of the historical period in which the novels are set – that the novels are pessimistic or deny the possibility of female agency. Rather, through prolepsis, which reveals to us Frederica's frustration with male representations of women and Stephanie's experience of the dehumanising hospital in the birth narrative, Byatt as the

author can show the possibilities for female agency: women may have to be subject to history, but the way in which history is defined can be both resisted and reconceived.

### 1. The Failure of History in the Embedded Text

In *Virgin* and *Still Life*, the character Alexander Wedderburn first writes and then stages a play, each representing a key figure from history (Elizabeth I and Vincent Van Gogh). Byatt represents Alexander's inner debate with the appropriate form for representing each subject. His plays represent their subjects through psychological realism, verse drama and the reification of the liberal-humanist "whole" subject. Despite the contemporary success of the play, *Astraea*, in *Virgin* and its fictional inclusion in school syllabuses, the play is viewed ambivalently both at the time and later, as it is perceived as a nostalgic depiction of Elizabeth I. In *Still Life*, the play, *The Yellow Chair*, is not as successful in the contemporary period; reviews criticise Alexander for his choice of subject, Vincent Van Gogh, as both the past and the individual are suspect in an age of accelerating social change.

Both novels begin with a prologue and each prologue foregrounds themes in the frame narratives, as the characters see a performance of Elizabeth I in *Virgin* and view Van Gogh paintings in *Still Life*. Alexander's recollections of his plays give the reader some directions with which to interpret those plays when the reader encounters them in the frame narrative. Both prologues portray each play's failure to adequately represent what Alexander sees as important and unique about each subject. Byatt presents Alexander's plays as failures because his understanding of literature, history and subjectivity are informed by liberal-humanist ideology.

The prologue to *Virgin* implies that Alexander's rendering of Elizabeth I was characteristic of the "false beginning" (15) of the 1950s and does not represent Elizabeth I appropriately: "he had sometimes thought of more modern, more artificial ways of rendering that matter, the virgin and the garden, now and England, without undue sentiment or heavy irony" (15). Alexis Alfer and Amy de Campos note that "in retrospect, Alexander is thus forced to recognise that his doubly nostalgic project of imitating Eliot's attempt to revive the Renaissance form of the verse drama was an embarrassing failure" (42).

Alexander's thoughts about the iconography in the Darnley portrait of Elizabeth partly dovetail with the emphasis on metaphor and imagery in the writing of the play, but with important differences. The portrait of Elizabeth emphasises ambiguity in its representation of its subject, whereas Alexander's play is constructed on the premise that Elizabeth's identity is eternal, whole and rock-like:

He explained [to Frederica] how Elizabeth's motto, *semper eadem*, had in his mind come to be associated with the homogeneity of stone, on the one hand, and the sempiternities of the Golden Age, on the other. Whereas Mary Queen of Scots's motto, *eadem mutata resurgam*, I shall arise, the same transmuted, she was Christian and much less rock-like than

Elizabeth's pagan reliance on her own eternal identity. (*Virgin* 133)

Alexander's work, then, attempts to reproduce that eternal, rock-like identity he sees as characteristic of Elizabeth's self-fashioned identity. Indeed, Olga Kenyon observes that "Alexander's play celebrates the wholeness of which Elizabeth is a symbol" (60).



In the prologue, however, Alexander considers the ambivalent double meanings in the Darnley portrait of Elizabeth I, emphasising the contradictory elements of Elizabeth's iconography, which contrast with the wholeness and unity that undergirds the play. The portrait encompasses ambivalent "stillness and energy" (*Virgin* 12). The hands hold a fan which either "dangled, or gripped" (12); "there were other ambiguities in the portrait, the longer one stared, doublenesses that went beyond the obvious one of woman and ruler. The bright-blanced face was young and arrogant. Or it was chalky, bleak, bony, any age at all, the black eyes under heavy lids knowing and distant" (12). The contrast of the representation of Elizabeth I in the prologue with that in the play points the reader to the way in which the liberal-humanist conception of identity is rejected in the novel. This rejection is further confirmed by the criticism of Alexander's play through prolepsis and in the frame narrative:

In the fifties they wrote critical articles on "Blood and Stone Imagery in Wedderburn's *Astraea*".

In the early sixties helpful lists of these images were published in Educational Aids to help weak A-level candidates.

In the seventies the whole thing was dismissed as a petrified final paroxysm of a decadent individualist modernism, full of irrelevant and damaging cultural nostalgia, cluttered, blown. A *cul-de-sac*, the verse drama revival, as should have been seen in the beginning. (134)

The changing judgement of *Astraea* could be read as a latent critique of the academic industry's changing perceptions of what constitutes literary value, or as an ironic commentary on the anticipated critical response to the novel itself. However, this juxtaposition of views suggests that Alexander's work, both the

form (verse drama) and the subject matter (a rock-like eternal core of identity), is “cultural nostalgia,” aiming at a revival of past glory, whether this was the intended or not.

Whilst Alexander insists several times that his play is not a “pageant” (20, 126), the play nonetheless is incorporated into a new Elizabethan festival in honour of the coronation of Elizabeth II. The festival is backed by a member of the local aristocracy, Matthew Crowe, who pays for it. The play’s connection to the festival is not necessarily positive in the mind of Bill Potter, Frederica’s father. Bill is a serious literary figure in the community, providing University Extension courses to the working classes and producing papers on local culture and literature: “Bill’s distinction was to stamp the work not as pupil-work but as Work worth doing, and to give the collection, and the community that collected it, a sense of identity” (24-5). Jane Campbell notes that “to Bill, Crowe’s hopes of giving the people a glimpse of the Golden Age are empty, frivolous nostalgia” (*Heliotropic* 75). Alexander’s play is therefore aligned with Crowe’s money and upper-class background, in contrast to Bill’s Leavisite sense of culture and value.

Crowe says that he wants to put “colour and light and movement and sounds and sweet airs” back into the locale; “the land’s sick for it” (*Virgin* 84). This invocation of post-war austerity as the land being desperate for festivities coincides with the newspaper article quoted later in the novel, “in this springtime above all the primeval imagery should have for us its richest meaning; for the Coronation is the nation’s feast of mystical renewal. We have passed through a grey and melancholy winter, dark with natural disaster” (196). The newspaper article suggests the coronation of Elizabeth II represents a rebirth, which is further corroborated by the nostalgic characterisation of other examples from

the press, including the climbing of Everest and the coronation: "it was not quite prepared, although it flirted cloudily with the concept, to say that the Coronation and conquest of Everest indicated the coming of the new Imperium, Heaven on Earth, Golden Age, Cleopolis" (316). The nostalgia of Alexander's play and the coronation celebrations are a panacea for a generation which has suffered the devastation of the Second World War and austerity, as well as the threat of nuclear war. The nostalgia and threat are contextualised by Byatt with a quotation from the press that states that despite the hopes for the future, "these are the years when the first atomic clouds drifted between us and the sun. If anything at all is plain it is that many a generation will be robbed of its future unless there can be established a settled peace" (316).

In her article on the coronation in *Virgin*, Ruth Feingold observes that "in order to achieve such symbolic power, the Coronation and its attendant celebrations were carefully constructed to demonstrate both Britain's glorious past and, simultaneously, its equally glorious present and future" (76). Part of the problem with Alexander's work is that it does not contextualise the Elizabethan period with analysis of its dominant ideology. *Astraea* appears to uncritically reproduce the period's ideology, aligned with the reproduction of Britain's imperial past in the contemporary representations of the coronation. Watching the coronation on television, hearing Richard Dimbleby compare Elizabeth I unfavourably to the new Queen, "Alexander brooded about the neo-Freudian social pieties implicit in Dimbleby's panegyric, and then became gloomy as he thought that his own play, too, presented neo-Freudian pieties about what drove the original Gloriana. He had not really dealt with government: only with family life" (*Virgin* 321). Whilst *Astraea* has messengers on stage during the ceremonies and romps, who tell of the deaths of Lopez and Mary

Queen of Scots, which provides some political context, these figures are cut when the play is staged.

The chapter of *Virgin* which describes the artistic efforts in Frederica's home town, Blesford, for Crowe's festival also notes that, in London, on the new Queen's coronation gown "emblems of Commonwealth and Empire were being embroidered in coloured silks" (137). This underpins the association of Alexander's play, Crowe's festival and the coronation of Elizabeth II as representations of English identity, formed through historicised ideals of empire. *Astraea* aims to represent the perspectives of the Elizabethan period, placing the characters of the play within the context of English imperial identities. Each act of the play has a prefatory dialogue, where Raleigh and Spencer are "gossiping, in verse, on practical things of permanent import, such as the fitting out of ships, Guinea cannibals, the brutishness and total unreason of the Irish peasantry" (381). The description of the play, however, reproduces British imperial certainties rather than critiquing them.

The historian Kevin Robins notes that "empire has long been at the heart of British culture and imagination, manifesting itself in more or less virulent forms, through insular nationalism and through racist paranoia" (16). While British imperial identity is not represented as a major concern to Alexander in the writing of *Astraea*, the play nonetheless draws on imperial ideas of identity.<sup>9</sup> Although the play was finished before the death of King George VI and the coronation of Elizabeth II, Alexander nonetheless allows it to be co-opted into the celebrations for the coronation and its ideology.

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<sup>9</sup> A further argument for the lack of political commentary in *Astraea* is that it can be seen as a coded self-portrait of Alexander: "In part Alexander has created his Elizabeth in his own image, a fact wittily expressed in the epithet 'the Virgin Queen' coined in his honor" (Gitzen 86).

Alexander compounds the play's nostalgia by not bringing the knowledge of his own later period on his critique of British imperialism. As Wilkie, who plays Raleigh, points out, the play has "no blood, no bones, no guts" (*Virgin* 475). Alexander's play instead emphasises Elizabeth's self-fashioning (43) and conceptualises Elizabeth within the context of liberal-humanism. Jane Campbell argues that Alexander's play is a failure and thus "all representation is doomed to fail" (*Heliotropic* 64). I would counter, though, that Byatt's fiction is not so pessimistic. Instead she represents Alexander's plays as failures in order to indicate that fiction has an unavoidably political dimension in both its use of history and its representation of subjectivity. Fiction that does not take into consideration the various twentieth-century criticisms of the liberal-humanist whole self and does not incorporate critiques of its political context are doomed to fail, as is *The Yellow Chair* in *Still Life*.

The prologue in *Still Life* functions in a similar way to that in *Virgin*, depicting Alexander reflecting on the challenges of representing what he finds interesting about Van Gogh. Alexander finds that it is difficult to reproduce the immediacy of Van Gogh's work in language: "at first he had thought he could write a plain, exact verse with no figurative language, in which a yellow chair was the thing itself, a yellow chair, as a round gold apple was an apple or a sunflower a sunflower" (*Still Life* 2). Plain and exact language is impossible, as even the yellow chairs cannot be separated from their cultural context (2).

*The Yellow Chair* fails to portray Alexander's conceptualisation of Van Gogh's art. The narrator suggests that the actor playing Van Gogh, Greenaway, is led by the director, Lodge, neither of whom are interested in Alexander's attempt to depict Van Gogh's intellect:

Neither Greenaway nor Alexander's verse conveyed that which was the essential, the work, the dry calculation, the strain. If Alexander had thought less of Van Gogh's intelligence, he could have done his grubby, unprepossessing presence more effectively. He was interested in the isolated mind. Lodge was interested in failed communication. Greenaway conveyed the latter. (313)

In the staging of *The Yellow Chair*, Lodge emphasises a Freudian explanation for Van Gogh's madness, by keeping the prostitute who was the model for Van Gogh's 'Sorrow' on stage longer than Alexander had intended, "so that what Vincent said about love and solitude was thrown at this unresponding figure" (313). Sue Sorensen finds that Byatt's priorities differ from those attributed to Alexander and those emphasised in the staging of the play: "Byatt aims in *Still Life* to redirect us towards a respect for van Gogh's realistic inclinations and to accept him as a literary artist" (*Something* 73). The evidence for Sorensen's argument lies in the more realistic paintings Byatt references in the novel, as well as Van Gogh's theories on art in his letters, rather than the paintings cited as evidence of his madness in popular portrayals. Sorensen's analysis of Byatt's priorities, distinct from Alexander's, is compelling, although it does not account for why, if Byatt's aim is to undermine popular portrayals that focus on Van Gogh's madness, Byatt writes Alexander's play as a failure.

At the dinner after the play, Raphael's criticism discusses the sexual explanation of Van Gogh's madness in the play: "it was very slickly Freudian. Everything came back to the mother, the dead brother Vincent, the symbiotic tie with Theo. Many people have such problems and don't produce major art" (*Still Life* 316). Raphael points out the "missed opportunities" (316) in which Van

Gogh's life and work could have been placed within a wider cultural context: "Artaud has a brilliant piece on his madness as a product of society's misunderstanding of art. But here there is no sense of large movements of thought or culture – just personal relations and stage lighting" (316). Raphael then relates these observations about the play's lack of cultural context to what he sees as a particularly English trend: "there is a kind of – how shall I put it – rather clotted English nature mysticism to which I am perhaps unduly unsympathetic, not being English. You have always found it very easy to appropriate and assimilate Van Gogh into this tradition" (316). The tradition into which Van Gogh is assimilated is not purely that of visual art, but also literary production. Raphael cites John Cowper Powys and D.H Lawrence as artists who represent the tradition of "English nature mysticism."

The problems Raphael locates in *The Yellow Chair* are similar to the criticisms of *Astraea*: it is narrowly about personality, without taking into account the wider cultural context. Furthermore, the assimilation of Van Gogh into the English tradition, rather than considering Van Gogh as a continental artist, suggests latent cultural imperialism. Raphael states that the imposition of English cultural interests misrepresents Van Gogh: "Van Gogh knew Rembrandt and understood impressionism: he was not English. It is so easy for the English to get excited about corn and blossom in a rather intense way, without any vision of wider horizons" (316; emphasis original). *The Yellow Chair*, then, represents Van Gogh narrowly in terms of English culture and as a whole self or personality. The representation of Van Gogh could have used his madness to engage with society's misreading of art, as Raphael suggests. Instead, Van Gogh's madness functions purely as an effect of personality and the use of a

Freudian interpretative framework prevents a political interpretation of his life and work.

## 2. Prolepsis and the Writing of National History

Hutcheon's contention that postmodern fiction dramatises the understanding of history as a representational practice that imposes a constructed order onto past events is useful for making sense of Byatt's prolepses, which are contrasted with the use of history in Alexander's plays. *Astraea* imposes a narrative order onto past events, without clear awareness that order is imposed. However, as Boccardi notes in *The Contemporary British Historical Novel: Representation, Nation, Empire*, Hutcheon's theory of postmodernism reproduces in part what postmodernism seeks to critique:

By discussing side by side and with few concessions to their individuality novels that align themselves with very different national literary traditions, her work risks replicating the assumptions of the primacy of surface connections and presentness that she seeks to refute, at the expense of a historically informed examination of contemporary historical fiction.

(9)

Instead, Boccardi's attention to empire and nation respects national literary traditions by delineating them. Boccardi's critique therefore signposts some of the problems with Hutcheon's work on postmodernism. This chapter seeks also to pay attention to national history and empire in its analysis. Byatt's use of prolepsis in *Virgin* and *Still Life* addresses the problems posed by the plays. In terms of history, Byatt's use of prolepsis constitutes an awareness of the construction of history, contrasting – rather than conflating – English and European culture. In terms of subjectivity, prolepsis constructs a position which



is critical of the liberal-humanist whole self, as Byatt's prolepses do not represent the self as an ahistorical unchanging essence. Instead, prolepsis directly presents subjectivity as fluctuating and constructed, foregrounding subject formation as an ongoing process, rather than a static product.

This section of the thesis analyses two things: the representations of Elizabeth II's coronation in *Virgin* that are contemporary to the plot, and prolepses concerning the coronation. The coronation in *Virgin* is represented through direct narration of the characters watching it on television, newspaper articles and prolepses that reflect on the coronation in the 1970s. The commentary that accompanies the televised broadcast of the coronation and the newspaper articles are nostalgic and conservative and they attempt to construct a second "Golden Age," coterminous with the first Queen Elizabeth. The prolepses avoid nostalgia by critiquing the impulse to historicise the coronation and demystifying the historiographic practices at work in its representation. Byatt's use of prolepsis avoids using history as a tool that creates a static continuity with Britain's imperial past to support the *status quo*.

Her use of prolepsis as a counter-narrative to undermine the nostalgic and static history in Alexander's play in *Virgin* is continued in *Still Life*, where she employs prolepsis in the representation of Frederica, who avoids projecting English paradigms onto French culture. After her A Levels, Frederica travels to the south of France to be an *au pair* and to avoid staying in North Yorkshire for the summer before she goes to Cambridge University. Frederica's knowledge of English culture does not provide her with a frame of reference by which she can understand French culture. As a result, Frederica fails to represent France either in writing or in her memory, as "later, at least for many years, she was not to see this time as part of her life" (*Still Life* 54). When Frederica is at

Cambridge, the University is represented as an enclosed institution unaffected by business and politics in the wider world, although the Suez Crisis has a substantial effect on the student population. Byatt's representation of the Suez Crisis draws attention to the question of English cultural imperialism in the novel, noting that there was now "a sudden need to think about national identity" (280). The representation of the Suez crisis is part of the context of changing markers of English identity in *Still Life*. The Suez crisis is juxtaposed with repeated references to Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954). Frederica's friends, who frequently discuss the recently published novel *Lucky Jim*, believe that its protagonist, Jim Dixon, stands for the ordinary man, against literary and cultural elitism. The representation of *Lucky Jim* as the ordinary decent man against, by implication, upper class and intellectual conceptualisations of English cultural history, suggest that cultural priorities were moving away from endorsing class hierarchies. However, although *Lucky Jim* might be representative of a more egalitarian society in class terms, it does not represent women as equal to men. Frederica not only finds *Lucky Jim* sexually unsympathetic, but also morally reprehensible, as it conflates seriousness with pretentiousness.

The representation of the coronation in *Virgin* demonstrates that British subject positions derived from empire and past glory are becoming less and less valid. Although the critique of imperialism is nascent in *Virgin*, it is more explicit in *Still Life*, as will be discussed below in the context of the Suez crisis. *Virgin* quotes Winston Churchill representing the coronation as an intellectual consolidation of commonwealth: "here, at the summit of our world-wide community, is the lady whom we respect, because she is our Queen, and who we love because she is herself" (316). Byatt's quotation of the various reports on the coronation demonstrates nostalgia for the outdated concept of imperialist

subjectivities. The media coverage of the coronation was linked with the conquest of Everest in the same year to effect the transmutation of British identity based on empire into a commonwealth identity. As Webster states, “imagery of world-wide rejoicing and people flocking to pay tribute showed London at the centre of a world stage. The commonwealth promised to maintain Britishness as a global identity through transforming its imperial dimension” (95).

The process depicted here is the mechanism by which imperialism continues through the ideology of commonwealth, even if fewer and fewer countries were under direct British rule in the 1950s. Edward Said notes that the kind of transformation in ideology of former empires that Webster describes is characteristic of the twentieth-century: “in our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism, as we shall see, lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices” (9). The point for Byatt’s fiction here is that it emphasises and critiques the ideology of imperialism in the contemporary portrayal of the coronation, as well as British grand narratives of history, through the representation of contemporary events with later interpretations.

Byatt contextualises 1950s media commentary on the coronation with the proleptic section that references Alexander’s 1973 television programme, the theme of which is the “changing style in public communications” (*Virgin* 317). On the television programme, Alexander analyses the various vocabularies used to represent the coronation and the new Elizabethan age:

The flimsy vocabulary, the trumped-up, wilfully glistening sentiments which juxtaposed words now no longer permissible, like gleaming, drifting, visionary, jingling, glittering et cetera,

Churchill's courtly phrasing, itself already vapid, with the new awkward technologico-Bethamite pieties about the new "resources" of science, industry and art, these three, "mobilised" to ease every man's burden to produce new "opportunities" of life and "leisure". (317)

In 1973, then, Alexander can refigure the coronation in political terms, correcting the lack of political commentary in *Astraea* itself and the play's part in the nostalgic festivities surrounding the coronation. Alexander capitalises on his historical distance from both the coronation and his play, analysing the early 1950s: "the huge misguided nostalgic effort of archaism had been a true shadow of blood and state, a real fantasy and trick of fame. The truth was and had been that the party was and had been over" (317). The implication here is that England's glorious past cannot be reconstructed in the 1950s, despite the efforts of the media and the festivities in honour of the coronation. Webster states that the coronation was seen on television by over twenty million people (97). Although this suggests a community united through the occasion and through faith in the British monarchy as an institution, however briefly, the media coverage instead implies a community created *through* the media, as Webster aptly summarises:

Through reporting the coronation, the media became involved not only in representing the nation but also self-representation, that demonstrated their own claims to speak for the nation. Producing imagery of a unified nation and commonwealth, they cast themselves in a key role in the creation of such a community, projecting their importance in enabling the people to participate. (96)

Alexander's analysis in the 1970s, although without explicit reference to imperialism, implies a critique of the language used to support imperialism through the media.

Frederica thinks that in 1973 Alexander oversimplifies the issue at stake, whereas in the 1950s he had tried to write "about history and truth," and that, looking back on the 1950s, "the people had simply hoped, because the time was after the effort of war and the rigour of austerity, and the hope, despite the spasmodic construction of pleasure gardens and festival halls, had had, alas, like Hamlet's despair, no objective correlative" (*Virgin* 318). However, at the time, Frederica places the coronation, in alignment with 1950s contemporary opinion, as "not only not the inauguration of a new era, it was not even a contemporary event" (318). This demonstrates Frederica's cultural capital in sensing the "right" contemporary response, which contrasts directly with her experiences in France in *Still Life*. Frederica encounters an unintelligible Provençal culture and cannot place what constitutes an appropriate response until she is much older and has accumulated more knowledge.

Frederica's time in France is characterised by her inability to understand what is characteristic of the Provençal culture as she does not have the relevant cultural paradigms through which to interpret the alien-seeming culture. Frederica begins by making comparisons between what she sees in France and what she knows of England, although in the end she avoids mistranslating France into British culture or projecting British cultural patterns. As Campbell observes, "in *Still Life*, other definitions of history and culture confront both sisters. In the summer she spends in France as a mother's helper, Frederica encounters another landscape, culture, and history" (*Heliotropic* 59). The first sentence of the section representing Frederica's time in France is

representative of what is to follow, as it shows that Frederica's knowledge of the south of France is limited: "when Frederica left for Nîmes she had no real idea of the South. She knew that Nîmes was a provincial city and would have preferred it not to be, seeing 'provincial' in terms of the English nineteenth-century novel, not of the Roman Provincia, Provence" (*Still Life* 49). As the father of the family, M. Grimaud, drives Frederica from the station to his home, he describes the land and its history, the Provençal industry of lavender, which Frederica has difficulty following and understanding.

A key proleptic interruption demonstrates that Frederica eventually accumulates the relevant knowledge to enable her to interpret both her experience in the south of France and M. Grimaud's discourse on the locality. It is worth quoting at length here:

In the 1970s Ezra Pound's laminated view of vital and moribund cultures, centred partly on Provence, made her see M. Grimaud's easy educating communications about the land, the lore, the language in which she found herself, as a sign of real energy in his community which had been ersatz, or only wished-for, in post-Festival of Britain Yorkshire. Bill Potter had his local pride: his evening class students collected local words, described patterns of social behaviour and family interrelationship with a kind of Fabian zeal, but without the sun-saturated liveliness of M. Grimaud's sense of what was shared and perpetual in his world.

(54)

The significance of this passage is that it not only characterises how Frederica is able, with the right frame of reference, to interpret her time in France but also

compares English and Provençal local fervour, acknowledging what is different about Provençal culture.

With little occupation in France, as the Grimaud home has many people to do the household chores, Frederica decides to become a writer. Frederica's attempts to write suffer the same problem as her general experience of France, as her English cultural frames do not translate into French culture. The narrator notes that she wanted to depict the southern landscape but struggles, as "her tradition of looking at landscape was deeply Wordsworthian" (59). Frederica's cultural paradigms of social behaviour also are not appropriate for representing her social encounters in France: "she had words for tea party behaviour and shopping discriminations in North Yorkshire matrons" (59). Frederica's attempts to describe the Grimauds fail as well: she recognises that the workings of the vineyard and Protestant community are beyond her understanding and therefore cannot be described. I would add to this that Frederica's problems with representing the landscape and the people in the south of France suggests that she is unwilling to attempt to understand France by projecting English culture onto it. In this way, Frederica resists misreading the local culture, knowing enough to know that English cultural forms do not fit the culture she dimly perceives.

Frederica's resistance to projecting English forms onto France demonstrates the lack of universality of English cultural forms, as France cannot be assimilated into English paradigms. This lack of universality is developed through the problematisation of English international interests as imposing an inappropriate order on foreign cultures, suggesting English perceptions of global politics are limited. In the chapter "History," the narrator states that this was the year of Suez and that "they were – we were – a generation who had

characteristically (one must immediately except Raphael Faber and Marius Moczygamba) innocently and unwittingly lived through a convulsive and exhausting piece of history” (280). The narrator makes clear that the legacy of the Second World War affects Frederica’s generation, which is also the generation of the narrator-as-author who is a mask of Byatt, indirectly, although some parents “felt it was necessary to expose them” (280) to the horrors of the Holocaust and the dropping of nuclear bombs.<sup>10</sup>

Although Frederica has not experienced the Second World War directly, she “correlated these terrible images with unlived knowledge acquired from literature to form a belief that human nature was dangerous and unstable” (280). The narrator also notes that there “co-existed in her with a half-disappointed, half-bourgeois unthinking certainty that a Prufrockian comfort and tedious good sense would prevail, in public, in private” (280). Here, the narrator describes the cultural context that mediates the meaning of the Suez crisis for Frederica and her contemporaries, derived from T.S. Eliot in the reference to “Prufrockian,” and summarised as: “boredom, to put it crudely, boredom, complacency and stultification were the actual enemies to be fought, not folly and ruthlessness on the grand scale” (280). On the one hand, this conceptualisation of the intellectual climate develops from the rejection of nostalgia for empire and Britain as global actor in the Second World War. On the other hand, the narrator observes that the legacy of British attitudes to the Second World war equally influence other opinions of Suez: “friends divided,

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<sup>10</sup> Raphael Faber and Marius Moczygamba are exempt as it is implied that they have experienced war directly. Many members of Raphael’s family were killed in Belsen (214) and although Marius’s experience of tragedy is not described, he is mentioned as having a “Polish name” (121), evoking the Nazi occupation of annexation and Poland, implying the likelihood of dead relatives.



often unexpectedly, over Suez, into those who believed in the British as a 'responsible' people, who were afraid of the implications of the word appeasement and those who saw the 'action' as cynical opportunism or the product of an out-dated version of Imperial Glory" (281). The representation of the differing views over the Suez crisis is conceptualised, for Frederica, through literary models: "her own judgements of the Suez events were as much judgements of style as of morals. She had learned from *Passage to India* that the British Empire, even if narrowly and locally just, was insensitive, overweening and wicked through its lack of imagination and vision" (281). The narrator enumerates other models, including the childishness of Rudyard Kipling, as "such understanding lead to seeing the Anglo-French intervention in Egyptian affairs as school-boyish arrogance, as Frederica did" (281).

The narrator states that people who were older than Frederica saw Colonel Nasser as akin to Hitler, although as the historian Peter Clarke points out, "it may not have shown deep historical insight to invest Stalin with the potential territorial ambitions of Hitler; but it was surely plausible, as a rational response prompted by caution. To cast Nasser in the same role, however, seems either unimaginative or over-imaginative" (259). The point being made in *Still Life* is that the imperial past is evoked in the support of British political interests, although the "paranoid" response to Suez was partly the "determination to learn the lessons of appeasement had to run through every post-war crisis" (Clarke 259). Such political machinations do not convince Frederica and her contemporaries, who see Nasser "as a spirited rebel against the exclusive *mana* and we-know-best of the school prefect" (*Still Life* 281). British subjectivity derived from the imperial legacy is therefore represented as

out-dated in *Still Life* through the context of Suez, as well as the unwitting cultural imperialism enacted by *The Yellow Chair*.

Suez stands for not only the increasing irrelevancy of the imperial legacy but also dissatisfaction with the ruling elites and their sureties. Alan Sinfield confirms that Suez was a point of importance in the attitudes of those resisting authoritarianism: “the sense of ‘establishment’ hypocrisy and incompetence was validated, for the discontented” (233). Mark Donnelly in *Sixties Britain* links the Suez crisis with the Angry Young Men’s rejection of elitism:

It was a neat coincidence of timing that a collective label was applied to this otherwise disparate group around the time of the Suez fiasco. After all, the affair was a sharply-defined symbol of what it was about Britain that made these writers angry. Suez provided critics with a licence to attack Britain’s ruling elite; both for its arrogance in launching the operation against Nasser and for its ineptitude in being forced to back down. (25-6)

*Still Life* also makes a connection between the Angry Young Men and Suez as Frederica finds her opinions on Suez align her “with the equally boyish grumbles and ranting of Jimmy Porter and Jim Dixon. Imitators of these wanted to bring down the hereditary, the culturally pretentious ‘establishment’, the prefects, and did this – in art – with a mixture of joky brutishness and virile appropriation of the prefects’ complaisant women” (*Still Life* 281-82).

The narrator describes Frederica’s difficulty with being aligned with the Angry Young Men: “it was not easy for Frederica to sympathise with these differing assertions of British masculinity” (282). Whilst Frederica’s male friend, Tony, values what he sees as the scrupulousness of Jim Dixon, Frederica finds that women in *Lucky Jim* are little better than caricatures and projections of the

male psyche: “there was a nice girl, whose niceness consisted of big breasts and a surprising readiness to find the lunatic Dixon attractive and valuable, and a nasty woman, who was judged for bad make-up and arty skirts as well as for hysteria and emotional blackmail” (122). In *Lucky Jim*, then, femininity is identified with and reduced to the female body, whilst at the same time women are defined by their relation to the male protagonist.

Webster analyses changes in the constitution of masculinity during the 1950s and 1960s, charting the rise of the “new man” who was less “manly” and more domesticated (184). The Angry Young Men rejected not only the new man paradigm but also the narratives of manliness in representations of the empire (Webster 184-5). In texts by the so-called Angry Young Men, Webster finds that the discourse of masculinity is predicated on an ideology that conceptualises the feminine as the dangerous opposite of masculinity and so denigrates the feminine: “women are shown as threatening in various ways – emasculating or domesticating men, draining them of vitality, feminizing traditional working-class culture – and they attract a range of punishments particularly for their sexuality” (205). Men who are young and angry, such as Jim Dixon, challenge the establishment but their place is predicated on a patriarchal and traditional conception of femininity. Women are reduced to the status of sexual objects, who reflect the protagonist’s importance rather than having subjectivities in their own right.

Whilst *Lucky Jim*, published in 1954, precedes many of the texts Waugh discusses, Byatt’s and Webster’s characterisations of Amis’s novel and the Angry Young Men movement function through the same mechanisms of masculine ideology as Waugh’s analysis of female characters in postmodernist texts by male writers:

Certainly in much twentieth-century fiction (Pynchon, Barth, Kesey) women characters are either presented as infantile in their emotional possessiveness or are represented through projections of infantile images of the all-powerful mother. Attachment is viewed as regressive and as destructive of the independent self, to be transformed into “romantic” or sexual conquest, or rejected in favour of worldly success, the “man at the top” syndrome.

(*Feminine* 51)

Frederica is dissatisfied with these options in *Lucky Jim*. Although the writers Waugh identifies criticise the liberal-humanist whole self, they nonetheless perpetuate the subjugation of female characters as the objects, not subjects, of Oedipal theory (*Feminine* 51). I suggest, however, that there are possible strategies in Byatt’s fiction by which the stereotypical reduction of women’s identities to their bodies can be resisted. Whilst these sites of resistance are local and limited, they nonetheless form part of the counter-narrative that destabilises the dominant concept that women are defined by their bodies.

### 3. Women, History and Subjectivity

In *Still Life*, as we have seen, Frederica’s narrative questions the sexist representations of women by male writers. However, Frederica does not solve the problem of a woman having an intellectual life as well as fulfilling the female roles of wife and mother. By the end of the novel, Frederica is still debating what course to take. Stephanie’s narrative raises similar questions that are also not definitively resolved. The representation of Stephanie’s pregnancy and labour in the birth narrative, however, points to possible sites of resistance to patriarchal power, despite the unresolved conflict between mind and body for women in the 1950s. The argument below will draw on Foucault’s work and

Foucauldian feminist critics to locate the power relations in *Still Life* and identify sites of local resistance to power relations. Evidence of resistance to patriarchal definitions of femininity as associated with the body rather than the mind are visible in the narratives of both Stephanie and Frederica. I will concentrate on Stephanie's narrative here as it offers several examples of female subjugation and more possibilities for resistance, despite Stephanie's death at the end of the novel.

There are several reasons that possible sites of resistance to patriarchal power have been overlooked in *Still Life*. Firstly, Byatt's fiction appears conventional in its use of marriage and childrearing plots. As Eagleton notes: "all these young women [characters] are caught within expectations, conflicting desires, and social change. They want sexual liberation, but are still close to conventions, want marriage but not at the price of losing independence, want to pursue qualifications but think of babies" (*Anxious* 104). Whilst Byatt's fiction is conventional in these respects, the novels represent these plots ambivalently. The evident use of realist forms and plots in Byatt's fiction can lead the reader and critics to emphasise the realist elements but this elides the non-conventional elements, such as prolepsis. My analysis will show that the birth narrative, comprised of Stephanie's pregnancy and labour, is a non-conventional plot and that it critiques conventional plots, despite being largely realist in form. One of the difficulties that Byatt's reader faces is that the critique of conventional plots in the fiction is limited, as the novels are set before second-wave feminism and so lack the vocabulary and concepts that feminism so effectively constructs. However, my analysis of the birth narrative demonstrates that there are sites of local resistance to patriarchal power within the novels and possibilities for effective agency.

A further obstacle to the recognition of possible opportunities for agency and resistance is that Stephanie's narrative is generally viewed pessimistically by critics. Stephanie dies at the end of *Still Life*, electrocuted by an unearthed refrigerator, and therefore never begins her projected PhD at the University of North Yorkshire. This leaves the potential reconciliation of the female roles of wife and mother with intellectual fulfilment unresolved. The scenario of death by a kitchen appliance has been seen as a fitting, if over-determined, end for Stephanie, who struggles to find time and space for intellectual pursuits once she is married. On the other hand, Alfer and de Campos emphasise that Stephanie's death is contingent rather than over-determined, as Byatt planned that the end of *Still Life* would represent the accidental death of a major character as a "technical' device" (60). However, although Alfer and de Campos cite Byatt's real-life electrocution by an unearthed refrigerator as the source for the manner in which Stephanie dies (60), emphasising the purely contingent manner of Stephanie's death risks reducing the ambivalence of the mind / body split in *Still Life*. Instead, I read Stephanie's death as an ambiguous device and I will reposition the discussion of Stephanie's narrative by emphasising the possibilities it contains for resisting the mind / body split.

It is, however, difficult to avoid reading Stephanie's death as a failure to reconcile mind and body for a woman in the 1950s. Jane Campbell notes that, in *Virgin*, Stephanie feels that marriage is a choice between the life of the mind and the life of the body: "powerfully drawn in both directions, [Stephanie] commits herself to the world of growth and change rather than the stillness of art" (*Heliotropic* 76). However, rather than an irreconcilable mind / body split, *Still Life* offers possible sites of resistance and alternative conceptualisations of subjectivity. These can be examined by applying Michel Foucault's theories of

power as well as interpretations and extensions of Foucault's work by feminist critics. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* provides a critique of power relations in institutional settings; the self-inscription of institutional discipline constructs a model of how discipline functions in society.

Tess Cosslett indicates that narratives showing childbirth from the point of view of the woman giving birth are rare, particularly detailed representations of the birth (*Childbirth* 263). Cosslett argues that Byatt's authorial representation of the choices Stephanie makes in childbirth seems anachronistic (271) and whilst Cosslett's argument is persuasive, it can be expanded with an analysis of the power relations in the birth narrative. Once Cosslett's argument is augmented with an analysis of power relations, the possible sites of resistance to patriarchal power become visible and this enacts a positive understanding of the signification of gender in Stephanie's narrative.

Recent scholarship, such as the work of Jan Williams and Elizabeth Newnham, has usefully applied a Foucauldian framework to the understanding of childbirth, with a particular emphasis on disciplinary techniques such as surveillance. These Foucauldian analyses of birth are used in my analysis to fruitfully extend Cosslett's analysis, by identifying not only power relations in *Still Life* but also instances of resistance to institutional power. I draw on Foucault's theory of discipline and the carceral society to dismantle the mind / body dichotomy perceived in *Still Life*. Foucault's analysis uses eighteenth-century disciplinary practices as the evidence to construct his theory and does not discuss "gender-specific disciplinary practices" (McLaren 92). However, numerous feminist critics such as Sandra Bartky and Jana Sawicki, whose work will be discussed here, recognise this and extend Foucault's work to discuss the female body.. My analysis of Stephanie's experience in the birth narrative

similarly extends Foucault's ideas within a feminist context. The key aspects of his theory of discipline for my discussion of Byatt's fiction are surveillance and normalisation. Foucault discusses particular institutions (for example, Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon) that keep order among their inmates or subjects by facilitating their surveillance or the possibility thereof (*Discipline* 200-209). In Bentham's Panopticon, the subject cannot know if they are being directly observed at any given point in time, as the guard tower is screened. The subject therefore behaves as if they are constantly watched and so self-regulates their actions: "he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202-3). The perceived omnipresent surveillance is reproduced by the subject and this has a normalising effect, as the behaviour of the subject is determined by the rules of the institution, which are replicated in the subject as normalcy. Foucault finds that the disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance and self-inscription are not only characteristic of institutions that have inmates but also typify our relations with society, enacting a "normalizing" effect (304).

Surveillance and self-inscription keep subjects in line; the institutions normalise what is considered acceptable behaviour and conversely define the transgression of those norms. Jan Williams finds Foucault's analysis of disciplinary techniques and normalisation relevant to the institutionalised management of labour in hospitals:

Each pregnant woman can be continually observed, her progress and that of the foetus monitored, and the results compared against the "norm." Deviations from the "norm" can then be



managed to bring them back within limits. Clinical experience is used to augment this. This method of surveillance and control is at the heart of contemporary British obstetric practice. (236)

Foucault's analysis of power as omnipresent appears to leave little room for resistance to normative power, a point that feminist analyses of Foucault have raised (Bartky, *Foucault* 82). However, Foucauldian feminists have addressed the gaps in his account of power relations to highlight and counter the way normative practices in medicine are gendered (McLaren 96-7).

Sawicki finds that in Foucault's genealogical works "he attempts to liberate us from the oppressive effects of prevailing modes of self-understanding inherited through the humanist tradition" (26-7). As noted above, liberal-humanism is problematic for women in several ways: not only is its inalienable core is used for the subjugation of women by justifying their intellectual inferiority to men as biologically determined but also that women have been excluded from liberal-humanist selfhood, as it appears to be gender neutral but is constructed from masculine attributes. Sawicki finds that Foucault's ideas can be effective for feminism, with caveats.<sup>11</sup> The key elements of Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power relations are applicable to the birth narrative in *Still Life*. I analyse two key episodes from Stephanie's pregnancy and labour, both of which take place in the hospital. The first is an ante-natal examination and the second Stephanie's labour itself. Both episodes

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<sup>11</sup> See 95-109. See also Sandra Bartky, "Agency: What's the Problem" in *Provoking Agents*. Bartky responds directly to Sawicki in this chapter, finding that Sawicki correctly values aspects of Foucault's work for feminism whilst reminding the reader of the risks of using Foucault's work in feminist theory ("Agency" 184-6). However, Bartky asks the reader to recollect that analytics of power have been present in second wave feminism prior to Foucauldian feminist perspectives (190).

feature surveillance, self-inscription and normalisation, and both episodes also have sites of resistance to disciplinary power relations.

These sites of resistance are often overlooked because, as noted above, critics have not analysed *Still Life* in terms of power relations and have characterised Stephanie's narrative as failing to reconcile the mind / body split. Whilst there is evidence in the novels that supports the mind / body split, these examples have to be isolated from the rest of the birth narrative in *Still Life* to support the idea that Byatt endorses the mind / body split. My argument takes into account the proponents of the mind / body split and reads the examples used as part of a larger narrative of power relations.

As noted above, Frederica struggles with the representation of women in literature that defines women by their bodies, particularly in *Lucky Jim*. In a similar way to Stephanie's narrative, Frederica also resists patriarchal ideology through her body as well as her mind. In *Still Life*, Frederica's time at Cambridge can be characterised as a number of small, local resistances to normalised gender stereotypes, particularly in aesthetics and sexual behaviour. Frederica's arrival at Cambridge opens with the sentence that the women's college, "Newnham was in those days outside, but not far outside, Cambridge University proper" (*Still Life* 110). This sentence sets up the implication that the discourse of separate spheres is active in Cambridge University, for all that women are allowed to be educated there. As is noted in the novel, there are certain places where women are allowed to go only if accompanied by a man, such as the Student Union (183). Not only does Newnham's location separate it from the University proper, but so does its feminine décor (110). The institutionalised femininity of Newnham is associated, from Frederica's point of view, with the suppression of sexuality in the female body.

Frederica meets Wilkie's friends, Tony and Alan, who write about her for the paper, although the article turns out to be a series of undergraduate clichés and sensational opinions on sex. As a result, there are people Frederica does not meet, who, it is implied, consider the article in dubious taste. However, the narrator also relates that Cambridge has many small worlds, some of which overlap and some of which are sealed; "a woman, perhaps particularly a notorious woman, and partly notorious for promising ideas about sex, could move between world and world more easily than a man" (116). Despite a level of mobility, Frederica still finds herself enacting traditional gender roles, darning and ironing shirts for male friends, as well as cooking for them (117). Furthermore, although Frederica finds conversation with her male friends exciting, they bargain over who will walk her home, with the possibility of sexual activity as an imagined outcome.

The narrator relates that men categorise women and discuss them: "men had their group behaviour. Together they talked about girls as they might talk about motor cars or beer, joking about breast measurements and legs, planning campaigns of seduction like army or teenage gang manoeuvres" (128). Frederica responds in kind, noting that if men categorise women into those who will or will not have sex with them, Frederica categorises men as those who can or can't and forestalls the campaigns and enacts a form of role reversal in response to the seductions: "if men wanted only one thing, so could, and would, and did, Frederica Potter" (128).

Frederica's sexual encounters and the role reversal she performs affect power relations, but the power Frederica gains is limited in several ways. In bed, Frederica is not active *per se* nor entirely passive, but mirrors her partner. Part of the reason for Frederica's partial passivity and limited sexual power is

conditioned by literary representations of women: she believes women to be more concerned with love than men, and “she was conditioned to desire to be abject. This desire was reinforced by the behaviour of Rosamond Lehmann’s heroines and of Ursula Brangwen (whom some other part of Frederica was ready to despise heartily)” (127). Frederica’s mirroring behaviour in bed allows her to remain abject, even if her manner of responding to the seduction implies a form of agency and power, rather than conventional feminine passivity.

Turning to the birth narrative, Lena Steveker notes that when Stephanie is pregnant at the beginning of *Still Life*, she struggles to read Wordsworth whilst waiting in the queue for her ante-natal examination. Steveker finds that Stephanie’s phrase “sunk in biology” is representative of Byatt’s endorsement of the mind / body split: “by delineating how a woman’s mind, once quick and active, is slackened by pregnancy until it becomes too slow and sluggish to take in Wordsworthian verses, *Still Life* not only opposes mind and body, but also associates woman with body and man with mind” (68).<sup>12</sup> There is further

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<sup>12</sup> Alfer and de Campos find that, in contrast, “Stephanie, in this constellation, represents the life of the mind, while Daniel, despite his occupation, represents the life of the flesh” (46). However, Alfer and de Campos also state that Stephanie’s reading in the queue for the ante-natal appointment represents Stephanie’s increasing difficulty thinking, not only because of the effects of pregnancy but also due to motherhood: “the poem, which describes a dead spirit as buried beneath the immovable bulk of ‘rocks and stones and trees’ rather aptly reflects Stephanie’s own sense of encumbrance, and, as the novel progresses, Stephanie does indeed sink ever deeper into the social and biological role of wife and mother, finding it ever harder to find the time to think and eventually despairing that she has even lost the rich vocabulary with which she was once able to form complex thoughts” (59). Eagleton agrees, as Stephanie “struggles at the antenatal clinic and in the labor ward to keep hold of her copy of Wordsworth or, in a stolen hour from childcare, to read the ‘Immortality Ode’ in the local library reveal

evidence of the mind / body split later in the Quartet, in *A Whistling Woman*, which describes Frederica's second pregnancy: "pregnancy disturbs the balance of body and mind, and is hard in any case on women like Frederica, who do not give in gracefully, who cannot let slip the habit of logical thought, who do not slumber easily" (*Whistling* 415). However, my analysis will show that taking the biological disturbance pregnancy can enact on the female mind as the *definitive representation* of female subjectivity in Byatt's fiction occludes the counter-narratives established in her fiction.

The disciplinary mechanisms at work in the ante-natal examination are evident through the way a miscarriage is represented. The episode begins with Stephanie attempting to read Wordsworth in the long queue for the examination. There are not enough chairs for the women, who may have to wait much of the morning for their appointment. Stephanie becomes acquainted with another expectant mother, Mrs Owen, whilst waiting and the latter suffers a miscarriage whilst in the queue, not wanting to bother the medical staff with her pains. Stephanie later breaks the taboo against complaining when she is examined by the doctor. The experience of Stephanie and Mrs Owen is contrasted, as it is Mrs Owen's first time at the clinic and she does not know the rules, whereas Stephanie has effectively internalised the rules.

There are various disciplinary mechanisms in the representation of the process of the ante-natal examination, particularly the self-inscription of surveillance and the resultant normalisation of behaviour. When Stephanie moves to another stage of the examination, involving the change of waiting area, the narrator notes that "she went into the corridor, hurrying as though she

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the impossibility of being able to effectively 'switch gear.' The 'rigorous conflict' between mind and body in her case is indeed deadly; Stephanie is electrocuted in a domestic accident" (*Anxious* 114).

did not know very well that she was simply being transferred to another waiting chair, that the urgency of their voices bore no relation to the speed of their, or anyway her, movements" (*Still Life* 13). Stephanie's automatic willingness to obey the nurses and respond to their urgency indicates that the patients must reflect the priorities of the medical staff, although Stephanie is not seen until quite some time later. The urgency of the nurse's voice instead makes clear the power relations in the hospital: the requirement for patients to respond exactly to both the command itself and its expression.

Stephanie's successful internalisation of the hospital's disciplinary mechanisms is further evident when Mrs Owen mentions her back pain to Stephanie. At this point, Stephanie not only reproduces the power relations within herself but also produces them to regulate Mrs Owen's taboo complaint. A stiff upper lip is required, and Stephanie enacts "a jolly sympathetic delimiting of response" (13). Although the narrator states that Stephanie's reply has "a disagreeable note of clergyman's wife" (13), the response is also characteristic of Stephanie's internalisation of the norms of behaviour in the hospital. Mrs Owen recognises how she is meant to behave and when Stephanie softens her response with a request to get someone for Mrs Owen, the latter says no, she was "already aware that doctors and nurses were not there to be pestered" (13). The patients therefore police their behaviour and become the principle of their own subjection, to paraphrase Foucault (*Discipline* 203).

Foucault states that docile bodies are, in part, an aim of the carceral society as "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136). Whilst Foucault is speaking specifically of the soldier here, the principle can be applied to the management of the female body, as shown in the feminist analyses discussed above. The process and progression of the ante-

natal examination in *Still Life* contribute to the production of the patients as docile bodies. As the characters progress through different rooms they become increasingly naked, moving through “cubicles with inadequate curtains, where they were told to strip completely and put on the clean towelling gowns in there” (*Still Life* 14). Stephanie’s gown does not meet around her body. The inadequate curtains and insufficient gowns add bodily exposure to the practices that subdue the patients and have similarities to Foucault’s description of obedience in the subject: “the obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him” (*Discipline* 128-9). The narrator summarises Stephanie’s habituation to these routine humiliations: “she was used, but not reconciled, to such indignities” (*Still Life* 14). Williams finds that

The patient is formed by being constructed as the subject of an institutional ideology with a number of components. The patient is dependent on the hospital staff. The patient is told what to do and must not step out of line for fear of being victimized and not being granted “favours.” The layout of the ward ensures there is no privacy. A strict time structure is imposed which also regulates the intake of food and drink. Movements around the hospital are restricted. Individuality is lost. (237)

Byatt’s representation of Stephanie’s hospital experience not only typifies hospital visits but also makes clear, as does Williams’s description, how the hospital functions as a disciplinary space. The ordered hospital experience contributes to the disciplining of patients and Cosslett finds that it also is

humiliating to the individual sensibility: “although, or perhaps because, rigid routines are imposed, ridiculous and barbaric indignities abound” (*Women* 48).

The mechanisms of discipline that act on the body as well as the unspoken injunction not to speak or complain keep the subject in line,. The injunction not to complain is demonstrated further when Mrs Owen begins to miscarry her child whilst standing in line. Stephanie points to the blood on the former’s leg, who responds: “Oh, how embarrassing. I kept trying to ask them, was a bit of blood all right, and the pains, but there wasn’t the opportunity, and it really wasn’t *this much*. . .” (*Still Life* 15; emphasis and ellipsis original). Mrs Owen’s speech, and her “deprecating, apologetic gesture” (15) as she collapses, are produced by the hospital’s disciplinary practices that are so powerful that the patients behave in a deprecatory manner even in the midst of a medical crisis. Stephanie breaks the rule of avoiding complaint when she see the doctor and tries to explain the extent and the effect of the hospital’s power structures, that Mrs Owen lost her baby “because no one would let her speak to them” (15). The doctor replies that Mrs Owen would have probably lost the baby anyway and Stephanie’s response, “but not so *foolishly*” (15; emphasis original) attracts his attention: “this slightly unusual speech pattern enabled him to address her directly” (15). Stephanie’s speech pattern marks her out as an individual, rather than a subject to be weighed and compared by the examination; her subjectivity destabilises the disciplinary practices of the hospital that reduce her to her bodily functions.

Cosslett rightly observes that the doctor does not initially look Stephanie in the eye and that “nurses speak to patients ‘as one speaks to distracted children or incapable old people’ [...] The patients become dehumanised” (*Childbirth* 272). Stephanie’s atypical phrasing makes the doctor notice her as a



speaking subject, therefore resisting the totality of the hospital's dehumanising power structures. Stephanie's use of her intellect here resists the mind / body split, as her eloquence means that she cannot be simply aligned with the body. The resistance is further developed when Stephanie explains why she is particularly upset about what happened to Mrs Owen, as they were taught to stand in line and not complain, whilst the doctor states that surely anyone experiencing a miscarriage would complain. Stephanie's response makes clear the extent to which the patients have internalised the hospital's injunction to be compliant and docile: "this place puts you in line. You stay in it. You stand for *hours*, without a girdle, because of block bookings and not enough chairs. Two chairs for all those women. Standing *hurts*. This place changes you. I told her myself not to think. Doctors are busy" (*Still Life* 16; emphasis original).

Stephanie's complaint addresses the key ways by which the hospital's disciplinary mechanisms operate: the regulation of the body to ensure docility whilst standing in line and the reasonable assertion that doctors are busy and therefore cannot listen to complaints. The former also justifies the necessity of the latter as the patients can see that the doctors are busy and it is not an arbitrary rule, therefore reinforcing the internalisation of the disciplinary structures and resulting self-regulation. Nevertheless, the doctor attends to Stephanie's complaint regarding the chairs, as when Stephanie returns for her next visit (mentioned but not represented) there are a further six chairs.

Whilst Cosslett finds that the doctor is "evasive and embarrassed, rather than powerful" (*Women* 61), I would add that he has implicit and largely unconscious sexist views, describing Stephanie's initial emotionality as "hysterical" (*Still Life* 15). He has only a vague recollection of seeing Stephanie before, "using 'the pregnancy' as a reading-desk. He didn't think that was quite

right, but hadn't formulated why" (16).<sup>13</sup> Despite the doctor's mildly sexist and disapproving attitude to Stephanie, she breaks through the censures of the hospital's disciplinary structures of the examination. This episode of the birth narrative suggests that power can be resisted, as McLaren states: "if we are under continual surveillance due to the workings of power, our own power lies in the continual surveillance of power itself" (46). Stephanie's observation of how the examination system keeps subjects "in line" demonstrates resistance to power. Furthermore, my analysis of Stephanie's observations counters the critics, like Steveker, who posit that Byatt constructs a mind / body dichotomy through Stephanie. The eloquence of Stephanie's language and her attention to the disciplinary functions of the hospital emphasise the use of her mind, despite the effects of pregnancy.

The labour episode of the birth narrative in *Still Life* has been similarly characterised in negative terms by critics, with regards to its contribution to the mind / body split and Stephanie's lack of agency. Alfer and de Campos figure the labour as dehumanising Stephanie, negatively reducing her to an animalistic body (60). Steveker notes that despite the progressiveness of representing labour from the female point of view, Byatt's method of representing it is all the more significant, as her approach reinforces patriarchal ideology from a female perspective, "told from a female perspective, this passage naturalizes the

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<sup>13</sup> Cosslett finds that it is the nurses who rather reinforce patriarchal views: "in these representations the powerful men are absent, or busy and abstracted, like fathers in traditional nuclear families, while the nurses and midwives, like mothers, get on with the business of enforcing the patriarchal order on to the children/mothers" (*Women* 62). Cosslett is right here about the role of the nurses, although, as discussed above, I add that despite the doctor's evasiveness, Byatt represents him as participating in the subjugation of women through his opinions on Stephanie's reading habits.

opposition of woman and mind, presented it as resulting from the biological processes of the female body giving birth” (69). The interpretations made by Steveker and Alfer and de Campos are apposite for the sections of the labour that they analyse. However, when these isolated passages are repositioned as part of the birth narrative in *Still Life* and analysed in terms of power relations, the mind / body split can be dismantled.

The representation of Stephanie during the labour episode has two main characteristics in terms of power relations. There is subjection to power and resistance to power. Stephanie’s subjection to power relations in the labour episode is demonstrated in the novel by the repetition of language that describes her as compliant and submissive: she “believed in good manners,” “was too polite to do more than knit her brows,” “obedient,” “wept a little, quietly, in case anyone should hear” and she is “docile” (*Still Life* 88, 89). Stephanie’s character is generally represented as docile. In *Virgin*, her mother Winifred describes her as “milder” than her sister, Frederica (41). However, the style and frequency of the language of compliance in the labour episode demonstrate not merely a character trait but rather that Stephanie has internalised the hospital’s disciplinary practices and is the instrument of her subjection.

The second way Stephanie is represented in the labour episode is in her resistance to the hospital’s rules on how to give birth. Rather than lying in bed, as instructed, Stephanie intuits that walking would be more comfortable (*Still Life* 90). This resistance to the hospital’s rules is important for several reasons. Although the nurses stop Stephanie walking when they arrive to examine her, Stephanie is able to articulate the logic behind her walking: “Look. If I use *these* muscles, I relax *those* . . .” (91; ellipsis and emphasis original). Although the walking is characterised as Stephanie “obeying some powerful instinct,” the

initial instinct is represented through reasoning rather than pure bodily intuition, “there was something ridiculous about lying here on one’s back, whilst it pulled – and something unnecessarily painful” (90). The logic Stephanie uses to find a more comfortable way to endure the labour pain is important as it works towards dismantling the mind apparent mind / body split.

As resistance to power relations, Stephanie’s walking does not wholly succeed. When the nurses admonish Stephanie for walking and reinforce the hospital’s rules, her routine is interrupted and the discipline is strengthened: “when they were gone she had lost her sense of her own rhythms, wanted desperately to get out and walk again and yet was afraid of being reprimanded for being a naughty girl” (91). Stephanie resumes walking, however, when the staff do not come back to check on her. The surveillance in the hospital is limited and this allows Stephanie to partly circumvent the internalisation mechanisms as the rules are not constantly reinforced. Stephanie is able to resist the hospital’s power relations when the surveillance is not omnipresent and therefore internalisation is not reinforced. However, Stephanie is compelled to submit to the hospital’s regulations whilst under direct supervision once she is in the later stages of the labour: “some relief could be found by moving her feet rapidly in circles, but one nurse slapped these and reiterated the admonition about not contracting muscles” (92).

Power relations in the hospital are not limited to the labour, as disciplinary practices also apply to the instruction the hospital gives to the new mothers. Babies are not seen as objects of love or occasions for the “bliss” that Stephanie feels when she sees her son for the first time (94). Rather, babies are agonistic and need to be kept in line: “frightful warnings were uttered about not letting these helpless human scraps get the upper hand” (100). The hospital

normalises certain practices of motherhood as well as certain responses of the babies, and pathologises other practices – a process that Foucault labels “dividing practices” (McLaren 123). The hospital enacts dividing practices to categorise the babies but also to differentiate between the patients and the nurses: “the mothers were as sloppy as the nurses were rigorous” (*Still Life* 100).

Dividing practices are composed of asymmetrical power relations. Foucault’s concept of power as a network is necessary to understand how specific resistances to the dividing practices function in *Still Life*. Resistance to power in *Still Life* functions laterally: direct opposition to power relations is suppressed by admonitions and force where necessary, such as the slapping of Stephanie’s ankles when she is giving birth, although force is the end of power and negates it. The dividing practices of the hospital as well cannot be resisted directly but can be mitigated laterally. The pervasiveness of power relations does not allow Stephanie to directly challenge the dividing practices, but rather to treat those with sympathy and in effect re-humanise those who are designated abnormal.

The key passage in the novel that indicates Stephanie’s resistance to the dividing practices relates several instances in which Stephanie humanises patients designated abnormal: “Stephanie, a good curate’s wife, talked to the silent and the sad – from a woman whose child was resolute in refusing sustenance, to a girl who had been cruelly settled in there after the birth of a still-born daughter. This one was too addressed by the staff as mother or mum” (101). The dividing practices in the hospital that designate non-feeding babies and women with dead babies (called “mum”) as abnormal are resisted by

Stephanie who mitigates the abnormal designation by, it is implied, treating them as normal and thereby dismantling the dividing practices.

Stephanie's activities in speaking to "the silent and the sad" could be seen as part of her pastoral duties she has taken on by marrying Daniel, who is a curate. However, although they are continuous with the pastoral duties, I read them as resistant to the hospital's dehumanising practices. In addition, there is conflicting evidence in *Still Life* for Stephanie's care-giving tendencies, suggesting it is productive to read Stephanie's apparent pastoral work carefully. Stephanie says to Daniel that she is happy to have figures from the local community in the house to give them somewhere to go, as there is a lot of Daniel's work she cannot help with (232). However, this impulse to pastoral work is undercut, as the narrator remarks, "there was something a little disingenuous in this reply. Partly at least she allowed the lost ones to sit in her house in order to neutralise Daniel's mother, who sat amongst them, one of many" (232). Mrs Orton, Daniel's mother, does however recognise Stephanie's tactics: "I'm a cross you bear, a load on your mind, better put away. I've not had a cross word out of you since I come, and not one word o' real warmth or humanity either, not one, you don't care what I am, so long as your duty's done, you cold fish" (305).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> It should be added, however, that the representation of Mrs. Orton in the text goes some way to explaining Stephanie's treatment of her, as it is not sympathetic. Marcus's reflections on Mrs. Orton typify the representation of her in the novel: "she is *no* use. She hopes he will offer her more ham. She does not want to be of use. She eats" (*Still Life* 135). Mrs. Orton is shown as precluding the kind of human affection she says Stephanie has withheld as she is unsympathetic as a character, as Stephanie observes during Christmas day: "she could feel Mrs Orton wanting to be noticed, desiring to be liked, preventing these things" (46).

Stephanie's interactions with Mrs. Orton are significant as they affect the interpretation of Stephanie's death, as well as the birth narrative. My argument uses Stephanie's feelings about Mrs. Orton to point out Byatt's ambivalent representation of Stephanie, because perceiving Stephanie's behaviour to the patients in the hospital as only pastoral risks eliding the resistance to power relations in the hospital. As Stephanie dies, the word "altruism" comes into her mind and relates to the mind / body conflict in *Still Life* in terms of defining women by their bodies.

Stephanie's death has been read in terms of Byatt's narrative design;<sup>15</sup> as an explication of the title of the novel;<sup>16</sup> as an edification of the role of God in Byatt's fiction;<sup>17</sup> as a punishment for failing to reconcile intellectual pursuits with the role of wife and mother;<sup>18</sup> and a number of critics discuss Stephanie's last

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<sup>15</sup> Carmen Lara Rallo (*Keeping* 101), Alfer and de Campos (60-1) and Sorensen (*Death* 115) read Stephanie's death in terms of Byatt's aim to plot a genuinely contingent event into the novel.

<sup>16</sup> Stewart considers the meaning of the title with regards to Stephanie's static life and as *nature morte* (*Color* 214) and Sorensen asks if the title could refer to "still" as in a continuation of life beyond death (*Death* 115).

<sup>17</sup> Sorensen states that "Stephanie is unquestionably constructed as a religious sacrifice of some sort; if the world view presented here is truly agnostic or atheistic, why the need for a character to bear the sins of others?" (*Death* 132).

<sup>18</sup> Eagleton (*Anxious* 114) and Steveker: "although her death occurs unexpectedly and is completely accidental, it seems to be the only possible fate for a character whose life has not left her any room for an activity to which she herself has ascribed existential importance" (66). Concha also finds Stephanie's death a punishment, but not for failing to reconcile body and mind, finding it a comment on the form of the novel: "in Byatt's novel, contrary to the tenor of classic realism that presides the two first volumes, Stephanie is 'punished' with death not on account of any feminine transgression but precisely because

thought, the word altruism.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to avoid interpreting Stephanie's death in a way that is over-determined. Indeed, Byatt's novel almost invites it: showing Stephanie struggling to read Wordsworth when pregnant; only negotiating time to study with difficulty; being enmeshed in the community's complaints; discussing her loss of her vocabulary as it is not relevant for everyday life; as well as death by kitchen appliance whilst trying to save a sparrow. Steveker finds, for example, that "like Nigel and John, Stephanie's husband uses sex to stop her using her intellect" (71). Given that both Stephanie *and* Daniel have identified that marriage has affected their concept of themselves, an alternative interpretation is that Stephanie makes the usual compromises of married life, rather than an act of coercion on Daniel's part.<sup>20</sup> Although of course part of Byatt's point is that marriage not only reduces Stephanie's opportunities to use her intellect but also means that she is not allowed to work. 1950s societal conventions did not allow middle-class women to have careers and therefore Stephanie's situation is representative of the limitations of female roles at this time.

In Stephanie's narrative, evidence can be found to support an over-determined reading of her death, as well as her life as it is represented in the novel. However, following the analysis of the birth narrative in this chapter, I would emphasise a more positive reading of Stephanie's narrative, whilst

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of her pliancy to the ideal of femininity provided by high literature of the moral kind upheld by liberal humanist critics such as F. R. Leavis" (215).

<sup>19</sup>Alfer and de Campos (61), Boccardi (*Byatt* 57), Campbell (79), Rallo (*Keeping* 99), Sorensen (*Death* 128).

<sup>20</sup> It is also worth noting that it is Stephanie also uses physical contact to still conversation when they are discussing their comparable losses through marriage (*Still Life* 307).



acknowledging the limitations experienced by women in the 1950s. Stephanie's last word, altruism, is the restoration or recuperation of the intellectual language that she cannot use in her daily life (Campbell, *Heliotropic* 79; Boccardi, *Byatt* 57). Sorensen adds that she finds that word altruism emphasises Stephanie's goodness (*Death* 128). I argue that Stephanie's unusual last word can be seen as a continuity of Byatt's repeated representation of Stephanie's mind as analytical. Stephanie thinks, as she begins to die, "oh, what will happen to the children?" followed by the word, "altruism" (*Still Life* 334).

Stephanie's last word recalls a conversation between Stephanie and Daniel earlier in the novel where they discuss how their daily lives have diminished their vocabularies, as they do not have opportunities to use conceptual language (305-7). The reduction of vocabulary stands for Stephanie's lack of intellectual pursuits; the words she lists as redundant in her daily life are conceptual: "discourse of reason. Sophistical. Ideal – in a Platonic sense. Catalyst. Anacoluthon. Mendacious. Realism" (306). This conversation is linked to Byatt's representation of Stephanie as analytical in the novel, particularly in the birth narrative. Thinking the word "altruism" could be perceived as Stephanie retrieving part of her lost vocabulary, following Campbell, but it is evidently a logical response to the question she has posed about her children.

Throughout *Still Life*, I have argued, Stephanie applies her logical mind to the problems she encounters. The novel makes clear that, in some instances, it is the way her mind uses language that effects change by distinguishing disciplinary practices and employing resistance. Stephanie's resistances are local and limited but her efforts achieve results. Byatt demonstrates not only the increasingly untenable dominance of the British subject position as male, upper

class and predicated on imperialism, but also specifically the increasing questioning of female subjugation in the 1950s. The alignment of man with the intellect and women with the body becomes less and less acceptable as is demonstrated through the narratives of Frederica and Stephanie. The next chapter extends this analysis further, by analysing Frederica's increasing, if limited, resistance to patriarchal representations of women and limiting gender roles.

### Chapter 3: Gender and Narrative in *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*

This chapter analyses several key embedded texts from *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002), all of which contribute to Byatt's ambiguous use of 1960s mythology. Byatt's representation of the 1960s engages with the dichotomised account of the decade that, on the one hand, perceive it as dangerously permissive, where increasing freedom of expression is aligned with offences to conventional decency, and, on the other hand, as a time of increasing liberation. Byatt represents the 1960s as a time of growing freedom but makes clear that those freedoms do not consistently apply to all characters, particularly the women. The embedded texts across both novels share and continue the questioning of male dominance over women discussed in the previous chapter. Chapter 2 demonstrated that the world of *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (1985) questions the hierarchies of English

society dominated by the upper-class male in the changes wrought by the end of the British Empire. In *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*, those hierarchies are not swept away by the cultural changes enacted by the new freedoms of the 1960s. Both novels represent institutions that are male-dominated, even within the various counter-culture movements, although these institutions are explicitly questioned in several ways in the novels.

Female resistance to patriarchal power in *Babel* and *Whistling* differs from *Virgin* and *Still Life*, as the female characters analysed here are writers and formulate their resistance through writing. In *Babel*, Frederica produces a notebook, *Laminations*, containing quotations removed from their original context that form new connections by being next to but not part of each other. *Laminations* is non-narrative, part of the 1960s experimentation that pervades the novel: “with its multiple beginnings, *Babel Tower* explicitly announces itself as a point of new departures and as a complex, multi-layered narrative that allows the provocative and feverishly experimental atmosphere of its 1960s setting to spill over strategically into the novel’s own narrative structures” (Alfer and de Campos 65). Alfer and de Campos rightly identify Frederica’s *Laminations* as part of Byatt’s representation of the *avant-garde* in *Babel*, “vocally rejecting the linear narratives of traditional realist prose and its purported claims to transparency in favour of radical experiments in literary form” (66). Their argument can be extended, as Frederica’s non-narrative technique is not simply a 1960s period detail standing for changes in cultural practices but also a response to the patriarchal manipulation of narrative in Frederica’s legal battles to get divorced and retain custody of her child. Frederica’s “writing” is part of a process of resistance to the patriarchal gender

roles projected by the law, as well as the type of self required by the law in *Babel*.

Byatt employs strategies of representation, particularly through the embedded texts, not only to construct her commentary on the cultural setting of her novels but also to make a political comment on gendered subjectivity. In *Whistling*, Byatt uses the increasingly widespread medium of television as it took hold across the 1960s to analyse female subject positions. Frederica becomes a television broadcaster; the television programme she presents uses parody to denaturalise gender roles and offer women a way to represent themselves that avoids reproducing phallogentric discourse. The embedded texts and the process of writing (or cultural production) question the prescribed gender roles the women encounter and the definitions of appropriate selfhood these institutions require, replacing them with multiplied subjectivities.

The diverse conceptualisations of 1960s mythology are often construed as the rise of the “permissive society” and “anti-permissiveness.” Mark Donnelly aptly summarises both positions, noting that the negative view emerged from right-wing conservative perspectives:

Viewed from the negative perspective, sixties Britain saw the beginnings of a breakdown of order and authority, a prioritising of self-indulgence over personal responsibility, a fashionable but dangerous acceptance of moral relativism, a vacuous preoccupation with cultural trivia rather than cultural self-improvement and an uncritical elevation of the new above the established. (5)

On the other hand, “a more positive set of readings holds that the sixties were a time of social and economic progress and cultural reinvigoration” (9). Byatt’s

fiction does not directly coincide with either myth of the 1960s, whether the freedom or the anti-permissiveness model. Instead, Byatt demonstrates the limitations of each model, particularly through the female characters who are constrained by their gender. Jane Campbell makes several astute observations on the limitations of female agency in *Whistling*. Despite Frederica's role as host on the television programme *Through the Looking Glass*, it is Wilkie rather than Frederica who controls the development of the programme (*Heliotropic* 253-4); despite Jacqueline's scientific advances in her research, her results are appropriated by her male supervisor (256) and although Brenda conducts pioneering sociological research, she relies on a man to keep her evidence safe (256). Campbell finds that Byatt's fiction and the history of the period do not offer women the same opportunities and freedoms as men:

Nowhere is the danger of reductiveness more threatening than in the lives of women in the Swinging Sixties, when the availability of the pill and the expectations of sexual liberation for women could mean the restriction rather than the enlargement of their freedom to make choices. Power is still in the hands of men; they dominate both the social institutions and the challenges to these structures. Even in the hippie protest group, women follow male leaders.

(253)

Campbell is right, both for the period and for Byatt's fiction. Donnelly observes that only three out of the top twenty music best-selling music artists in the period were female and that "films overwhelmingly dealt with male-centred narratives, viewing women on screen through the 'male gaze' of a camera lens that was almost always directed by men" (198). However, it is important to note that power is not monolithic in Byatt's fiction. In *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*,

Foucault states that power is everywhere, rather than monolithic, and that resistance is therefore not external to power relations but “where there is power, there is resistance” (95). He continues, “these points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single focus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of revolutionaries” (95-6). Foucault asks:

Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing limits and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. (96)

Indeed, the student revolt of '68 appeared to herald a new era and the overthrow of bourgeois society, although in fact all the rebelliousness of the 1960s was contained by capitalism and society. Sawicki notes that instead

Genealogical resistance involves using history to give voice to the marginal and submerged voices which lie “a little beneath history” – the voices of the mad, the delinquent, the abnormal, the disempowered. It locates many discontinuous and regional struggles against power both in the past and present. These voices are the sources of resistance, the creative subject of history. (28)

In both *Babel* and *Whistling*, the female characters are represented as resisting patriarchal power in the institutions they work in or encounter. The risk of the limitations on female agency that Campbell identifies are very real in Byatt's

fiction, but Byatt represents strategies for resistance and promotes a positive view of women, even if that resistance is limited. I contend that Byatt's fiction recognises the limitations on female agency in the setting of the novels but also recognises the possibilities of resistance, as power is not monolithic.

*Babel* and *Whistling* do however predate second wave feminism and the characters cannot benefit from a feminist framework that would enable more widespread resistance. Although significant legal changes were made towards the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, these come too late for Byatt's characters.<sup>21</sup> *Babel* demonstrates that the broadening definitions of acceptable behaviours and ideas, as well as the increasing acceptance of female intellectuals and professionals, have limited effects on social institutions. The legal narrative in *Babel* is comprised of Frederica's divorce and custody hearings and the obscenity trial of Jude's novel *Babbletower*. All three trials rely on conventional story forms and narrative techniques used to shape the evidence into recognisable stories. Frederica's trials also rely on language and paradigms of appropriate behaviour for women that are sexist and that are employed to discredit her.

The role of narrative in the trials in *Babel* is characteristic of the complexity of narrative in law more generally. Although Robert Ferguson is writing about criminal trials, his remarks are pertinent for the problem of storytelling and representation in the legal narrative in *Babel*: "the legal priorities placed on truth-telling notwithstanding, a story succeeds only when it is well told. Lawyers in conflict look for a story jurors will believe, and they understand that the most believable story will already appear familiar to their listeners" (25). The

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<sup>21</sup> The key reforms were the Abortion Act 1967, Divorce Reform Act 1969, Equal Pay Act 1970 and Matrimonial Property Act 1970.

“most believable story” in the divorce hearing portrays Frederica as self-centred and unwilling to sacrifice her identity and ambition for the sacred roles of wife and mother. This story is accepted as reasonable for a woman and is supported by another narrative that represents Frederica as an unreliable witness, so enmeshed in fantasy that she cannot tell reality from a story, although the irony here is that Nigel’s lawyer’s story is a fantasy, built on perjury.

In *Babel*, Frederica and Jude find themselves subject to narratives that misrepresent them; that is, narratives constructed by the opposing counsel that draw on anti-permissive contemporary ideology. The trials are representative of the competing ideologies of the 1960s. Frederica and Jude are, in effect, on the side of new freedoms, but are castigated by the conservative legal system that in each case draws on conventional story forms and moralities. The legal narrative in *Babel* not only imposes gender norms but is also built on a particular conception of identity. The enlightenment self, coterminous with the liberal humanist self discussed in Chapter 2, is required by the legal system, as the law is premised on the idea that people must be the free agents of their actions and so can be punished for those actions. Clearly, this is revised by considerations of diminished responsibility but the law nonetheless has the enlightenment conception of self built into its discourse. Peter Brooks observes that, in legal confession, objective “truth” is problematic as it does not have a one-to-one correspondence with its referent, although

to say this is not to argue that the law should embrace post-Freudian and post-Foucaultian notions of the individual, two versions that deconstruct the idea that we are masters in our own psychic abodes and suggest that rational free will is an illusion. To do its job, the law needs to insist upon traditional notions of



individual responsibility, including responsibility for acts of confession. (*Troubling* 63-4)

The difficulty with the law, then, is that the self it requires is challenged in various ways throughout the twentieth-century.

Legal norms of selfhood and identity are problematic in *Babel* for both Frederica and Jude. The novel represents several instances of disconnect between the subject and the paradigm of self that is imposed by the legal narrative, as Frederica's conception of her subjectivity is fragmented, not whole. The movement from the sureties of the fifties world in *Virgin* and *Still Life* to the fracturing of subjectivity in *Babel* aligns the novel with one of the visible hallmarks of postmodernism, although as discussed in Chapter 2, the liberal-humanist model of identity was challenged in the earlier novels. In *Virgin* and *Still Life*, Byatt uses different strategies of representation to critique the nostalgic history and conservative politics in Alexander's plays. In *Babel*, the law's patriarchal language, its conceptualisation of selfhood and use of conventional narratives lead Frederica to refigure her relationship to language and narrative.

*Whistling* portrays proto-feminist representations of gender in its juxtaposition of three professional women: Frederica working in arts media, Jacqueline in scientific research and Brenda in sociological research. Whilst both Jacqueline and Brenda appear in *Babel Tower*, they feature more prominently in *Whistling*, as does their research. Brenda's sociological research in the Quartet analyses gender, both in her taping of female to female conversations in *Babel* and her analysis of gender roles in the cult in *Whistling*. The cult begins as a group, informed by the influence of alternative interpretations of Christianity and the anti-psychiatry movement. The group

develops into a cult with the advent of the disturbed but charismatic Joshua Lamb and his Manichean teachings. The cult typifies the utopian ideals of 1960s counter-culture, seeking to revolutionise society, although the cult's impact on the wider world is very limited and eventually implodes.

*Whistling* is characterised by failed revolutions, as the Anti-University and its planned student revolt fails to change society, although it severely disrupts the University of North Yorkshire's conference and damages their buildings. The student revolt is not viewed sympathetically by the novel (Steveker 119). The counter-cultural movements in *Whistling* are exemplified by their ineffective methods. They do not bring about revolutions and are dangerous, as both the cult and the Anti-University set devastating fires at the climax of the novel. The critique of the failed revolutions of the counter-culture may appear to endorse the anti-permissive conservative agenda, although it should be recognised that whatever the intellectual gains made on the continent, the spirit of '68 had a limited effect on British life. As Marwick notes, the transformations to culture and law in the 1960s

helped make possible the events of 1968, but their significance had nothing to do with the success or failure of these events, on which too much attention has been lavished. More critically, the real changes in ordinary lives have been obscured by the attention lavished on the minority practices of "underground culture" whose long-term influence was minimal. (*British 68*)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Julie Stephens considering 1960s protest culture from the perspective of the anti-disciplinary elements and sees this aspect of 1960s culture having a much further reaching influence on modern culture than the failures of 1968: "however, in giving consideration to the politicized counterculture the issue is not to restore it to its rightful place in sixties narratives but to call

Byatt is careful to balance her focus between the changes in the ordinary lives Marwick mentions and the effects of 1960s counter-culture. *Whistling* represents the double focus on changes for the individual and changes in culture by juxtaposing the narratives of women and analysis of gender across both relatively ordinary lives and within the counter-culture.

Julie Stephens argues that feminism is a counter to the “death of the sixties” accounts, like Marwick’s, that perceive the protest culture of the 1960s as a failure because it did not revolutionise society: “feminist groups remained committed to some concept of revolution (personal, socialist, radical and so forth)” (122). By focusing on women, Byatt avoids endorsing either the myth of permissiveness or conservative anti-permissiveness through a critical approach to gender that recognises the limitations of female agency in both the dominant culture and counter-culture. Byatt nonetheless represents professional women resisting patriarchal definitions of gender through their work and their thoughts about their work, even when that agency has limitations.

### 1. Regulating Gender Narratives in *Babel Tower*

In *Babel*, the legal narrative imposes norms of gender and subjectivity and judges the characters caught up in the trials by those norms. The story that explicates the legal evidence is shown to be a significant legal weapon, particularly when the facts are under question, as Robert Weisberg makes

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into question the frameworks which so inform our commonplace understandings of this period and its relationship to what are perceived to be the anti-political inclinations of later decades. In the current political/theoretical landscape, the impulses of political disengagement, represented at one level by a certain tendency of postmodernism and at another by popular conceptions of the dominant cultural mood, have been shaped as much by the success of the anti-disciplinary politics in the sixties counterculture as by the failure of more traditional conceptions of protest” (4).

clear: “it is a staple of legal practice that where facts are disputed, lawyers narrate a version most conducive to their legal arguments without violating credibility or ignoring or negating those facts that are unequivocally established” (66).

Paraphrasing Kim Scheppelle on rape cases, Weisberg states that “truth [...] is not the property of an event; rather, it is the property of an account of an event” (68). *Babel* takes narrative in the law further, as the most damning evidence in Frederica’s divorce hearing is manufactured: sworn affidavits are lies and respectable members of the community commit perjury. However, although the evidence is manufactured, it must be constructed into a plausible argument to be persuasive. The argument in the divorce hearing draws on conventional narratives and tropes to ensure it is familiar and therefore convincing. Robert Ferguson provides a clear analysis of narrative conventions in legal storytelling:

The genre of a story, its familiar form in the telling, is a crucial factor and often the hidden ingredient in courtroom belief. Notably, lawyers have masked the real importance of generic considerations through their appeals to the common sense of a situation. But common sense, as anthropologists have begun to show, is basically a culturally constructed use of experience to claim self-evidence; it is neither more or less than “an authoritative story” made out of the familiar. (87)

Conventional representations of gender and fairy-tale fantasy are the familiar tropes and narratives used in the divorce hearing, along with the manufactured evidence, to discredit Frederica’s narrative of the marriage.

For Frederica, the legal narrative begins before the trials, imposing generic considerations and legal norms of self upon her from the start of her conferences with her solicitor, Arnold Begbie (*Babel* 276-80). The legal narrative's use of norms and particular configurations of sexist language have continuities with Nigel's use of language at the start of the novel. Although it is not explicitly acknowledged in the novel, the continuity of language use and the imposition of both Nigel's and Arnold's norms leads Frederica to distrust the latter. Frederica's response to the legal narrative is to analyse the language as a protest, to recognise and analyse the imposition of norms and to increasingly distrust narrative as the novel progresses. Frederica's *Laminations* does not follow narrative conventions and is deliberately fragmentary, which is characteristic of her increasing rejection of narrative in general and the legal narrative's imposition of normalised identity in particular.

*Babel* breaks with the form used in *Virgin* and *Still Life* by dispensing with the proleptic prologue and instead offering several different openings, stating at the start of each one "it might begin." As Alfer and de Campos note, Byatt's alternative beginnings are in line with developments in the form of the novel in the 1960s: "narrative form and literary experiment were hot topics during the period in which *Babel Tower* is set, with the self-styled avant-garde of the era, anxious to respond to Alain Robbe-Grillet's (1965) call for a 'new novel' to reflect a new reality" (65-6).

Although the form of *Babel* is coterminous with developments in 1960s literature, the initial representation of Frederica emphasises continuities with the fifties. When Frederica's old friend from Cambridge, Hugh Pink, coincidentally runs into Frederica during his walking tour, Frederica is represented as dressed in a country style: "the woman is wearing country clothes, jodhpurs, boots, a

hacking jacket. She has a green headsquare knotted under her chin, in the style of the Queen and her royal sister" (*Babel* 3). The reference to the Queen and the country clothes align Frederica with the time of *Virgin*, rather than the cultural change in the 1960s. Ruth Feingold shows in her article on *Virgin*, discussed in Chapter 2, that the ideology of Elizabeth II was based on the family, to encourage women back into the home after increased female participation in the labour market during the Second World War: "the message that young women may glean from their Queen's example is consistent: the strength of the country lies in the strength of the family – and it is up to women to provide this strength, by linking past to future" (86). The association of Frederica with the Queen serves to underscore how the former has limited options in *Babel*, as Nigel expects her to stay in the home and fulfil the role of wife and mother, without a career. It is not until much later in the novel that Frederica encounters the new 1960s developments in culture and is able to pursue a professional life.

When Frederica begins to reject the placid and docile femininity that Nigel requires, by complaining that she wants intellectual work to occupy herself, he uses a personal narrative to promote compliance. Nigel emotionally blackmails Frederica for wanting to do more than be a wife and mother, and chastises her by telling the story of his mother abandoning her family (*Babel* 37). Nigel's strategic use of language, saying he loves her so she will be placated, causes Frederica to reflect on the solidity of language in Nigel's world:

Much of what [Nigel] says, Frederica has noticed without yet thinking about it, is dictated by the glaze of language that slides over and obscures the surface of the world he lives in, a language that is quite sure what certain things are, a man, a woman, a girl,

a mother, a duty. Language in this world is for keeping things safe in their places. (38-9)

Nigel's use of language that has fixed meanings for him in turn constructs a gendered narrative: the women of his family must stay within the home, kept safe in their places. Language is not a mode of expression for Nigel but is used to justify convention.

The legal narrative imposes a variety of effects even before Frederica gets into court. In conversation with her solicitor, Arnold Begbie, Frederica begins to feel that the legal proceedings are constructing a narrative of events which project unrepresentative roles onto people and also mischaracterises the episodes from Frederica's marriage. As Frederica describes the problems in her marriage to her solicitor, she notes "that the legal narrative she has just constructed has changed several people: Nigel into the Husband, herself into the plaintiff, Thomas Poole into something he is and is not" (281). Frederica is living with Thomas Poole at this point, sharing babysitting so she can work outside the home. Begbie warns Frederica that her living arrangements will be subject to scrutiny and could prejudice her divorce, unless she intends to marry Thomas. Frederica and Leo move in with Agatha Mond instead, as it will appear to be a more appropriate situation for the divorce hearing. The legal narrative imposes its ideology of acceptable behaviour that applies to all aspects of Frederica's life.

In her work on feminism and the law, Carol Smart argues that the solicitor has to translate the client's narrative into legal terms: "most of the story will be chaff as far as the lawyer is concerned, no matter how significant the rejected elements are to the client. Having extracted what law defines as relevant, it is translated into a foreign language of, for example, ouster

injunctions, unfair dismissals, constructive trusts” (197-8). The legal narrative is therefore constructed, rather than truthful: “this is the routine daily practice of law in which alternative accounts of events are disqualified. The legal version becomes the only valid one” (Smart 198). For Frederica, then, the conversations with her lawyer construct a legal narrative that is a partial and therefore distorted representation of her life. All representations are partial, but the legal narrative does not recognise any deviation or possible alternatives to its account.

In trying to write the account of her grievances in her marriage, Frederica polices her language, feeling that emotional language is inappropriate: “she has a vague idea that this piece of writing should be bare, unemotive, scrupulously neutral, whatever that might mean” (*Babel* 336). Frederica’s response to the imposed identities and the narrative constructed through the legal discourse is to reject a mode of writing that appears to engage in fictional techniques. She feels that *neutral* language might mitigate the distortions necessitated by representation, allowing the facts to speak for themselves. If she uses emotive language, then her *opinion* of those events is included, therefore conscripting the facts into a narrative which seeks to convince, making it a lie. Neutral language, however, does not adequately deal with the problem of representation and harms Frederica’s case, as it limits its human appeal and persuasiveness: “the document is nauseating because it is the skeleton of a document that could truly plead, that could make its reader weep for pity and laugh grimly at human folly” (307). Despite using neutral language, the document, in Frederica’s eyes, is not truthful: “it recounts true facts, for a valid purpose – to get Frederica out of a marriage that has become a trap – but it recounts these things one-sidedly, in inappropriate (inappropriate? lying?)



inadequate?) language” (307). The document recounts what Frederica finds unacceptable about her marriage, but does not recount her own failings and is therefore one-sided.

Frederica’s document of her marriage points to an increasing problem with language in *Babel*. Boccardi argues that “the world around [Frederica], similarly, has lost the perceived coherence of the 1950 to take on a postmodern fragmentation that affects not only personal and social relations but also (in a nod to the influence of post-structuralism) language itself” (*Byatt* 43-4). Although the characters of *Babel* are not represented as reading what become to be known as post-structuralist texts, post-structuralist theories of language permeate the novel. Language in the novel does not passively reflect the world but rather constructs our perceptions of that world. This is stated directly in the report of the fictional Steerforth Committee on the teaching of the English language to children: “language has become not merely the glass through which we see ‘the world outside’ but the instrument with which we shape and limit our purposes and apprehensions” (*Babel* 479). The report also notes that language is not neutral but that “there is a proper and increasing interest in language as an instrument of power, of subjection and manipulation” (479).

Post-structuralism recognises that language is not a neutral system that mimetically coincides with the world. Mark Currie clarifies Derrida’s phrase “il n’y a pas de-hors text,” often translated as “there is nothing outside the text”: “it is closer to ‘there is no outside text’. Derrida does not mean that reality does not exist except as an illusion foisted on us by language, but that it is not possible to distinguish categorically between what is within and what is outside” (*Postmodern* 45). In *Babel*, language usage implies power relations. During the preparations for the divorce hearing between Frederica and Begbie, her sexual

history prior to her marriage is discussed: “pre-nuptial incontinence does not come into the domain of public morals. But it may lead to a presumption that you had no objections to sleeping with more than one man: it might lead to questioning about your subsequent conduct” (*Babel* 323). Despite the law’s seeming neutrality and objectivity, “law is one of the discourses which constantly reproduces self-evident and natural women. In addition law reproduces her in a sexualized and subjugated form” (Smart 204). Considering the social context within which the law operates, Smart notes that “law may benevolently or malevolently confirm us in our discursive place as woman; the point is that it does so” (204). The subtext of the conversation between Frederica and Begbie is that certain standard and conventions of conduct will be applied to her because she is a woman.

Frederica deconstructs the legal language, finding that the words not only have a specific and narrow meaning within the legal system, but also contain accumulated cultural meaning: “these legal words carry with them the whole history of a society in which a woman was a man’s property, not to be contaminated” (*Babel* 324).<sup>23</sup> Whilst women’s equality increases as the twentieth-century progresses, *Babel* makes the point that the establishment, symbolised here by the legal system which encapsulates upper-class values,

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<sup>23</sup> Frederica is able to deconstruct the legal language because of her education and therefore her education affords her some measure (of very limited) power in this context. As Sandra Bartky notes, however, legalese is one of the many ways that the legal system disadvantages women who are not as privileged as Frederica: “the language of the courtroom too must be alien to the ear of the woman who has come for redress: indeed, legal language is notoriously convoluted, technical, and often intelligible only to specialists” (*Battered* 57).

has not yet embraced social change.<sup>24</sup> The attitude is exemplified by the language the legal system uses, which reinforces gender inequality, despite the laws that are beginning to come into place to protect women's rights in the late 1960s.

Despite the emergence of a distinct youth culture and the "permissive society" of the 1960s, with the expansion of acceptable or partially condoned behaviours with regards to, for example, dress codes and sexuality, the "domain of public morals" remains heavily influenced by patriarchal values. The point being made in the novel is that the perception of the 1960s as synonymous with "free love" and rebellion is not a wholly accurate portrayal of the era. As Frederica's recollection of her student days demonstrates, the ideas of her contemporaries were already changing, where their attitudes to sex symbolises the rejection of conventional morality and limitations in the 1950s (324-5). These attitudes are not representative of wholesale change in British society even by the 1960s, demonstrated by the way in which gender inequality is built into the connotations of the language used by the legal system, which is presumed to make judgements based upon facts and not prejudices.

The document enumerating Nigel's offences does not represent Frederica's opinion that she should not have married in the first place. During the hearing, Lawrence Ounce, the opposing counsel, questions Frederica and asks her to recall an earlier statement where she said she withdrew mentally from the marriage, and asks her if she would care to comment. When Frederica

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<sup>24</sup> In terms of the law, it is worth noting that even in the late 1980s, teaching the law was male-dominated. Judith Resnik recalls being given advice in the late 1970s by a male colleague, indicating that she should avoid "'women's issues'" (1924), as women were teaching in law schools "on sufferance" (1925).

responds, saying that she saw she had promised something she could not give, the narrator reports that Frederica was “temporarily relieved by having at last said what is in her mind” (493), which is an attempt by Frederica to redress the balance and to give a fair account of the marriage. Frederica’s instinct to play fair by not constructing a cohesive story that would inevitably misrepresent her marriage provides the opposing counsel with more ammunition. Frederica says that “*withdrawing* doesn’t excuse axe-throwing” (493; emphasis original), Ounce says “it does not. But we do not admit that an axe was thrown” (493). The judge decides the axe attack was unsubstantiated, as Nigel denies the incident and the evidence, including a sworn affidavit from the Revier doctor, states that Frederica’s wound was a barbed wire tear.

Whilst Frederica’s refusal to present a cohesive story is exploited by the opposing lawyers, the relief she feels in having spoken her mind correlates directly with her experience of the legal narrative. When Frederica speaks her mind here, she subverts the adversarial narrative required by the legal system; the characterisation of each party as solely victim or perpetrator does not adequately represent the ambivalences of her marriage. The “justice” Frederica feels she needs to enact by representing the marriage as accurately as possible is also gendered. Discussing the intimidation abused women may feel when in court, Sandra Bartky observes that there are many factors that may replicate the abuse the woman initially suffered (*Battered* 57). Bartky argues that judges can and do reconfirm patriarchal values in their judgement of and treatment of women in the courtroom: “and the improper moral or therapeutic stance taken by some judges may only confirm the woman’s suspicion that she has brought all this on herself, that she has somehow failed to be a good wife, something the batterer too would have her believe” (61). Frederica’s powerful impulse to

figure the marriage as her fault, but to conceive it as “justice” to the truth of the marriage, can be refigured in the light of Bartky’s analysis.

The concept of justice is an abstract construct that elides the gendered discourse that produces it. Like Stephanie in the birth narrative in *Still Life*, Frederica is the instrument of her own subjection in the legal narrative. In Foucauldian terms, Frederica reproduces in herself the values of patriarchy that Nigel has subjected her to and she will of course feel it is her fault that the marriage has failed. During their marriage, Nigel used a range of disciplinary techniques to ensure Frederica’s submission to him. Nigel is often away from the house for work, but leaves and returns without a predictable pattern. However, in Nigel’s absence, his sisters and Leo’s nanny become his surrogates in the surveillance of Frederica’s behaviour. Whilst there are a number of references to the family watching Frederica, it is the pervasiveness of the surveillance that is significant and its normalising effect. The abnormality of Frederica receiving a letter is marked by the family watching her, implying judgement (*Babel* 77). Answering the letters feels like a transgression of how she should behave, showing that Frederica has internalised Nigel’s rules: “she fans out the postcards so they can see how little she has written” (87). There are a number of other examples of surveillance in the text, such as the inhabitants of Bran House standing around the phone-box watching Frederica (103) or when Leo accompanies Frederica’s friends on their walk to prevent Frederica from talking about her life with her friends (109).

Alfer and de Campos note the gendered motivation of the hearings, emphasising the inability of language to represent the truth (72). Frederica’s refusal to narrate her story in the way required by the law is a protest against its restrictions on both subjectivity and gender. Paul John Eakin finds that self-

narration is characterised by a rule-governed system that is usually navigated without conscious input: “after years of practice, we operate on automatic pilot; we know the identity protocols by heart. The working of the system becomes visible, however, when memory fails and narrative competence collapses, or when self-narration is deliberately refused” (*Living* 23). Although Frederica cannot refuse self-narration in the trial, she can resist the system of self-narration by refusing to manipulate narrative, as the lawyers do. However, as will be seen, this does not work in her favour.

The full irony of the legal narrative constructed by Ounce and Nigel’s family is not available to the reader until the lawyers’ summations. Ounce’s summation is a masterpiece pastiche of literary tropes, employing literary conventions to represent the marriage: “[Nigel] believed that they would marry and live happily ever after, that the princess would become lady of the manor and live as her predecessors had lived” (*Babel* 516). Ounce states that Frederica was unstable and having found Nigel’s pornography “the story is now Bluebeard’s Castle, the grisly exhibits have been duly viewed in the cupboard” (516).

Nigel’s lawyer deflects attention from the untruths told by Nigel and his family by suggesting it is against the balance of probability that they have closed ranks and made up a *story*: “are we to believe that these taciturn, church-going ladies – ‘tweedy and boring,’ as they put it themselves, got together and concocted a foolproof coherent story? And that they then suborned the excellent Dr Roylance to commit perjury?” (517). Ounce’s deflection is ironic because he represents Frederica as lost in a story, accused of reading too much and therefore unable to tell fact from fantasy; but his defence is a conventional story based on deliberate distortions of the facts and

outright lies. Frederica is accused of concocting a fantasy but has told the truth about the events, rejecting her defence to be told as a story that could be convincing, as she feels that a defence using narrative tropes would be akin to lying. The final remarks, that it is unlikely the tweedy Reviers have concocted a story, deflect back to Frederica again: “No, the unstable, creative imagination, the *literary cleverness* is all Mrs Revier’s” (517; emphasis original). The genius of the summation here is that it entirely discounts Frederica, using her intelligence and literary brilliance against her, whilst, in comparison, Ounce’s clients look “prosaic” (517).

The combination of the manufactured evidence and the narrative construction of that evidence means that Frederica loses the divorce hearing. The judge remarks that: “the higher education of women has in many ways, I have observed, been very hard upon both men and women. It has encouraged skills and raised expectations which society as it is at present constituted is incapable of fulfilling or satisfying – skills and expectations perhaps incompatible with the fulfilled life of wife and mother” (519). The key point in terms of the judgement which is made, however, is that the judge believes that other women in Frederica’s situation, as it has been represented to him, might have been “more patient, more tractable, more resourceful” (519), whereas Frederica ran away. Whilst the axe attack is the impetus for Frederica’s flight, the way in which the evidence has been manufactured, as well as the representation of Frederica’s character, casts doubt on the veracity of the attack.

On the one hand, mediating Frederica’s understanding of her marriage are the doctrines of patriarchy that conceptualise a wife within certain bounds, which Frederica feels she has transgressed and therefore caused the marriage

to fail. On the other hand, Frederica complicates truth production in the trial, by rejecting a coherent narrative that is a deliberate and manipulatively partial representation of the marriage. Truth-production is, as Leigh Gilmore observes, masculinist: “truth is marked as a cultural production entwined with our notions of gender so completely that even the structural underpinnings of truth production are masculinist” (“Policing” 57) and is manifested in the rules of confession and the role of men as judges. Frederica is alienated from the court and the masculinist form of truth it both constructs and requires. She protests against this masculinist bias by refusing to narrate herself in their terms. Instead of a coherent and partial narrative, Frederica tells a narrative that reflects her multiple perspectives of her marriage, although these narratives not only conflict but are also constructed by internalised patriarchal ideology. She refuses the style of self-narration that would construct a coherent and stable identity that is coterminous with the portrayal of selfhood in legal discourse. Frederica’s conceptualisation of her subjectivity is multiple, as will be discussed below in relation to her non-narrative writing that protests against the form of truth and narrative conventions employed in the legal narrative.

The situation is slightly different for the custody hearing, although it is the same judge. As predicted by Frederica’s lawyers during the divorce hearing, the judge has indeed noticed the hostility from Nigel’s family towards Frederica. Although “the biological presumption that [Frederica] would care for the child” (*Babel* 598) is doubted, Frederica bears no resentment towards the other women who care for Leo, which the judge finds encouraging. The final decision, however, rests with the judge’s assessment of what Leo wants: which is to stay with his mother and so the judge grants custody to Frederica.



Frederica's experiments with fragmented writing parallel the legal narrative and these form another aspect of her rejection of conventional narratives. The text which becomes Frederica's book, *Laminations*, is a collection of quotations, derived in part from William S. Burroughs' cut-up technique. Burroughs' statement of the purpose and meaning of cut-ups is quoted in *Babel*: "all writing in is fact cut-ups. A collage of words read overheard. What else? Use of scissors renders the process explicit and subject to extension and variation" (379). Frederica juxtaposes and recontextualises various quotations. Initially, her attempts at cut-ups are a direct response to the legal narrative, and her first cut-up is of a letter from Nigel's lawyers:

Lawyers are concerned to make unambiguous statements with unquestionable conclusions; Frederica's cut-up has therefore less beauty than a cut-up of some richer text might have, but it does approximate to a satisfactory representation of her confusion, of her distress, of her sense that the apparent irrefutable clarity of Nigel's solicitor's arguments is nonsense in her world. (379)

Jack Stewart characterises Frederica's cut-ups as an impetus to construct order in the chaotic 1960s, working within a new form to represent a changed reality: "Frederica's *Laminations* reflect the incoherence around and within herself and her desperate need to impose some kind of order" (*Ekphrasis* 501). Whilst this is no doubt part of the premise of *Laminations*, Frederica's concept of writing in this way also relates to her subjectivity: "she has had the idea that she is many women in one – a mother, a wife, a lover, a watcher, and that it might be possible to construct a kind of plait of voices, with different rhythms and vocabularies" (*Babel* 462). Rather than striving for the connection and oneness characterised by Frederica's lectures on D.H Lawrence and E.M Forster (305-

13), Frederica's subjectivity is multiple in *Babel* and responds to the widening definitions of the self in the 1960s. Mark Freeman notes that Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault "each of whom, in his own way, has sought both to 'de-substantialize' the self – that is, to show why it is not to be regarded as a thing, a bounded entity – and to situate it within the texture of discourse itself, which is where it is most often thought to belong" (12). Frederica's identification of multiple subject positions is indicative of her placement within different contexts and discourses, contrasting sharply with the coherent and unified selves required by the legal narrative. It is therefore consistent that the judge finds the evidence from characters who present themselves as having a unified identity is the most persuasive. Frederica's inconsistent evidence aligns with her multiple and conflicting subject positions. Frederica's *Laminations* therefore respond to the unified identity imposed by the legal narrative by, eventually, using narrative to deconstruct that identity. As such, it is a method of resistance to the norms that the legal narrative projects upon her.

Steveker notes that Frederica's thought process that leads to *Laminations* is inherently gendered, aimed as it is on keeping things separate rather than connected in an image of Lawrentian oneness (51). Byatt's female characters, for Steveker, are portrayed in a constant battle with the social and biological effects of gender that threaten female autonomy. These are formulated as a dichotomy by Steveker: "female identity is defined as depending on an inherently paradoxical relation between the female need for a separate self and the diametrically opposed experience of bonding" (54). The implication of Steveker's argument is that Byatt's characters do not resolve this paradox; her argument can be developed further through my analysis of the discursive construction of gendered subjectivity in Byatt's fiction.

Whilst the female characters are portrayed as caught in a dichotomy that defines them by their relationships whereas they attempt to exert their autonomy, Byatt's fiction does not reproduce the dichotomy uncritically. Byatt's fiction is historically specific and represents the patriarchal power relations of the setting but she also writes her female characters as resisting those power relations. Cosslett describes Stephanie's narrative in *Still Life* as characterised by "decline and defeat" (*Childbirth* 265), whereas my analysis in Chapter 2 emphasises Stephanie's resistance to the dehumanising disciplinary practices in the hospital. The process of cut-ups in *Babel* is part of Frederica's resistance to the imposed norms and gendered identities in the legal narrative.

## 2. *A Whistling Woman*, Gender and Narrative Strategies of Resistance

From the outset, *Whistling* restages *Babel*'s battle for self-representation in the rejection of normative gender roles which are imposed on the female characters. As *Whistling* progresses, different strategies of gendered self-representation are employed within the embedded texts, offering ways to resist normative gender roles. These strategies of representation build on the limited resistance to gender norms demonstrated by the rejection of narrative in Frederica's *Laminations*. In *Whistling*, parody is used to reshape the female cultural narrative so that it encompasses effective female agency.

The key embedded texts for this section are Agatha Mond's fantasy novel, *Flight North*, and Frederica's television programme, *Through the Looking-Glass*. Agatha's novel opens *Whistling* with an ambivalent image of female agency, suggesting that woman can only use power in the way a man does by separating from society. My analysis of Frederica's television programme demonstrates that women can have agency in society by

marshalling techniques of representation, such as parody and simulation, to undermine and subvert patriarchal representations of women.

Byatt situates the resistance of her female characters to patriarchal representations of women within her depiction of the historical context of 1960s Britain. The ideology of the “permissive society” is found in various contexts in *Whistling* and does not simply coincide with sexual mores: “permissiveness was about more than simply personal and sexual morality [. . .] it included such things as autonomy and individualism” (Donnelly 123). Byatt’s 1960s setting affords wider opportunities to women than in the previous Quartet novels: the female characters have a louder public voice and a more visible public presence (for example, in Frederica’s television programme) and wider career opportunities. In the Quartet up to this point, the reader has seen women study English Literature almost exclusively and, if they have had careers, those careers have to be abandoned on marriage, such as in the case of Winifred, Stephanie and Jenny Parry in *Virgin*, and Frederica in *Babel*. In *Whistling*, the reader sees women studying and pursuing careers in science. Jacqueline’s scientific studies in *Babel* evolve into a career in *Whistling* and Brenda’s social science research, although briefly encountered in *Babel*, is represented in detail in *Whistling*. Jacqueline and Brenda come up against institutionalised gender bias in their research careers, and Frederica explores the gender bias in her television programme “Free Women.”

The “permissive society” was not as pervasive or new as the myth of the 1960s suggests. Arthur Marwick cites Geoffrey Gorer’s study, *Sex and Marriage in England Today*, published in 1971: “Gorer’s general finding supported the view that sexual permissiveness was very far from rampant in the late sixties” (*British* 170), adding “however, the signs clearly are of a definite trend away

from older social controls” (170). The counter-culture movement in the 1960s appears to embody the new freedoms. Donnelly states that it concerned: “idealism about self-fulfilment, free expression, communal values, racial and sexual politics, a clean environment, the nature of work and the opening-up of cultural spaces” (124). Byatt, however, represents the contradictions inherent in the apparent freedoms, utopianism and anti-conservatism of the counter-culture and its reinforcement of patriarchal gender roles. Donnelly states that “feminists also saw that the narrative of the counter-culture was male-dominated and that its ideal of ‘sexual liberation’ was typically defined on men’s terms” (130).

Carmen Lara Rallo considers the effect of counter-cultural ideology in Byatt’s work, exploring concepts of utopia and dystopia in Jude’s *Babbletower*, the embedded text in *Babel* that is tried for obscenity, and the cult in *Whistling*. Rallo cites *Babbletower*’s questioning of sexuality in the 1960s (*Utopia* 90-1) and how technological advances may risk destruction of the planet in both novels (91-2). Rallo’s perspective can be extended as she does not comment on the gender bias in the cult, seeing Brenda Pincher’s sociological letters, written to her colleague about the cult’s development, as impartial, particularly when contrasted with Elvet Gander’s subjective account in his own letters to a colleague (89). However, Brenda’s letters focus on gender roles in the cult through her sociological analysis. Brenda is certainly more impartial than Gander, but she recognises that her participation in the group is not neutral and may affect what she observes:

I present myself as a person desiring to participate in a group, indeed, to be a member of that group. I do not present myself as a sociologist studying the methodology by which the group defines itself, pursues its aims, achieves its coherence, etc. etc. If I did so,

I would change the dynamics of the group so that it was not what I was observing, or what I wished to observe. However, it could be argued that my very presence as a group member is not neutral. I am a visible woman, not an invisible “bug” on the wall of the jury-room. (*Whistling* 193)

Brenda is not identified explicitly as a feminist, but she continually analyses gender dynamics in the group. From Brenda’s letters, the reader can see that male members lead the direction of the discussion about the group’s purpose, certainly in the initial stages of the establishment of the group – demonstrating that language is coterminous with male power. As the group develops into a cult, the women decrease in agency and are further relegated to traditional female societal roles, such as cooking and sewing, whilst the direction of the group’s purpose remains with the male leader. In this way, Byatt demonstrates the tendency of the counter-culture to reproduce patriarchal gender roles for women and its hierarchal power structure.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, emphasise the importance of recognising and analysing that negative male representations of women are “mythic masks” (16-17). Gilbert and Gubar have produced a powerful analysis of how the female writer has been constructed by patriarchal discourse.<sup>25</sup> The analysis they make is illuminating for *Whistling*, given its late 1960s setting and that the novel begins with an ambivalent image of female agency in a female authored embedded text, Agatha’s *Flight North*. Agatha’s story problematises female agency, as it appears to suggest that women can choose to be powerful and free or to live in society as wives and mothers. Women cannot be both in society as it is currently figured. This is an

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the limitations of Gilbert and Gubar’s work.

ambivalent message for a woman who tells this story to her daughter, although the Quartet up to this point confirms its relevance. Despite the ambivalent representation of women in *Flight North* that confronts the reader at the start of *Whistling*, Byatt then explores the ways in which women can have agency as well as being wives and mothers throughout the novel.

In *Flight North*, the Whistlers' song or speech is rumoured to be deadly, although one of the protagonists, Artegall, intuits that he may be able to interpret their speech. In deciphering the Whistlers' speech, Artegall learns that they were women who were confined to a valley and performed domestic tasks as well as teaching children, whilst the men of their society had magic which enabled them to transform into animals and roam widely. The Whistlers charmed a student into giving them the secret of the magic and they shapeshifted into birds, but they were eventually discovered and banished from their society for their assumption of male magic and their transgression of gender roles.

The Whistlers are an embodiment of violent female agency, although it is a violence which arises from miscommunication rather than deliberate harm. Given the choice to live as bird-women hybrids or to return to society in a position with no agency, the Whistlers chose freedom. *Flight North* constructs a binary from the image of the Whistlers which is ambivalent at best. Women may have agency but will be unrecognisable as women, denied the normalised female roles of fulfilment through marriage and motherhood and are so changed that their language cannot be understood. The Whistlers present the reader with a binary that stages the position of women in the novel, foregrounding language and communication as part of the image. In restaging the problematic of female agency in *Babel*, the image of the Whistlers demonstrates that representation is

not in female control. The Whistlers are determined by the stories about them, although Artegall considers that the stories might misrepresent the bird-women and is successful in his efforts to bridge the language barrier. The Whistlers' misunderstood language stands for their condition as women with agency, literally untranslatable as the people who cast them out do not comprehend female agency.

The Whistlers carry Artegall and his companions to the outskirts of Veralden to see the travellers' kinsmen, which is the society the Whistlers were driven from when their magic was discovered. The travellers are welcomed into the city and recognised by the King and the story ends. The characters listening to *Flight North* feel cheated as many of the story threads are not definitely concluded. For the reader of *Whistling*, *Flight North* has a deep ambivalence. Through the story of the Whistlers, it is implied that the travellers are safe, if they agree to a social contract and do not transgress the conventions of the city. Safety in Veralden comes at the price of female agency.

In the end, the Whistlers' bodies define them. As women with female coded bodies, the Whistlers must submit to the social contract in Veralden. They may appropriate male power, but they are expelled from the community and are no longer women. The Whistlers are an embodiment of the mind / body split in Cartesian duality that privileges mind and aligns women with the lesser term, the body. Steveker states that the patriarchal alignment of women with the body and men with the mind is a recurrent theme in the Quartet (70). In *Whistling*, Frederica's decision to renounce acting in favour of intellectual pursuits is considered by Steveker as an act that "undermines the gendered dichotomy of body and mind" (72) but "reinforces the hierarchical categorisation of Neoplatonism by privileging mind over body" (72). Steveker continues that



Frederica in some ways bridges the mind / body split through finding professional success and a personal relationship with Luk, who respects her mind but that in “representing the pregnant body as ‘naturally’ opposed to the mind, Byatt’s tetralogy eventually fails to deconstruct the gendered dichotomy of body and mind” (73).

Two points can be made in response to Steveker. First, that Byatt is representing female characters set within historically specific conditions and that the possibility of female agency must be represented from within those conditions, as the novels pre-date second-wave feminism. Second, in Byatt’s fiction a key determinant of female agency is the portrayal of women taking control of language, representation and narrative, challenging patriarchy by giving women a voice to denaturalise their subordinate position. To demonstrate the way in which women can gain control of representation to construct alternative subject positions, Byatt’s fiction speaks from within patriarchy to show how it can be dismantled.

As a result, Byatt’s fiction is constructed around a paradox and is the same concept Hutcheon perceives in postmodernism: “this is the paradox of art forms that want to (or feel they have to) speak to a culture from inside it, that believes this to be the only way to reach that culture and make it question its values and its self-constructing representations” (*Politics* 13). As Hutcheon demonstrates, art forms which speak from within the culture they seek to question are easy to align with that culture: it is possible that the complicity with that culture is seen as the dominating element of the art form without noting the questioning critique. The same mechanism is at work in Byatt’s fiction. It is easy to perceive the elements of Byatt’s fiction which are complicit with patriarchy and bourgeois values, such as Byatt’s use of realism as a form. However, the

element of critique in Byatt's fiction is significant, if subtle at times. This is what I will address next: the ways in which *Whistling* offers a dissenting voice to patriarchy, through the self-representation of women who analyse and gain control of their image in narrative.

Byatt's characters must be adept readers of the feminine cultural narrative in patriarchy. The female characters are subject to patriarchal values, such as in Frederica's divorce hearing in *Babel*, and try to dismantle patriarchal representations of women by their attempts to represent women differently. Giving women a voice to effect that change requires an understanding of how women are represented in patriarchy and why that representation has power. Patriarchy can then be exposed as a cultural construction.

The women in *Whistling* are repeatedly subject to patriarchal standards for women and limiting gender roles: this is dramatised particularly clearly through Jacqueline's narrative which is threaded throughout the novel. Jacqueline's work and body are appropriated by her male supervisor, Lyon Bowman; she is invited to a conference and has to confront a sexual bargain: "Jacqueline had heard about Lyon Bowman's conference invitations to women graduates. Like a cockerel in a farmyard, one woman had said, crossly, having locked her bedroom door and failed to advance her career" (*Whistling* 164). She is offered introductions to research groups in place of genuine career development (414). The language Byatt uses to represent Jacqueline suggests that Bowman assumes he has the right to access her body and research; she is "a see-through implement, that was all" (361). Jacqueline is see-through because her results are taken with no credit given to her but also because her body makes her an object. She does not exist as a speaking subject.

The problem that the women in Byatt's fiction face is how to deal with the fact that, as Moi states, "in patriarchal culture the feminine *as such* [...] is repressed; it returns only in its 'acceptable' form as man's specularized Other" (*Sexual* 134). Like Hutcheon's characterisation of postmodern fiction, in that it has to speak from *within* the culture it critiques, Moi finds that:

We have to accept our position as already inserted into an order that precedes us and from which there is no escape. There is no *other space* from which we can speak: if we are able to speak at all, it will have to be from within the framework of symbolic language. (170; emphasis original)

One way out of this apparent impasse is to appropriate strategies of representation and use them to subvert patriarchal ideology. Moi states that Luce Irigaray's mimicry of male discourse could be productively disruptive: "hers is a theatrical staging of the mime: miming the miming imposed on woman, Irigaray's subtle specular move (her mimicry *mirrors* that of all women) intends to *undo* the effects of phallogocentric discourse simply by overdoing them" (140; emphasis original). This strategy, however, is not always effective: "for what she seems not to notice is that sometimes a woman imitating male discourse *is* just a woman speaking like a man: Margaret Thatcher is a case in point. It is the *political context* of such mimicry that is surely always decisive" (143; emphasis original).

In *Whistling*, Byatt uses forms of mimicry and parody to destabilise cultural representations of women and denaturalise patriarchal definitions of femininity. Hutcheon states that parody in postmodernism has been seen as "value-free" and a "de-historicised quotation of past forms" (*Politics* 94). However, Hutcheon repositions parody as "a value-problematizing, de-

naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations” (94). On Frederica’s television programme, Byatt’s parody and mimicry of female conversation in a patriarchal context denaturalises the values of its context, politicising the conversation. Frederica’s television programme episode “Free Women” discusses how femininity is represented in culture and the lack of agency female characters have within patriarchy. The programme is a parody of how women speak amongst themselves and forms a space in which women’s voices have primacy; the characters can state dissatisfaction with how women have been represented in patriarchy. The content of the television programme demonstrates the limitations of gender roles and offers possibilities for change through reclaiming representation, by destabilising the naturalised order patriarchy requires. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby state that “Foucault’s analytics of power reminds us that we are not totally encapsulated by the prevailing discourse” (201) and that “it is important to continue to expose and reveal those languages that center on mastery and monolithic identity, as well to seek languages that evoke a fuller range of our senses, emotions, intellect, and imagination” (201-2). The women on the television programme implicitly analyse such languages that identify women with a monolithic identity under patriarchy and Byatt illustrates that the language of parody offers a way to resist such alignments.

The premise of “Free Women” originates with Frederica, who takes her inspiration “from the sections of the *Golden Notebook* about Molly and Anna, the women living alone, or with children, without men” (*Whistling* 139). The guests are Penny Komuves, journalist, and Julia Corbett, novelist, the latter reprising the character of Julia in *The Game*. Wilkie is the producer and determines that the programme should show how women talk when they are

alone. The result is a “knowing parody, a send-up of a *kaffee-klatsch*” (142). Although the section that describes the programme is short, covering nine pages, it offers the participants and other female characters who watch it a way to denaturalise the kinds of speaking positions offered to them under patriarchy. Part of the parody of the programme arises from the fact that Wilkie wants the women to talk as women talk when they are not observed. However, parody and mimicry pervade every aspect of the “Free Women” programme, from the slightly self-conscious women trying to talk as if they are alone, to the tenor of their observations of female gender roles, to the set itself, which is a “mock kitchen” (182). The mock kitchen has a table covered with a “pink and white, imitation damask, plastic cloth” (141). The set compounds the artificiality of the naturalised domestic roles of women that they discuss when the programme commences.

I want to draw attention to a further layer of complexity in the parody constituted by the set. Not only does the set point to the artificiality of the naturalised domestic roles of women in *society* more widely but also of those roles within the Quartet itself. The variety of outmoded objects on the table, “a heaped collection of precise silver instruments (mostly tarnished) for performing arcane operations” (141), along with the plastic imitation damask tablecloth directly refers back to the Potter household and Frederica’s mother, Winifred. In *Virgin*, Winifred has another such table cloth that “imitated, with unnatural cunning, white rosy damask” (*Virgin* 38). In *Still Life*, Winifred is shown as sitting at the table during meals, contemplating the objects on the table, “small objects with very limited functions” (*Still Life* 146), thinking about her life and that all her children have now left the home. The objects “made her life appear to correspond with some ordered, ideal form, some series of ceremonies to which

the proper utensils lent authenticity and grace” (147). “Free Women” parodies Winifred’s experience in the novels, albeit recast in a knowing parody that gives women a language in which to speak. Winifred does not have access to such a language and is portrayed throughout the earlier books as often silent and powerless.<sup>26</sup>

The set is contrasted to the object chosen for discussion, a Tupperware bowl that is described as “liberating. Look – she gestured – at all that mess on the table, all that fussy silver-cleaning, all that enslavement to objects” (*Whistling* 145). Julia associates the bowl with labour-saving devices: “these go with machines that do give us time, if we can use it” (145). Julia is a novelist and writes at home whilst the machine washes, although recognising, to an extent, the limitation of such devices as they only save time for those who work in the home. Alan Sinfield notes that a further issue with labour-saving devices is that “many didn’t have these aids, and, apart from washing machines, they helped relatively little with looking after infants” (207). In her analysis of housework in *More Work for Mother*, Ruth Schwartz Cowan finds that the increase of labour-saving devices in the home obscures changes in the conventions and frequency of housework, as well as the effect of the disappearance of servants (for middle-class households).

Writing about the United States in the 1980s, Cowan reports that housewives spend on average of 50 hours a week on housework and women

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<sup>26</sup> Two notable exceptions to Winifred’s lack of power and voice are represented in *Virgin* and *Still*. In *Virgin*, Winifred organises Stephanie’s wedding (defying Bill’s opposition to the marriage) and she also shouts at Bill in *Still Life* saying that he has driven their son away. Neither event particularly changes her marital relations or situation; life only becomes easier for Winifred when Bill retires and mellows in *Babel*.

who work outside the home spend 35 hours (200). Although labour is saved by machinery, this is off-set by an increase in productivity (193) and frequency of cleaning (12), resulting in no decrease in the time involved in housework.

Cowan aptly analyses the ideological conditioning that determines the frequency of cleaning and the necessity of having a spotless house, as perceived dirt is associated with the fear of poverty (214). The practicalities of domesticity are a problem for women if they want to live on their own and work. Frederica observes “we’d need servants. If we had children. What would *they* choose. You can’t labour-save *all* labour” (*Whistling* 146; emphasis original). Frederica’s statement, however, applies to middle-class women, as working-class women have almost always worked outside the home, but such a statement reflects the realities of housework and childminding in the twentieth-century, given the amount of hours still devoted to it.

It is not simply the practicalities of living alone and childrearing that are a problem for women but also whether it is right for mothers to work and leave their children with other people. Penny writes articles for this generation of women who are educated but are subjected to older models of femininity, specialising in “articles about the new anxieties of female graduates, who found themselves alone in kitchens with infant children, admonished by experts like Bowlby that any prolonged separation between mother and child might damage the latter’s development irrevocably” (140). Sinfield explains that psychologist John Bowlby’s work was part of the ideology of domesticity required to ensure that women went back to the home after the Second World War (204).<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>27</sup> See also Cowan on the representation of working wives, as part of this ideology: blamed for increases in a number of areas; juvenile delinquency in the 1950s, divorce in the 1960s and male impotence in the 1970s (203).

ideology of domesticity in the West therefore naturalises a particular family configuration, constructing the myth of maternal deprivation to ensure women stay in the home.

Catherine Hall's feminist history describes the analysis of the family by feminist critics: "feminist politics in the 1970s was inevitably very preoccupied with the place of the family, attempting to understand the extent to which women's oppression, to use the language of the 1970s, was rooted in the family" (15). In *Whistling*, Byatt personalises the effect of the ideology of domesticity and motherhood by refracting it through female characters who discuss the cultural ramifications of such ideology. Byatt reifies the ideology of domesticity in the set of "Free Women." As Campbell observes, "the set itself, with its allusive doll's home and its conglomeration of objects denoting women's domestic roles, asserts that only the externals of women's lives have changed" (*Heliotropic* 253). However, I read the set of "Free Women" as part of the language of parody that can be appropriated by women. To deconstruct the representation of domesticity and femininity through parody, Byatt's fiction suggests, is to reclaim representation and affect power relations by undermining patriarchal imagery of women.

The women on "Free Women" not only discuss the ideology of domesticity and socio-economics but also the representation of women in culture. Nancy Fraser's article on social justice states that both socio-economic distribution and cultural recognition are necessary to achieve justice, which is illuminating for the discussions on the "Free Women" programme, as "overcoming androcentrism and sexism requires changing the cultural valuations (as well as their legal and practical expressions) that privilege masculinity and deny equal respect to women. It requires decentring



androcentric norms and revaluing a despised gender” (79). Fraser’s ideas are illuminating for the historical context of *Whistling*. Although legislation was beginning to redress gender inequality in the late 1960s, cultural gender bias against women persisted. The women on the television programme note that in animals “male beauty is determined by female sexual selection” (*Whistling* 142) and that society ritualises female beauty through “women’s magazines, women’s advertisements, with women’s bodies decorated for men to look at” (142). The women denaturalise the ritualisation of female beauty, which in conjunction with motherhood defines women by their bodies, by positing what women would look for in a male beauty pageant. The reversal demonstrates that the cultural construction of femininity that aligns it with the body, rather than the mind, is arbitrary and not natural. Although it is arbitrary in itself, the mind / body split is a way, as seen in the birth narrative in *Still Life*, that women are deprived of power and agency.

On the episode “Free Women,” Frederica and her guests are adept readers of how femininity is represented in culture; the women reinforce their discussion of how women are defined by their bodies through their analysis of George Eliot. Julia says that Eliot punishes her beautiful characters, although Frederica counters that “she punished those who *exploited* it, who *lived by it*. Hetty, cold Rosamund, chilly, terrified, power-crazed Gwendolen. Her warm-blooded heroines were beautiful too” (144; emphasis original). The distinction made by Frederica is significant: George Eliot punishes those characters who accept the patriarchal dictate that a woman is defined by her body and therefore must live by it. As the discussion continues, the “warm-blooded heroines” are noted as being punished as well: Maggie by drowning for her emotion, and Dorothy for “high-mindedness”, who “decline[s] into a marriage with a second-rate

journalist” (144). They ask why Eliot could not make characters who were “free, and creative, and sexy” (144), like Eliot herself was. Frederica suggests it is because Eliot representing “how clever women’s lives *were*” (144; emphasis original).

In summing up, Frederica observes that the female body, for characters in Victorian literature, is highly problematic: “female characters in Victorian fiction are wise, and attractive, and human as little girls, and become monsters, demons, or victims, when they become women. Jane Eyre and Maggie are *diminished* by womanhood” (146; emphasis original). It is arguable that this is a necessary conceptualisation of the female body under patriarchy: by positioning the mature female body of the once-wise little girl as monstrous, it is Othered and so intellect is constructed as unnatural to the female role. The culture of patriarchy enshrines the meek and non-intellectual female as natural and the intelligent female as a monster.

In *Whistling*, the ironic counterpoint to the programme “Free Women” is that the women “were all girl-women. It was in the air, at the time,” with schoolgirl like fringes, make-up which is “doll-like,” wearing dresses resembling school gym-slips (146, 147). The narrator remarks that “there were equal elements of dressing-up, parody (of what?) and mask” (147). Whilst it is ironic that the women are dressed girlishly when discussing how to live as women, it forms part of the “eclectic Sixties parodies” (*Still Life* 5), recasting the prologue from 1968 in *Virgin*. In contrast, in the prologue to *Virgin*, Alexander considers the parodies of the military clothes and flower-people: “was it all a considered ‘statement’ [...] about accommodated and unaccommodated man?” (*Virgin* 9). Alexander is unsure and dislikes parody. However, for the women in *Whistling*, the parody of gender demonstrates the naturalised attributes of gender roles

and enables them to question patriarchal representations of women which perpetuate the gender divide.

In *Whistling*, the “Free Women” episode is, in some ways, a formalised version of the conversation in *Babel* that Frederica hears outside her lawyer’s office, where two women discuss their marriages. The overheard women talk about how their husbands appear to believe that anything they think about must be “trivial and somehow demeaning” (*Babel* 280). The gendered narrative that Frederica overhears constructs women’s speech as nagging, imposing trivial concerns on the male mind: “I tell him, I don’t want my brain cluttered with questions you can’t be bothered to listen to or answer, I could think important thoughts if I didn’t have to remember every trivial thing for you” (280). The women are not given names and are seen only in terms of their clothing. They are an example of “an archetypal, anonymous female narrative” (281) that cannot be heard by men, as the language does not reflect male concerns back to them. The narrative Frederica overhears is a reification of women’s position under patriarchy:

Caught in the specular logic of patriarchy, women can choose either to remain silent, producing incomprehensible babble (any utterance that falls outside the logic of the same will by definition be incomprehensible to the male master discourse) or to *enact* the specular representation of herself as a lesser male. (Moi, *Sexual* 135)

Carolyn G. Heilbrun restates the issue Moi describes in slightly different terms: “woman is thus offered, on the one hand, exclusion from (patriarchal) language itself or, on the other, a circumspection within the feminine domain of language, a domain that ‘in fact marks the place of women’s oppression and confinement”

(41). One way out of this is for women to talk to each other: “women must turn to one another for stories, they must share the stories of their lives and their hopes and their unacceptable fantasies” (44). Whilst feminist criticism has moved on, as I noted in Chapter 1, the feminist texts I reference here are relevant to Byatt’s fiction as their publication and reception coincide with the historical period in which the novels are set and thus she can be seen to engage with the concepts that Heilbrun and Moi analyse. The television programme “Free Women” is an analogue, to an extent, of feminist consciousness-raising: the women discuss the socio-economic conditions of women and share their thoughts on the problems women face. Of course, the novel predates the codification and rise in publication attention of feminist consciousness-raising. However, the point Byatt makes here is that it is necessary to speak of women’s oppression, to show how power operates in patriarchal images of women and to provide a strategy to resist such oppression through the way that the women speak.

Ellen Messer-Davidow, writing in 1995, analyses how consciousness-raising functions. She observes that as women shared stories from their lives, they discovered common features and by analysing those commonalities, they found ways of fighting oppression (36). One of the commonalities that the women discovered was the male tendency to dismiss female lives and concerns as trivial. The designation of triviality is then recognised by the women as a feature of the patriarchal control of women that assigns femininity a lower value than masculinity. The shared recognition is analysed by Messer-Davidow as a “click” of identification: “the ‘click’ is a complex articulation that overloads ‘triviality’ with meaning: their similar experiences and feelings about them, their attunement, their change in affect and insight – revealed the pervasiveness of

women's denigration and allowed a symptomatic reading of patriarchy" (41). On "Free Women", as well as the conversation Frederica overhears in *Babel*, shared experiences present the possibility of a "click" of recognition, analogous to consciousness-raising.

Jana Sawicki notes that the choice that women have under patriarchy – to speak in phallogocentric discourse or to remain silent – is altered by Foucault's analytics of power: "he would have rejected the view that the power of phallogocentric discourse is total. Instead, for Foucault, discourse is ambiguous and plurivocal. It is a site of conflict and contestation. Thus, women can adopt and adapt language to their own ends" (1). This is precisely the strategy *Whistling* represents: that language can be adapted to women's needs. Sawicki finds in particular that consciousness-raising is compatible with Foucault's critique of humanism, as "destabilization of identity is often the most profound effect of consciousness raising, not the creation of a unified sense of self" (104).<sup>28</sup> What Byatt offers in *Whistling*, and to a lesser extent in *Babel*, are ways by which women can question, resist and reclaim their representation in a phallogocentric system.

### 3. Rereading Endings

*Whistling* is the final novel of the series and thus concludes the Quartet, but several factors suggest that the ending of *Whistling* itself should be read as provisional and with caution. Whilst the narrative order of events ends on the

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<sup>28</sup> Ellen Messer-Davidow also finds that consciousness-raising can alter female subjectivity when women discover shared experiences (a "match" in their views): "my point here is not merely that these women experienced a match or even that it moved them from depression to elation, but that such attunements, through repetition, were an articulatory practice that could lead to the reconstitution of subjectivity" (39).

last page of *Whistling*, set in 1970, the prologue to *Still Life* is set in 1980. The proleptic structure of *Virgin* and *Still Life* affect how the ending of *Whistling* should be interpreted, given that the prologue of *Still Life* takes place *after* the events of *Whistling*. As Campbell observes, “linearity is disrupted: any concept of beginnings and endings is called into question” (*Heliotropic* 67). The ending of each novel is deliberately open and non-teleological. *Virgin* ends with an image of stasis, Daniel giving Frederica tea whilst Stephanie and Marcus sit, utterly inactive: “that was not an end, but since it went on for a considerable time, is as good a place to stop as any” (*Virgin* 566). *Still Life* ends with a different tea party situation, as Alexander gives Daniel coffee. Jack Stewart interprets this ending as ironic; it “symbolizes revitalization, with the complementary colors, blue and gold, forming a Dionysian-Apollonian harmony and the contrasting men, dark and light, forming a human bond” (*Color* 234). *Babel* ends with the last pages of an embedded text, *Babbletower*, showing the wise characters who foresaw the implosion of community walking away from the tower: “and they went on walking, and if the Krebs did not catch up with them, they are walking still” (617). None of these endings resolves the novel, either in themes or form.

Mark Currie quotes Hayden White’s argument that narrativity and endings in historical writing make “events meaningful, especially in moral terms” (*Postmodern* 67). Currie observes that although he is discussing historical narrative, “White identifies a function of closure that historiographic metafictionalists have exploited for its critical insight: that endings are ways of projecting values onto events, rendering the remainder of the narrative sequence intelligible in retrospect” (67). Currie’s point applies to Byatt’s fiction as she avoids closure in the Quartet novels. No particular moral can be inferred

from her endings as the chronological end to the Quartet does not coincide with the last page of *Whistling* because Byatt uses proleptic techniques. The endings also avoid moralising as it is not possible to read the endings in terms of a particular theme in the novels.

Byatt's endings seek to denaturalise the kinds of ideology associated with the ending of realist novels: none of her novels ends with marriage or, except in the case of *Still Life*, with death. Currie writes about the kinds of endings historiographic metafiction uses, such as positioning the end in the middle of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the backwards narration in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* and two endings in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Byatt's open endings could be included in this list, as they "highlight the ideological package that linear narrative and closure deliver to us" (68). To ensure the reader does not misread Byatt's project, in *Whistling* she constructs various images of the endings of stories. The characters' reactions to the endings provide the clues to understand the ending of the novel itself, which is nonetheless not the chronological end.

The children listening to Agatha read the ending of *Flight North* are appalled by its lack of closure and frustrated that the story does not resolve all the different narrative threads: "that isn't the end. We don't know everything. We don't know what happened to the Whistlers. We don't know what his uncle was like. We don't know where his father is. We've waited and waited and waited to know these things, and now you say, now you say . . ." (*Whistling* 10, ellipsis original). The children are sure that narrative closure should be provided and that the lack of closure undermines their experience. Following the ending of

*Flight North*, Frederica considers that the ending of relationships, as much as literature, follow conventions when they end (11-12).

As the beginning of *Whistling* deconstructs the endings of stories and what constitutes a good ending, Byatt's reader should be prepared that the novel may not follow literary conventions in its ending. A further clue to the way the reader should conceptualise the end of the novel is Bill's revelation about *A Winter's Tale*. At various points in the Quartet, Bill is represented as disliking *A Winter's Tale* for its Christianity and confusing comedy with tragedy (*Virgin* 110-11; *Whistling* 385). However, watching his granddaughter, Mary, who looks very like the dead Stephanie, Bill has an epiphany:

It isn't anything to do with fobbing you off with a happy ending when you know you witnessed a tragedy. It's about art, it's about the necessity of art. The human need to be *mocked with art* – you can have a happy ending, precisely because you know in life they don't happen, when you are old, you have the right to the irony of a happy ending. (*Whistling* 395; emphasis original)

Bill's revelation directs the reader's attention to the potential function of irony in conventional happy endings. When the ending of *Whistling* is reached, the reader can bear in mind Bill's revelation as a cue or indeed duty for the reader to interpret that happy, conventional ending of Frederica finding love with Luk as ironic.

Steveker finds the ending of *Whistling* ideologically conservative by giving the last words of the text and decision of what to do about Frederica's pregnancy to Luk, and therefore depriving Frederica of agency (64). If this ending is reread in terms of the novel's imagery of endings as well as with the productive power of parody in "Free Women," the perspective of the apparently



conservative ending can be identified.<sup>29</sup> The recurrent imagery of endings in the novel indicates that the ending of the novel is ironic. Reading the ending as ironic, then, means that Byatt does not reduce Frederica's agency but rather that it forms part of the parody of conventional gender roles in the novel.

The ideologically conservative happy ending is subverted by the thematisation of conventional endings in literature, not only in *Whistling* but also in the legal narrative in *Babel*. The use of conventional story forms that invoke fairy tale happy endings are denaturalised and unmasked as ideologically conservative, as the fairy tale with its happy ending is used to reinforce traditional gender roles. Ounce states of Nigel, "he believed that they would marry and live happily ever after, that the princess would become lady of the manor and live as her predecessors had lived" (*Babel* 516). Given the recurrent references to happy endings, treated ironically by Bill and exposed as ideologically conservative in the legal narrative, and the repetition of open endings in the three previous novels and in *Flight North* the ending of *Whistling* cannot be taken at face value.

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<sup>29</sup> See also Alistair Brown, who finds the ending of *Whistling* potentially unites the scientific discourse and that of the humanities in Luk and Frederica's baby (69). Brown also finds that the ending is "unfittingly pastoral given the generally realist tendency of the novel; equally, the romance plot is unconvincing, since Frederica and Peacock have been for the majority of the novel diametrically antagonised, both intellectually and emotionally. However, it is arguable that its awkwardness as allegory and romance defines its status against a generic or genetic determinism. Its ambivalence – 'We shall think of something' – denies the novelistic writing of destiny on the forehead, leaving characters in possession of their independent consciousness, rather than dogmatically orientated participants in an allegorical and intentional scheme (*Paradise Lost* being one such master allegory) that exists outside of them and deprives them of independence" (69).

Additionally, my analysis of gender in the Quartet demonstrates that, although Byatt represents the limitations on women's opportunities in the historical period that the novels represent, she constructs instances of limited resistance to stereotypical gender roles. The deconstruction of the mind / body split in the Quartet, particularly through resistance to power relations in *Still Life*, indicates that Byatt's fiction does not endorse the alignment of women with the body. The representation of gender in the Quartet demonstrates that reading the ending of *Whistling* as ideologically conservative, with Frederica giving up her agency to Luk, contradicts the numerous instances of resistance to and denaturalisation of patriarchal definitions of gender. The conventional happy ending which is ideologically conservative and restores the status quo of the subordination of women to men is ironic, and therefore cannot be read literally. The ending of *Whistling* and the Quartet, then, does not subordinate Frederica to Luk but is rather the conclusion to a series of novels which consistently question the conventions of literature and gender.

#### Chapter 4: Gender and the Act of Writing in *Possession*

*Possession* is made up of a complex interweaving of texts written by Byatt. These are not always what they appear to be and they undermine the conclusions drawn from the frame narrative. I analyse Ellen Ash's Victorian journal in this chapter and I suggest that the construction of the journal and its representation of subjectivity demonstrate that the novel does not reject post-structuralist and postmodern literary theories. The journal is postmodern in the way that it installs and subverts accepted Victorian tropes and ideology. This chapter will discuss the way in which texts and authors are valued in *Possession* first, to lay the ground work for how Ellen's journal destabilises these values and then to go on to analyse the journal in detail before finally considering women's authorship in the novel.

Although neo-Victorian fiction can be dated to 1940 (Kohlke 3), it is generally dated from the 1960s, beginning with Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) (Kirchknopf

53). Neo-Victorian fiction can reinterpret or rewrite the Victorian period and “seek to both reinsert the Victorians into their particular historical context and engage with contemporary uses of the Victorians which efface that historical context” (Hadley, *Neo-Victorian* 6). Such contemporary uses of the Victorian context, for example in the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher, have employed an interpretation of perceived Victorian values to support conservative ideology and, as Heilmann and Llewellyn indicate, representations of Victorian settings or values are not necessarily progressive, as it depends on whether the fiction is critical of its use of the Victorian period (6). However, “this kind of fiction often appears to be driven by a desire to illuminate and occasionally even ‘correct’ aspects of the Victorian age, or the Victorians’ attitudes to the specifics of sex, gender, and erotic relationships” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 7-8). A potential problem for readers of *Possession* is whether the novel is a nostalgic and uncritical revival of Victorian values implicit in the neo-Victorian novel.

The dual timeline of *Possession* follows 1980s scholars Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey as they research a previously unknown relationship between the Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. There are important differences in status between Maud and Roland, as Maud has a secure academic job, an international reputation and an upper-class background, whereas Roland’s background is working-class and he is a part-time researcher, with an uncertain future. Maud and Roland’s research is also presented by the narrator as of differing value: Maud is characterised as working at the forefront of Lacanian feminist theory, whereas Roland is represented as a textual scholar, not in the right field (literary theory) for promotion. Despite their differences, Maud and Roland work together to follow literary clues that reveal a relationship between the poets and their illegitimate

child, Maia. The twentieth-century characters discover that Maud is descended from Maia and therefore from both Randolph and Christabel. As Maud discovers her lineage, Roland's professional status changes; by the end of novel, he is portrayed as the poets' spiritual heir and receives three academic job offers. At the end of *Possession*, Maud and Roland embark on a relationship.

Byatt appears to grant the contemporary characters full access to the past, as they have found the answers to their questions by the end of the novel. The novel, however, undermines the possibility of knowing what really happened in history. Even though the characters discover much that was previously unknown, there is much that remains hidden to them; for example, the postscript to the novel depicts an unrecorded meeting between Randolph and Maia. Randolph asks Maia to give a message to Christabel, but the message is lost. There is physical evidence of the meeting, as Randolph receives a lock of hair from Maia: the lock of hair is, however, misread by all the characters, who reasonably presume that the hair is Christabel's, not knowing that Randolph and Maia met.

A number of critiques of *Possession* will be considered here, as they typify objections that are raised against the novel: it is anti-postmodernist and conservative (Boccardi, *Byatt*); the novel rejects post-structuralist theories of authorship and favours a "traditional" conception of authorship (Adams, "Dead"), and *Possession* does not provide a positive representation of the female author (Steveker). Critics such as Mariadele Boccardi judge that Byatt prioritises the Victorian period in a way that echoes and endorses Margaret Thatcher's 1980s call for a return to Victorian values.

Louise Yelin argues that *Possession* is “self-conscious, if not self-consciously postmodern” and that the novel deviates from postmodernism in the representation of historical knowledge: “she makes at least an implicit claim to possess Victorian secrets known or knowable by no one else” (38, 40).

Although it would appear that the postscript is a postmodern device that points to the limitations of historical knowledge, Ann Marie Adams states that “it is a nonironic coda that demonstrates how author’s lives and works are necessarily more capacious, complex and ‘interesting’ than any particular critical reading of them” (“Defending” 348). The postscript, for Adams, confirms Byatt’s rejection of criticism and typifies the way that Byatt privileges the creative writer over the critic, particularly because literary criticism is perceived as imposing preformed interpretations onto texts in the novel.

Lena Steveker states that Christabel’s poetry has a limited reputation and is not part of the canon in *Possession* (48), and that she loses her status as a poet after the affair with Randolph. Although Christabel has been admitted into the *feminist* canon in the 1980s in *Possession*, there is an economy of literary value that is, even in the twentieth-century narrative, coterminous with male selfhood and masculine tradition, as Steveker notes: “two Western traditions of thought merge in Roland: having distanced himself from Ash, he comes to represent the autonomous male individual conceptualized by liberal-humanism; finding his poetic subjectivity, he represents the Romantic ideal of the poet as male genius whose separate self is the source of his poetry” (45). Steveker’s argument suggests that the male characters in *Possession* can achieve a writer’s sensibility that is derived from historical paradigms of artistic identity as “autonomous” and “separate”. By contrast, “a woman artist’s autonomy [...] is incompatible with Victorian patriarchal society” (Steveker 58).

Mariadele Boccardi states that *Possession* aligns its Victorian setting with 1980s conservative politics: “*Possession* does not fully escape the suspicious of an underlying complicity with Thatcherite rhetoric about the merits of Victorian values and the nostalgia for the lost certainties of that period” (*Byatt* 69). There is evidence for Boccardi’s argument, as there is for the other critics mentioned here. However, I argue that Byatt represents the socio-economic and political environment of the 1980s but undermines its priorities and its nostalgic appropriation of Victorian “values” through Ellen’s journal, a text that appears authentically Victorian yet is subtly postmodern. And as Catherine Belsey says, “the Victorian story itself proves ultimately elusive, evasive, differential [sic]. If *Possession* is critical of postmodern skepticism, it is by no means nostalgic for Victorian metaphysics” (*Postmodern* 693). My reading of Ellen’s journal analyses its evasions as part of Byatt’s postmodern strategies of representation and undermines the perceived complicity with the Thatcherite construction of Victorian values.

Ellen’s journal appears to be a Victorian lady’s journal, although of course written by Byatt, and is accorded little value in the novel, because it is perceived as “*dull*” (*Possession* 31; emphasis original). Critics of *Possession* largely replicate the characters’ judgement of the journal and rarely write about Ellen. The journal, however, is more interesting and important than it might seem from its guise as a dull Victorian lady’s journal. In Chapter Twenty-Five, the direct narration of Ellen and her thoughts shows her about to rewrite the journal on Randolph’s death-bed. She rewrites the journal partly to protect the privacy of Randolph and herself, but also to provide clues for future generations to enable them to discover Randolph’s affair and child. If the affair is discovered

then later generations will understand Christabel's importance to Randolph (*Possession* 442).

Analysing Ellen's rewriting enables this thesis to challenge existing critical readings of *Possession*. Although the journal can be cross-referenced with other documents, there can be no final or definitive knowledge about Ellen herself or the way she portrays events. The reader of *Possession* cannot know which entries were rewritten or how the representation of events and characters may have been changed; the journal therefore undermines the contention that the reader of *Possession* can know everything. Ellen's direct narration reveals significant information; the reader learns that the marriage was unconsummated. However, even as Byatt represents Ellen's thoughts, the reader's knowledge of Ellen is curtailed, limited by what Byatt provides. *Possession* is populated with characters that are intent on learning the complete and absolute truth, but Byatt confounds the priorities of these characters by including a text that is *deliberately* constructed to only partially reveal and represent its subjects.

Byatt complicates the "single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" of the text (Barthes 146) as the journal generates conflicting readings in *Possession*, undercutting the "traditional" critical response Adams identifies. The journal is symbolic and functions as a performative account of the marriage; its form both represents the happy surface of the marriage as it appeared to outsiders and points to its secrets. To read the journal as either one or the other would misrepresent its liminality: the conventional heterosexual marriage is neither simply the "reality" of the marriage, nor is it a "lie". In its representation of the marriage, Ellen's journal comments on Victorian gender roles and literary tropes, especially that of the "angel in the house" as "the



eternal type of female purity” (Gilbert and Gubar 20), denaturalising the conventions of each. The journal enacts a simulacrum of the writing process: its apparently spontaneous emotions indicated by halting syntax and punctuation, as well as by partially deleted phrases, are deliberately included to emphasise its verisimilitude.

Not only is the journal liminal, it also constructs the historical record. In rewriting, Ellen deliberately chooses what to reveal and conceal, controlling at least part of the story.<sup>30</sup> Although the affair is indicated by Ellen’s clues, she is not represented as consciously coding her virginity into the text of the journal. Nonetheless, Ellen’s virginity can be read in the journal’s gaps, as Adrienne Shiffman expertly shows (and as I will discuss later). The journal portrays Ellen’s happy marriage, but this is deliberately undermined by the gaps, which point to the affair, and also confirm feminist intratextual readings of the journal. Although feminist literary theory, particularly the views of fictional literary critic, Leonora Stern, are satirised, Byatt complicates her representation of feminism, as Leonora’s interpretation of the gaps in the journal is, in fact, correct. Ellen’s journal therefore also demonstrates that Byatt does not dismiss feminist literary critical interpretations, although she is wary of such approaches.

The journal therefore challenges the apparent dynamics of literary criticism in the novel. The frame narrative appears to valorise the Victorian era and to reject literary criticism.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, the possessive and ambitious

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<sup>30</sup> Although the journal is still not published at the time of the contemporary narrative, scholars consult it and consider it part of the historical record. See, for example, Cropper’s writing on Randolph’s funeral, quoting Ellen’s journal (*Possession* 442-446).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Kate Mitchell: “whereas resuscitations of the past, whether in the public discourse of poetry or the ostensibly private forms of diaries and letters, enrich Byatt’s Victorian age, her late

attitudes of some of the literary academics, Mortimer Cropper, Leonora Stern and Fergus Wolff are presented as having the wrong relation to the past: “those who seek to possess – power, place, property, the past – are revealed as villains, while those who can allow themselves to *be* possessed – by curiosity, the desire for understanding, history, love – are rewarded richly in unexpected ways” (Janik 164). Janik’s analysis implies that “traditional” approaches to the past are positive, although Adams finds such approaches reactionary, as they valorise the naturalised ideology that post-structuralism deconstructed. However, these critical analyses are complicated by the fact that Ellen’s journal repositions feminist criticism as adept and accurate, not simply a caricature that imposes a preformed interpretation and homogenises women’s writing.

Post-structuralism is another important critical field that *Possession* appears to critique. Roland’s initial post-structuralist approach to texts, mentioned at the start of the novel, becomes a biographical reading of literature as a result of the literary detective quest. However, Adams states that Roland’s reading of literature throughout the novel does not change, as it is not post-structuralist even at the start of the novel (“Dead” 110-11). Post-structuralism is relevant to the interpretation of Ellen’s journal in its destabilisation of the message of the Author-God, as discussed above. Shiffman also enacts a post-structuralist feminist analysis of language to interpret Ellen’s journal. Shiffman’s approach is effective and enlightening, demonstrating not only the relevance of post-structuralism to a novel that appears to reject it, but also using it as a theoretical framework that is necessary to understand the subtleties of the journal.

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twentieth-century is cluttered with impersonal, dense and scholarly works that obscure and obfuscate rather than explicate and enliven the past” (96).

The journal represents an alternative concept of subjectivity and authorship, challenging the unitary ego. On the one hand, Maud and Roland's post-structuralism appears to be superficial to Adams. On the other hand, Ellen's journal does not represent a unitary, unified ego in its text and so is constructed from a post-structuralist perspective by Byatt. Sidonie Smith's sophisticated work on women's autobiographical narratives is particularly illuminating here. Smith notes that "traditional autobiography, perhaps more than any other genre, may have held out the hope of unified vision of the universal subject. But other things happened on the way to self writing" (19). Women, Smith states, have "no unified, atomic, Adamic core to be discovered and represented" (15): "she cannot find herself as universal man does in his Romantic journey inward to the core of his being, except through those social roles already defined for her, the very masks romantic man would define, penetrate, and discard" (15). Ellen's journal represents the female narrator in a way that is equivalent to Smith's definition of the woman self-writer: Byatt represents Ellen through her masks and social roles to denaturalise the ideology that constructs the masks of femininity.

Ellen's journal precludes the possibility of a unified code of identity not only in its female narration but in its status as a rewritten document. Any "authentic" self that might have been represented in the "original" document is over-written by the subject constructed in the rewriting. There is no original here, only masks and a simulacrum of a self. Ellen's journal complicates the definition of the female author in *Possession*; on one level it coincides with the patriarchal definition of a woman as submissive and domestic that reflects the masculine image of femininity back to him, but on another level it destabilises that reflection by showing it as simply *his* reflection. In another moment that

destabilises conclusions in *Possession*, Byatt has Randolph recognise that male portraits of women say less about women than about male fantasies. Randolph is about to join Christabel in their hotel suite and he thinks about *Roderick Random* and its oblique representation of sex. The female in the novel is “some characterless embodiment of physical and spiritual perfection, or more accurately of the male imagination” (*Possession* 282). However, this is more extensively explored in Ellen’s journal, if in coded terms.

Byatt reifies the angel in the house trope in Ellen’s self-representation to ensure that the journal appears dull and escapes censorship (any direct impropriety might lead to the journal being destroyed). Except the angel in the house, the reader surmises, is partly what Ellen must have been, although the reader cannot know the *extent* to which the archetypal image of the middle-class Victorian housewife coincides with Ellen’s subjectivity. Byatt uses postmodern strategies of representation in the journal, to portray Ellen’s subjectivity as encompassing *both* the archetype of the angel in the house *and* subverting it through the subtle critique of the limitations of Victorian femininity and agency.

Byatt’s choice of a journal for Ellen’s critique is effective and has historical precedent, as Podnieks observes: “the diary is a place where women can express themselves through narratives which conform to culturally scripted life stories, while at the same time they can rewrite them to reflect their subversive desires and experiences” (*Daily* 6). Byatt exploits historical precedent in the female use of the journal form in *Possession* and Ellen’s rewriting of the journal. Although it also has precedents in diary writing, the

journal is postmodern in its representation of subjectivity and how it affects the position of literary criticism in the novel.<sup>32</sup>

A number of critics, such as Shiffman, have paid careful attention to Ellen's journal, including Irene Martyniuk, Kym Brindle, Lisa Sternlieb and Dana Shiller. Although these critics acknowledge that Ellen's journal is rewritten, they do not consider the effect of the rewriting. Critics point to the way the direct representation of Ellen shows the reader that "as if by only knowing the 'real' truth can we see how much of it is habitually hidden" (Shiller 548). This confirms that the "truth" of the postscript as the historical record will always be incomplete. Not only does the journal point to the unavoidably incomplete historical record but also that Ellen deliberately controls the historical record in her journal by choosing to reveal only certain facts (Sternlieb 145). My analysis focuses on the rewriting of the journal to demonstrate how the journal, as an embedded text, destabilises the apparent certainties and values of the frame narrative of *Possession*. Treating Ellen as a writer affects the hierarchical valuation of certain kinds of writing over others and positions the female writers differently in relation to the canon in *Possession*, subverting the novel's apparent politics. Ellen's journal is a postmodern device in Hutcheon's sense

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<sup>32</sup> Podnieks cites several diaries, including Samuel Pepys, to demonstrate a number of entries might be written up at once after the respective days had passed and also might be written for publication: "in either case, the diary as a truly spontaneous, secret, uninhibited text remains at best an ambiguous reality" (*Daily* 24). There are, however, penalties for the diary appearing contrary to its reputation as spontaneous, even if its codification as spontaneous is in fact erroneous. Philippe Lejeune indicates that Anne Frank's journal was partly rewritten by Anne herself and then edited by her father who had to remove references to Anne's sexuality to avoid censorship. However, any evidence of rewriting or editing the journal could have been perceived as casting doubt on the journal's authenticity, particularly at the time when German Holocaust deniers were attempting to discredit Anne's journal (262-3).

that “the postmodern involves a paradoxical installing as well the subverting of conventions – including the conventions of the representation of the subject” (*Politics* 13).

Although Hadley finds that “postmodernism precludes an extended consideration of the impact of the Victorian context” (*Neo-Victorian* 15), it need not be the case. Ellen’s journal is a simulacrum of a Victorian lady’s journal, but it forms part of and constructs the Victorian context of the novel, sharing its strategies of representation, as will be seen, with Smith’s analysis of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s autobiography. Samantha J. Carroll finds that postmodernism is necessary to understanding neo-Victorian fiction, to avoid the kind of Thatcherite “nostalgia” about the past that leads to “conservatism and intellectual regression” (176). Carroll states that the conservative attack on political correctness, aligned with postmodernism in their arguments, shows the continuing threat of postmodernism and its continuing subversive function (191-195). Neo-Victorian fiction can give a voice to those who are barred from the dominant discourse and therefore it has a political function. Carroll aptly states the political aspect of neo-Victorian fiction, which “brings to the fore the ‘trace of the excluded’ [...] – those voices or events whose overt presence might disrupt the clear path of the narrative with viewpoints that contest the authority of the historical record itself” (193).

Carroll argues that *Possession* replicates heteronormativity in the novel’s representation of lesbianism “from the vacuous impotence of Blanche Glover to the butch predation of Leonora Stern” (184). In Carroll’s reading, the voice given to those excluded from the dominant discourse is uneven. However, my analysis of *Possession* argues that Leonora is a much more complex character when considered in relation to Ellen’s journal. Byatt’s apparent heteosexism

should be perceived as part of the frame narrative that is undermined and complicated by Ellen's journal. Reading Ellen's journal as a postmodern device complicates the novel's apparent endorsement of the Thatcherite nostalgia for the past. Boccardi cites the novel's heteronormativity, representations of upward social mobility and rejection of

post-structuralism (whose emergence in the late 1960s provides an interesting coincidence with the historical moment identified by Mrs Thatcher for the break with the values of the past) in favour of the more traditional close attention to the written word, through which the author's voice can be heard and the clues left for posterity solved. (*Byatt* 70)

Boccardi cites aspects of the novel that align with the ideology of Thatcherism; her argument appears persuasive but it only accounts for the frame narrative. The embedded narratives by the female characters, particularly Ellen's journal but also Christabel's poetry, undermine the politics of the frame narrative through their representation of gendered subjectivity and the discourses that construct the subject. Ellen's journal points to how femininity is constructed by societal conventions, such as the repeated references to the domestic affairs of the house as Ellen's sphere (*Possession* 222, 227) and her inadequacy (222, 231). The references to Ellen's failure to enact the angel of the house, in conjunction with the gaps in the journal and her direct commentary on gender roles, subtly indicate that femininity is a cipher or mask. Byatt's embedded narratives also reflect metafictionally on the difficulties women writers face and they enact a complicit critique that destabilises the paradigm of the artist's autonomous, separate selfhood as a masculine trope that excludes women.

#### 1. The Economy of Literary Value in *Possession*

The economy of literary value in *Possession*, by which I mean the canonisation of texts and the resultant hierarchy of literary worth, constructs appropriate priorities of reading and critical practice, and affects the interpretation of the novel. Literary value is constructed and reinforced through the various critical opinions of texts in the novel and a hierarchy emerges from this, where some texts, authors and critical perspectives are valued over others. However, the valuation of texts can be reordered and the hierarchies in the canon can be disrupted, as the reader of *Possession* can make a different interpretation of the embedded narratives to those offered within the novel.

The economy of literary value is complex, both in terms of the nineteenth-century poets and the critics who work on them. Randolph Henry Ash is an acknowledged genius by the older generation of critics who edit his works. The American Mortimer Cropper edits Randolph's letters and writes his biography and the British (Scottish) James Blackadder edits Randolph's plays and poems. However, value is not stable in the text: when Blackadder becomes an expert on Randolph's work, it is in "Ash's most unfashionable days" (*Possession* 28). The fictional diary of the real Victorian, Crabb Robinson, provides evidence that Randolph's contemporary reputation was ambivalent (23) and Randolph felt himself misunderstood by the reading public. Christabel's comprehension of his work is what forges the initial interest between them; he felt she understood "*his ignored, his arcane, his deviously perspicuous meanings, which he thought not meanings, since no one appeared to be able to understand them, had after all one clear-eyed and amused reader and judge*" (5-6; emphasis original).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Letters in *Possession* are transcribed in italics.



Of the younger generation of academics in *Possession*, Roland Mitchell works part-time as one of Blackadder's research assistants, describing himself as "an old-fashioned textual critic" (50). Roland does not have a tenured position because he does not practice fashionable forms of interpretation; Fergus Wolff, a deconstructive critic, gets the job in Roland's department, as he is "in the right field, which was literary theory" (14). From the outset, *Possession* sets up a hierarchy of texts and interpretative frameworks, although by the end of the novel, Roland is "awarded" the woman Fergus alienated, a choice of jobs and a poetic consciousness. However, I will argue that this is only one way to read the economy of value and it is disrupted by Ellen's journal.

The feminist critics in the novel, Maud Bailey and Leonora Stern, have tenured positions, suggesting that feminism has value. The work of both Maud and Leonora is admired internationally, as demonstrated by the French student-scholar Ariane le Minier (313, 380). The feminists have rediscovered Christabel's poetry and they are able to locate feminist perspectives in the poems. Maud finds it surprising that Christabel could have liked Randolph, perceiving him as writing "nasty anti-feminist" poetry (55). Leonora also finds Randolph's work too masculine (402) and therefore has not read it before she is to appear briefly on a televised arts programme aimed at raising funds to buy the correspondence between Randolph and Christabel. Byatt makes the point here that for all their good work, feminists *can* misread by imposing a predetermined perspective. Although, as will be seen, Byatt complicates this portrayal of feminism by showing that Leonora's insights interpret the unconscious symbolism in Ellen's journal correctly.

It is implied that Christabel's epic, *The Fairy Melusine*, does not sell well at the time of publication (501). Roland's research on Christabel, before he

meets Maud to research the connection with Randolph, consists of two books, Veronica Honiton's *White Linen* (1947) and Leonora's edition of critical essays, *Herself Herself Involve: LaMotte's Strategies of Evasion* (1977). Each text foregrounds different critical paradigms that are representative of the time they were written. Honiton's work describes *The Fairy Melusine* as "deservedly forgotten" (37) and implies it is not ladylike enough. Honiton reproduces the dominant gender politics of her period in the traits she values in the poetry: "Christabel's reputation, modest yet secure, rests on the restrained and delicate lyrics, products of a fine sensibility, a somewhat sombre temperament, and a trouble but steadfast Christian faith" (37).

Both Maud and Leonora contribute to the 1977 book of feminist essays, repositioning Christabel as a writer with a distinctly female power and seeing her as "distraught and enraged" (37). Although Blackadder comments that *The Fairy Melusine* is reputed to be "unreadable" (31), this could be a result of his age and gender. Fergus introduces the poem as liminal: "it's an odd affair – tragedy and romance and symbolism rampant all over it, a kind of dream world full of strange beasts and hidden meanings and a really weird sexuality or sensuality. The feminists are crazy about it. They say it expresses women's impotent desire" (33).

Feminism gives women a framework within which patriarchal concepts of femininity can be challenged. The problems women face, articulated through feminism is that they are denied access to the dominant paradigms of identity and representation. Susan Sniader Lanser writes about narrative authority and how the exclusion from the dominant culture poses particular problems for the woman author:

In Western literary systems for the past two centuries, however, discursive authority has, with varying degrees of intensity, attached itself most readily to white, educated men of hegemonic ideology. One major constituent of narrative authority, therefore, is the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to this dominant social power. At the same time, narrative authority is constituted through (historically changing) textual strategies that even social unauthorized writers can appropriate. (*Fictions* 6-7)<sup>34</sup>

Byatt's Victorian women writers and artists (as well as their feminist critics) are well aware that they are denied access to the dominant cultural paradigms because they are women. Christabel relates to Randolph that

*You do not seem aware, Mr Ash, for all your knowledge of the great world I do not frequent, of the usual response to which the production of the Female Pen – let alone in our case, the hypothetick productions – are greeted with. The best one may hope is – oh, it is excellently done – for a woman. (Possession 180; emphasis original)*

Blanche's suicide note refers to the socio-economic conditions of female artistry, as women need time and space to complete their art: "independent women must expect more of themselves, since neither men nor other more conventionally domesticated women will hope for anything or expect any result

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<sup>34</sup> See also Elsie B. Michie, who analyses Victorian women authors and adeptly summarises the problems women face not only when attempting to write but also conceptualising what it means to be a woman: "Feminist theorists from Simone de Beauvoir onward have taught us to see femininity as a quality of the second sex, from this point of view, the feminine is that which is repressed, denied, or excluded by the dominant culture, which appears to be universal in fact implicitly defines itself as masculine" (1).

other than utter failure” (307). Christabel’s cousin, Sabine de Kercoz states that women are viewed as “monsters” if they do manage to create something worthwhile (350). As will be seen, Ellen also makes reference to what are perceived as women’s limitations in the Victorian period through the metaphors in the journal.

Jane Campbell observes that Byatt has her Victorian women appropriate artistic production, although Byatt recognises the difficulty of their attempts:

In her portrait of Christabel, Byatt poignantly explores the ambiguities of freedom for creative women, and does so in a way that speaks to the twentieth-century women, who, recognising Christabel as a victim of Victorian repression and stereotyping, also see her, with Blanche and Sabine, as affirming qualities of strength, insight and versatility that persist throughout the generations. (*Heliotropic* 121)

Campbell’s analysis demonstrates a sisterhood between the women of the two storylines. Although Byatt elsewhere recognises the good work done by feminism in the attempt to canonise neglected writers, she warns of “the excesses of theory” (Waugh, *Woman* 193). Such cautions are particularly visible through literary critics in the novel, especially Fergus and Leonora, who are portrayed as seeing all texts through the lens of sexuality and therefore distorting the meanings of those texts. Their theories are also represented as conditioning their personal conduct, as both Fergus and Leonora are shown to be sexually possessive of Maud: “Maud thought of Leonora’s ferocity, of Fergus’s wicked playfulness, of the whole tenor and endeavour of twentieth-

century literary scholarship, of a bed like dirty-egg white" (*Possession* 221-2).<sup>35</sup>

This sentence is deliberately ambiguous. It appears to describe the theories Leonora and Fergus subscribe to but it could equally describe their sexuality. Mary Eagleton surmises that Byatt is suspicious of totalising theories, represented in the satiric portraits of Fergus and Leonora, implicitly linking their sexualities to their theoretical positions (*Danger* 70). The portrait of feminist literary criticism in *Possession* is further complicated by the representation of Beatrice Nest, part of the older generation of academics, who is the editor and in some ways the protector of Ellen's journal. Beatrice began her postgraduate work in the 1950s and she intended to do a PhD on Randolph's *Ask to Embla* love poems but was dissuaded because literary analysis was perceived as unlikely to meet the PhD requirements, as well as being said to be beyond her feminine capabilities.

By the time of the contemporary narrative, twenty-five years later, Beatrice has not produced Ellen's journal for publication, but she is "treated rather sympathetically by Byatt" (Mitchell 189). Beatrice deliberately delays publishing the journal to protect Ellen's privacy, suspecting that Ellen would disapprove of publication (*Possession* 221). Beatrice is partly right, as the journal makes reference to protecting Randolph's privacy when he died (442), but Beatrice's insight is complicated by the fact that Ellen rewrites the journal in order to leave clues to the affair.

For Beatrice, like many characters in Byatt's work, part of her professional difficulties stem from beginning her work before second-wave feminism and subsequently feeling herself excluded from feminism. Beatrice's

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<sup>35</sup> See Jennifer M. Jeffer's article "The White Bed of Desire in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*" for an extended discussion of Maud and Roland's shared image of the clean bed that represents an absence of desire.

motherly appearance is read as “threatening and repulsive” (117) and she is subject to “*witch-hunts*” (221; emphasis original). Byatt represents some drawbacks with feminism here, in that in some cases, women who do not conform to its orthodoxies find themselves disempowered: Maud’s ‘natural’ blond hair is similarly offensive to feminists, “I once got hissed at a conference, for dyeing it to please men” (271).

Mary Eagleton underscores Beatrice’s exclusion from feminism (and other critical practices) in arguing that Beatrice operates professionally “through a mode of deliberate obfuscation which parallels the obfuscation of Ellen’s journal, she is involved in her own small rebellion against the University and the field of literary criticism which disdains her anti-theoretical research” (*Figuring* 104). Although the parallel Eagleton draws is accurate, there is a risk in taking this parallel at face value. Eagleton observes that “one reason why Beatrice gives Maud access to the Ellen Ash journal is because Maud understands her antipathy to the current critical preoccupation with sexuality” (*Danger* 67). Eagleton is correct, as Beatrice relates that Leonora came to find out about Ellen’s sexual relations and Beatrice did not react positively: “I told her there was nothing of that kind in this journal. She said there must be – in the metaphors – in the omissions” (*Possession* 221). Although sympathetic to Beatrice, Maud counters that Beatrice’s conceptualisation of the journal as “baffling” is rather “a systematic omission” (221) of sexuality.

Beatrice may well be staging a limited resistance to contemporary critical paradigms, as Eagleton surmises, particularly feminism’s concern with sexuality. Byatt complicates the portrait drawn of feminism, in its apparent tendency to impose a preformed interpretation, by showing that Leonora’s presuppositions are accurate. What is omitted from the journal and signified by

the gap is not only the affair (which is sexual) but also Ellen's own sexuality. By staging one correct interpretation of Ellen's journal through the satirised Leonora, Byatt's portrait of feminist literary criticism can be acknowledged as more complex than it is often perceived to be. Instead, Byatt's representation of feminism portrays the risk of totalisation inherent in any critical position, as it may attempt to remake the world in its image rather than adapting its methodology to what it analyses.

The omissions and gaps in Ellen's journal signify her virginity, as do the partially excised phrases Ellen includes in the rewritten version of her journal. As Shiffman points out:

Ellen, however, disrupts this phallogentric order when she refuses sexual penetration. Her "hole" is a "whole:" it is presence, not absence, power not powerlessness, meaning not nonmeaning. *Thus, much like the textual gaps in her journal, Ellen's physiological gap, her vagina, is a site of subversion of the dominant patriarchal discourse.* (100-101; emphasis added)

Shiffman's analysis can be extended, as her article confirms that Leonora's critical position is correct: the omissions textually represent Ellen's sexuality.

Leonora's interpretation may entail risk, and perhaps most importantly risks that she does not appear to be aware of, but she is also flexible. Leonora adjusts her reading of Christabel, stating that she "has always been cited as a lesbian-feminist poet. Which she was, but not exclusively, it appears" (*Possession* 485). Christien Franken finds that "even though a feminist scholar such as Leonora Stern is satirized in *Possession*, she and Maud Bailey are 'the discerning readers' LaMotte hopes for in her last letter to Ash: 'I think she will not die, my Melusina, some discerning reader will save her?'" (105). Although

Adams makes the point that Maud's apparent theoretical sophistication oversimplifies as much as Cropper, Fergus and Leonora, she nonetheless notes that Leonora's theories prove correct. Adams states that Maud's consideration of the egg metaphor in Christabel's letters to Randolph shows that Maud is revising her thinking about Christabel even before she opens Leonora's letter exhorting her to reconsider Christabel's poetry:

Leonora's remarks about LaMotte's sexuality as "an empowering force behind her work" are also somewhat prescient. Leonora may still erroneously believe that LaMotte is a lesbian, but she does perceptively notice a lacuna within Maud's thoughts that Maud herself will only come to acknowledge later: her reluctance to understand how eroticized encounters and passionate connections (not inviolate self-sufficiency) inform LaMotte's work. ("Dead" 115)

Despite Byatt's satiric representation of Leonora, Byatt repeatedly provides Leonora with correct interpretations and the recognition of this repositions feminist literary theory in the novel. Both Leonora's correct interpretation and Shiffman's analysis counter the critical perspectives that consider the novel to value a "traditional" process of reading and interpretation that should reconstruct authorial intention. Instead, Shiffman's sophisticated analysis of Ellen's journal, as well as Leonora's critical perspective, demonstrates that critical theory is necessary to decode the novel's politics.

There is, however, a caveat to be made here. The reader of *Possession* knows that Ellen rewrote her journal to leave clues to the affair: this would seem to endorse a critical position that implies the importance of reconstructing authorial intention. However, there is no indication in Ellen's direct narration that



she intended to encode her virginity in the text. It is unlikely that Ellen would be able to do so deliberately as her honeymoon and the failed consummation is situated in her memory as images only: “she did not remember it in words. There were no words attached to it, that was part of the horror” (*Possession* 458). Although the frame narrative of *Possession* appears to position the correct interpretation of literature as one that reconstructs the author’s thoughts, Ellen’s journal destabilises such attempts. Other effects of the rewriting of Ellen’s journal and how it affects Byatt’s portrait of the woman author will be considered below.

## 2. Narrating the Woman Author in Ellen’s Journal

The effects of Ellen’s journal cannot be understood without paying careful attention to how the journal is narrated. The complexities of the journal are interpretable by analysing Byatt’s strategies of representation. The narration of the journal, however, enacts the limits of the representable. Neither history nor subjectivity can be accurately and entirely reconstructed, even with the abundance of historical and literary “evidence” in *Possession*. The journal destabilises the possibility of reconstructing history and subjectivity in its deliberately selective presentation of Ellen. The twentieth-century characters realise that Ellen’s journal is selective; they intuit that it might be deliberately partial, although without the confirmation of the direct narration. Maud observes that the journal seems to be selective: “I didn’t immediately see what you meant about baffling. And then, I think I did. On the evidence of that part of the journal – I couldn’t form a very clear idea of what she was *like*. Or if I liked her. She tells things. Interesting things. But they don’t make a whole picture” (232; emphasis original).

Unlike the characters, the reader of *Possession* is made aware that the journal is rewritten and the rewriting affects the historical record and the presentation of subjectivity in the novel. *Possession* might be populated with “round characters” (Janik 162), but Ellen’s journal represents subjectivity as partial and constructed. There is a further productive complication to the rewriting of the journal, as it prevents any possibility of identifying Ellen the character in *Possession* as the referent for Ellen who is narrated in the journal. In *Ellen*, Byatt forecloses the possibility of the “whole picture” of not only history but also of the identity that Maud and Roland are searching for in their quest to discover the “truth” about the Victorians. It is not that *Possession* confirms that the author knows *more* than the characters and that essential information will always be partially unavailable. It is rather that the textual and linguistic representation of identity is inherently unstable: there is no core of identity that ensures the author can be assuredly “known.” *Possession*’s round characters and its realism are undermined by Ellen’s unstable narration of events and subjectivity. In a novel that appears to value knowing as much about the past as possible, Ellen’s journal confounds the search for complete knowledge, as Maud states in relation to what happened to Ellen’s pregnant maid, “how frustrating, though. Not to know” (*Possession* 232).

Analysing the effects of the journal requires attention to its narration, otherwise the impact of its rewriting is liable to be overlooked in accounts of the novel. Neglecting the narration of the journal would also elide the complexities of Byatt’s representation of feminism, although, as Susan Sniader Lanser summarises, feminism and narratology have been perceived as incompatible approaches:

Formalist poetics may seem to feminists naively empiricist, masking ideology as objective truth, sacrificing significance for precision, incapable of producing distinctions that are politically meaningful. Feminist criticism may seem to narratologists naively subjectivist, sacrificing precision for ideology, incapable of producing distinctions that are textual meaningful. (*Fictions* 4-5)

A further reason for the lack of rapprochement between feminism and narratology is that the latter has been androcentric in its choice of texts for analysis and thus in its construction of a particular kind of canon (Lanser, "Towards" 343).<sup>36</sup> In her book on the female narrator in British fiction, Lisa Sternlieb finds that Lanser's work, although important in forming links between feminism and narratology, does not add new insights to previous feminist interpretations of texts: "her narratological readings arrive at the same ideological conclusions as non-narratological feminist critics have written" (2). Sternlieb instead seeks to "analyze not the story of plot but the plot of narration – the circumstances under which the story comes to be told at all. And I consider chastity, virtuousness, self-effacement, and submission not as merely the intractable expressions of Victorian femininity but as plot devices" (1). By focusing on the conditions of narration, Sternlieb is able to analyse the effect of retrospective narration and to distinguish between "deliberately" and "inadvertently unreliable narrator[s]" (6). Emphasising retrospection and types of unreliable narrators allows Sternlieb to posit that the female narrators she writes about assume agency in writing and are not the submissive feminine characters their narration describes (6).

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<sup>36</sup> Lanser does however make clear that good work has been done by feminist narratologists, although its impact on feminism more generally has been limited ("Towards" 343).

Ellen is like Sternlieb's narrators in their hidden agency: she knows her journal might, and partly intends it to, be read, so that the clues she leaves can be decoded and allow posthumous recognition of Christabel's significance in Randolph's life. Ellen must ensure that the journal is not perceived as something too private, or scandalous, otherwise it might be destroyed on her own death-bed, by family members concerned for Ellen's privacy or the protection of the family reputation. Shiffman discusses Lynn Z. Bloom's "distinction between the 'truly private diary' and the 'public private diary'" (94), and notes that "any diarist who does not personally destroy her work must be aware of the existence of a possible audience, present or future, and will construct her text accordingly. Hence the emergence of the public private diary" (94-5). Ellen's public private persona must correlate with a level of presumed privacy so that it is mistaken for the generic Victorian lady's journal that it purports to be, but must also ensure the clues are at least partially visible to a future generation.

Elizabeth Podnieks's sophisticated study of the modernist female diary also contains a significant analysis of the diary form written by women in general. Podnieks indicates the censorship that modernist writers faced when publishing on subjects that were provocative, particularly sexual matters (*Daily* 6). The concept of the "public private text" positions the diaries as private but also intends them for later publication, "the private-diary-as-public-text proves the perfect vehicle by which women can deliver their own versions of themselves" (7). Of course, these selves are discursively constructed and in a Victorian diary, Podnieks states, women could "paradoxically comply with and challenge the silence prescribed for respectable female conduct" (46).

The representation of Ellen's public private persona in the journal is able to avoid post-mortem censorship by her family because it convincingly coincides with the authorised Victorian female subject, representing Ellen through the domestic imagery of the angel in the house.<sup>37</sup> Byatt constructs a distinctly postmodernist perspective in Ellen's journal by using it to comment metafictionally on the Victorian literary trope of the angel in the house. The journal represents a multiplicity of domestic details for Randolph's comfort that reify Virginia Woolf's indictment of the qualities of the angel: "in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others" (*Selected* 140). Woolf states that the angel stole over her writing, affecting the quality of her work, and she had to kill her (140). In *Possession*, Byatt's installs the trope of the angel in the house as the explicit theme of the journal but subverts the narration of female domesticity by a subtle but recurrent commentary.

Ellen's journal is replete with domestic imagery and details, such as the washing of the curtains to make the house fresh for Randolph after his Yorkshire travels (*Possession* 222), Ellen's dealings with servants (226) and curates (223). The journal draws on the Victorian imagery of separate spheres, where the male is associated with the public domain and the female with privacy and domesticity. In dealing with her pregnant servant, Ellen notes that the issue "belongs to my sphere of influence and responsibility" (227). The reader cannot, however, know how much of this domestic detail is accurate

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<sup>37</sup> See also Adrienne Shiffman, who states that "Beatrice's certainty that Ellen 'absolutely wasn't going to' reveal anything 'intriguing' suggests an intentional orchestration on behalf of the diarist; her perfected, feminine domesticity is exposed as a deliberately manufactured and, hence, fictional construct" (97).

whether in the inclusion of fictional or fictionalised events as the journal is rewritten. The direct narration of Ellen does, however, partly conform to the angel concept: “she thought she could feel his needs and discomforts, without words” (448).

Sidonie Smith analyses the autobiography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, nineteenth-century writer and early women’s rights activist, in *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body* and constructs a conceptualisation of subversive femininity that is illuminating for my reading of Ellen’s journal. Smith notes how Stanton carefully positions her journal to avoid being designated as an unnatural monster: “initially Stanton appears to embrace the cultural identity of bourgeois woman. To counter any reading as a *lusus naturae*, a self-asserting and monstrous woman, she positions herself squarely inside the enclosure of domestic space, the territory of embodied selfhood and true womanhood” (*Subjectivity* 27). Ellen’s journal functions in a similar way to Stanton’s autobiography in the apparent embrace of the “bourgeois woman” on the surface. However, Smith states that “Stanton’s representation of herself as wife, mother and true woman persistently recedes into the background of her text” (29). As the text progresses, Stanton gives more prominence to her public life as a champion of women’s suffrage. The emphasis of domestic details accords with the prescriptions for Victorian women, whilst also adopting the male role of artist. Like Stanton’s autobiography, Ellen’s journal uses the domestic narrative as a screen by appropriating the angel in the house identity to ensure that her journal would not contain any explicit transgressions.

Byatt’s construction of the journal subverts its adoption of the angel in the house imagery through reference to the limitations on women’s lives. Ellen writes of several games of chess she plays with her curate, Herbert Baulk, who

offers her limited praise: “he was pleased to tell me that I played very well *for a lady* – I was content to accept this, since I won handsomely” (*Possession* 227; emphasis added). The subsequent entry provided for the reader relates Ellen’s dream of playing chess with Baulk, although Ellen’s queen can only move one square. Ellen notes that “it is odd, when I think of it, that in chess the female may make large runs and cross freely in all ways – in life it is much otherwise” (228). Such entries are not outright critiques of Victorian gender roles, but they serve to destabilise the legitimacy of the angel in the house imagery. Direct criticism of Victorian femininity might also risk censorship of the journal, as appropriating the male role of writer contradicts Victorian femininity and so the Victorian text must be coded to appropriately feminine imagery. As Smith notes, the female writer had to at once assume a masculine subject position to write, and so repress her femininity, but also ensure her text emphasised her nurturing feminine virtues: “to do neither was to write something ‘scandalous’ or grotesque, to write, that is against the law of genre. Thus the autobiographical project fastened the autobiographical subject to her body as it unloosed her from it” (*Subjectivity* 25). Although Ellen’s journal is not autobiography as such, it is an autobiographical narrative intended, partly, for public consumption and so Byatt aligns it within these matrices. Ellen, however, has not reproduced, so she cannot claim to have “all bodily parts having worked properly and effectively”, although Ellen’s attention to the house indicates appropriately feminine imagery: “all the domestic spaces cleaned up, this bourgeois woman has fulfilled her identity” (30). Like Cady Stanton, Ellen’s journal must *appear* innocuous by aligning the written text with the ideology of Victorian femininity, reifying the angel of the house.

The narration of the journal is complicated by instances of partially deleted phrases and visibly eradicated passages. The inclusion of “mistakes” contributes to the apparent naturalness of the journal. Alan Robinson states that “life-writing has less to do with verifiability than ‘verisimilitude’ (lifelikeness) and subjective plausibility, in which one’s past may be (un)consciously adjusted to create an illusion of continuity or consistency by minimising or rationalising cognitive dissonance” (5). On one level, such mistakes enhance the verisimilitude, as it is usual to make minor errors and to self-censor whilst in the process of writing is usual. Sternlieb states that “the writing is labored and calculated yet fosters the impression of Richardsonian spontaneity” (141). The journal includes an entry that represents Ellen crying as she writes and the syntax contributes to the spontaneity Sternlieb identifies: “but he shan’t see this, and I will find a way – to be a little more – there now I am crying, as that girl might have cried. Enough” (*Possession* 122). Ellen’s partial deleted phrases also *create* the cognitive dissonance that, as Robinson states, life-writers would usually avoid. The partially deleted phrases, however, are not aimed at discovering a voice for Ellen to talk to herself, but part of the clues to point the reader to the affair. A partially deleted phrase is included at a key point in Ellen’s journal, in the entry describing Randolph’s letter, poem and present of a Yorkshire jet brooch, sent whilst he was in Yorkshire with Christabel. Ellen relates that “~~Despite all~~ we have been so happy in our life together, even our separations contribute to the truth and deep affection that is between us” (229). The partially deleted phrase suggests that the marriage has suffered conflict of some sort that has undermined the happiness. Shiffman notes that “the crossed-out words essentially suggest an act of self-editing on the part of the



diarist in order to create the fiction of the perfect marriage” (99).<sup>38</sup> Shiffman is correct, but the problem elided here is that Ellen could have *completely* excised the phrases in her rewrite of the journal and sustained the fiction of the happy marriage. Instead, Ellen keeps the words but gives them a liminal place in the journal, both included and excluded. The words therefore undermine the representation of the marriage as wholly happy and serve as a clue to indicate that it was not quite, or not only, the happy marriage the journal represents.

Ellen leaves textual clues for later readers in the representation of Ellen the character, who is narrated by Ellen the writer. Shiffman states, in quoting one of Ellen’s journal entries, where Ellen recalls that as a young girl she wanted to be both “a Poet and a Poem” that: “the desire to be both poet and poem, author and text, is essentially the desire to be both subject and object” (103). In advancing Shiffman’s analysis, I argue that Ellen specifically references the gender division in this journal entry: “I hit on something I believe when I wrote that I meant to be a Poet and a Poem. It may be that this is the desire of all reading women, as opposed to reading men, who wish to be poets and heroes, but might see the inditing of poetry in our peaceful age a sufficiently heroic act” (*Possession* 122). Although the gender division is important in *Possession*, and a major theme of the journal, it deliberately draws the reader’s attention from Ellen’s act of writing as much as it is a comment on Victorian gender roles.

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<sup>38</sup> Kym Brindle comes to a similar conclusion, taking the Richardsonian spontaneity at face value: “Ellen speaks, hesitates, and recovers composure by erasing evidence that might belie the textually assemble façade of her marriage” (59). In Brindle’s statement, the character of “Ellen Ash” represented in the journal is conflated with Ellen the writer of the journal, as it is the character who “speaks, hesitates and recovers composure”. Ellen the writer, however, sits by Randolph’s death bed to rewrite the journal.

A further feature of the journal is that its narration is retrospective, because it is rewritten, although it conceals its retrospective narration. Sternlieb pays careful attention to the effect of retrospective narration in *Jane Eyre*. As a character, Jane's apparent closeness to the reader of the novel masks the possibility that Jane, as narrator, holds the reader at a distance, revealing Rochester's poor treatment of her but not her own secrets (Sternlieb 18). Sternlieb does not apply this interpretive strategy to *Possession* and so conflates Ellen the narrator with Ellen the character. The distinction, however, is crucial as the character of Ellen who conforms to the angel in the house is undermined by the narrator who leaves clues to the affair. Like *Jane Eyre* in Sternlieb's reading, the reader cannot know how much of the character is constructed and how much coincides with the referent of the narrator. As a result, Ellen is not a round character; even the direct narration is partial, and so Ellen's lack of an Adamic core ensures that no reconstruction of a unified identity can even be attempted in the journal.

Adams finds that the reference to the "portly truth" in Byatt's quotation of Robert Browning's "Mr Sludge, 'the Medium'" in the prefacing quotations to the novel is often presumed to be (but is not) postmodern: "while the quote does indeed question the nature of 'truth', it does not register the text's, or Byatt's, capitulation to contemporary theory" ("Dead" 122). Although Adams implies that Ellen's journals are aligned with the "portly truth" that is not postmodern (119), I read Ellen's journals in line with practices that distinguish fiction as postmodern: "if, as is frequently the case, postmodernism is identified with a 'decentering' of this particular notion of the individual, then both humanist and capitalist notions of selfhood or subjectivity will necessarily be called into question" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 13). Of course for Hutcheon, as for Byatt, postmodern fiction installs but

also subverts the subject of humanism and capitalism. It is not that Byatt is untroubled by postmodernism; the frame narrative appears to devalue postmodernist literary theory and favour more traditional approaches to textual interpretation. However, as with Byatt's other fiction, the certainties of the frame narrative are destabilised by the embedded text that prevents totalising interpretations of the novels.

Byatt represents Ellen's subjectivity as conflicted in her recognition that her marriage was both happy and that its marriage vows were undermined by Randolph's affair. The direct narration represents Ellen as living with "lies" but insists that she must be honest with herself: "she had always believed, stolidly, doggedly, that her avoidances, her approximations, her whole *charade* as she at sometimes saw it were, if not justified, at least held in check, neutralised, by her rigorous requirement that she be truthful with herself" (*Possession* 457; emphasis original). The effect of such a statement, however, misdirects the reader: it appears to indicate Ellen's "truthfulness" but it also demonstrates that Ellen is caught between conflicting and unresolved subject positions. Ellen's subjectivity is liminally positioned on the threshold of the conflict, without resolution, indeed, the "charade" of the marriage and the knowledge that it is "a house to hold a lie" (457) constitutes the "truth" for Ellen.<sup>39</sup>

Although the language Byatt uses, "lie" and "charade," appears to invalidate the marriage, such a characterisation is not wholly accurate.

Randolph says to Ellen during his last illness:

"What would I do without you, my dear? Here we are in the end, close together. You are a great comfort. We have been happy."

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<sup>39</sup> See Kathrin Lang's article "Existence on the Threshold: Liminal Characters in the Works of A.S. Byatt" for a good discussion of liminality in relation to Christabel's poetry.

“We have been happy,” she would say, and it was so, They were happy even then, in the way they had always been happy, sitting close, saying little, looking at the same things, together. (448)

The happiness and the challenges to that happiness might appear mutually exclusive but the journal and the novel itself are constructed in such a way to ensure that the reader avoids understanding Ellen’s situation as a mutually exclusive contradiction. In Ellen’s direct narration, she drafts responses to Christabel’s letter that enclosed her last letter to Randolph. Ellen considering writing that she has always known about the affair and notes that “if she did write that, it would be no more and no less than the truth, but it would not ring true, it would not convey the truth of the way it had been” (453). The journal has the same concerns at its centre: if Ellen wrote baldly that her marriage was unconsummated and that Randolph had an affair, it would not convey the truth of the marriage. Stating these facts outright would lead the reader to assume that the happiness of the marriage was negated by those facts, as if both positions were mutually exclusive. The partially excised phrases and other strategies of representation resist emphasising one particular reading of the marriage and the journal, instead multiplying unresolvable interpretations.

Brindle, however, considers that Ellen’s journal represents a surface that is a lie: “the truth that [Ellen] is living a lie – double life with a surface that does not represent actuality – is reproduced in her double-voice narrative” (59).

Brindle’s position can be clarified and extended by considering Ellen’s reflection on her quotation of Sir Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*: “Ellen liked the idea of these hard, crystalline things, which were formed in intense heat, beneath the ‘habitable surface’ of the earth and were not primeval monuments but ‘part of the living language of nature’” (*Possession* 458). The subsequent

paragraph shows Ellen applying her observations on the quotation to her life: “I am no ordinary or hysterical self-deceiver, she more or less said to herself. I keep faith with the fire and the crystals, I do not pretend that the habitable surface *is all* and so I am not a destroyer or cast into outer darkness” (458; emphasis original). The journal is reconstructed from this principle: the apparent narrative of the Victorian angel of the house and the happy marriage is the “habitable surface” but it does not pretend that it is the whole truth and contains allusions to other important elements of their lives, such as the affair.

Ellen’s narrative in her journal is certainly “double-voiced”, as Brindle identifies, but I clarify this statement by arguing that this is deliberate: it both does and does not represent the actuality of Ellen’s life. Brindle states that “Ellen was misread (and dismissed) as a conforming domestic angel” (60). This statement is correct but it elides the fact that Ellen also deliberately constructs herself as the angel of the house through the representation of the “habitable surface” of her marriage in the journal. The conflicting subject positions that Ellen’s journal constructs, on the one hand, represent the marriage accurately when compared with the direct narration of her in the novel and seemingly coincide with her conceptualisation of her life as the referent for the writing. On the other hand, the journal also unconsciously codes Ellen’s virginity, represented in the symbolism as well as through the gaps in the journal, and so it undermines the “proper aim” of literary criticism as a reconstruction of what the author intended. The biographical material in Ellen’s direct narration confirms that all the readings of her journal in the novel are partially correct: dull (Blackadder), baffling and private (Beatrice), coded sexuality (Leonora) and the representation of subjectivity as partial (Maud). The significance of the partial accuracy of each reading made by the characters is that it indicates that all

these different critical interpretations have value, but that each is conditioned and limited by the ideology implicit in individual critical positions. The intersections between critical positions can therefore correct the biases of each separately.

Byatt has been perceived as dismissing contemporary literary theory by privileging the Victorian characters and period, as well as satirising feminism and theories that emphasise sexuality. However, my analysis of Ellen's journal repositions feminism and postmodernism, as the journal and its destabilisation of the apparent values of the novel constructed through the frame narrative are both feminist and postmodernist. Ellen may not appear to have agency in the novel, but her journal nonetheless constructs the historical record. The journal also provides a positive example of a female writer, successful in her writing in terms of skill, if not actual publication.

### 3. Femininity and Reading Female Writing

My analysis of Ellen's journal demonstrates Byatt's use of postmodern techniques of representation to make postmodern points about truth, history and subjectivity, destabilising what appears to be an act of historically accurate Victorian ventriloquism. Ellen's journal is read as an "authentic" Victorian diary by the characters in the novel and it is revealed to be purposely edited and rewritten, a simulacrum of a journal and an act of ventriloquism by the character. The portrait of the woman writer is complicated by Byatt's representation of Ellen's carefully wrought and well-written impersonation of the middle-class Victorian female diary. Ellen's journal employs and subverts the angel of the house trope and serves to propel the detective plot forward, hinting at the secret affair. However, the references to Victorian gender roles and the angel in the house in the journal also denaturalise the literary patriarchal

discourse that enforces the femininity of women's writing as a regulatory law.

*Possession* addresses the discursive construction of the woman writer by explicating and resisting the naturalised ideology of femininity deemed necessary in women's texts.

Byatt engages with theoretical conceptualisations of the woman writer in *Possession*, staged in the embedded texts. Competing perspectives on female authorship are set in tension, often subtly. Although Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* have arguably been surpassed by later works of feminist scholarship, it is relevant to aspects of Byatt's representation of the woman author, as is the work of life-writing critics, including Sidonie Smith and Leigh Gilmore. Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of the angel and the monster as conceptualisations of femininity in Victorian literature are pertinent to Byatt's ventriloquism of Victorian texts but the work on autobiography and subjectivity contextualises Byatt's use of postmodern strategies of representation, as well as her interrogation of the representation of subjectivity.

As Gilmore states, definitions of autobiography as a genre have excluded gender, positioning women as the "outlaw", which "tends to reinforce the conception that women are always already banished to the margin, and it may naturalize the practices that construct margin and center and then relegate some women to those margins" (*Autobiographics* 22). Lena Steveker's analysis of *Possession* evidences the problem that Gilmore identifies, stating that the novel "marginalizes the only female poet it features" (56), as Christabel is denied both literary success and personal happiness. Steveker considers the feminist reclamation of Christabel's poetry irrelevant to the economy of literary value, as the feminists are ridiculed in *Possession* (56). For *Possession*, the

points that Gilmore raises with the law-outlaw figure of women, who write from the margins, are staged in the Victorian women's writing. Steveker in particular emphasises the priority of the male canon in *Possession* (48), although the novel itself contains many images of the rereading and the revaluation of marginalised literary texts, and my reading of Ellen's journal in particular reevaluates feminism in the novel.

I will compare Ellen's journal with Christabel's poetry, as well as their statements on the problems women face when attempting to write under a patriarchal society. Christabel writes, in a letter to Randolph, how she asked a well-respected poet if she had a poetic voice, "*he replied with courteous promptness – that they were pretty things – not quite regular – and not always well-regulated by a proper sense of decorum –*" (*Possession* 180; emphasis original). The criticism Christabel receives makes the relationship between the conventions of genre and conventional gendered behaviour explicit, where femininity is a regulatory law that keeps women's writing in its place as minor. Christabel's poetry has the appropriate prettiness expected of women and women's verse, but lacks other feminine virtues like regularity. The language Byatt uses, that the verse is "*not always well-regulated by a proper sense of decorum*", draws attention to the gendered traits that women's writing must exhibit to be perceived as successful as *female* verse. She therefore demonstrates that women's writing is subject to patriarchal discourse.

Virginia Woolf, when considering how androcentric values have dictated what is perceived as important and dramatic in literature, states that women writers have faced the devaluation of their concerns and incurred negative responses to their writing: "she met that criticism as her temperament dictated, with docility and diffidence; or with anger and emphasis. It does not matter



which it was; she was thinking of something other than the thing itself" (*Room* 86). The point Woolf makes is that women's writing will be perceived as inadequate when judged against universalised masculine conventions, as those conventions distort women's writing.<sup>40</sup> Byatt's commentary on Christabel's poetry makes explicit the way that femininity is enforced on women's writing as a regulatory tool, as Christabel adapts genre and gender conventions irregularly and is criticised for doing so. Christabel's language is carefully constructed by Byatt. The reader of the novel can recognise that Christabel's poetry, particularly *The Fairy Melusine*, is positioned as a deliberate destabilisation of the regulation of female writing through the conventions of femininity, as I will discuss below.

Earlier in this chapter, I referenced Woolf's need to kill the angel in the house in order to write and analysed Byatt's use and subversion of the angel in Ellen's journal. Gilbert and Gubar analyse the effect of patriarchal images of femininity, such as the angel, on women's writing: "all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity" (17). The "monster" is the angel's Other: the active, selfish, worldly woman who does not sacrifice herself for everyone else. Byatt stages both the angel and the monster as tropes of femininity and female writing in *Possession* but undermines the patriarchal

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<sup>40</sup> Toril Moi reads this passage in *A Room of One's Own* differently: "it is not hard to see what Woolf is struggling to avoid having to choose between her gender and her humanity, between being a woman and being a writer, between her particular way of being embodied and her sense that the writer must attend to things as they are in themselves" ("Woman" 268). Moi's reading of Woolf is accurate, given Woolf's preoccupation with the androgynous creative mind, although I think this passage is also shows how patriarchal conventions distort women's writing.

discourse implied by such imagery through a feminist re-visioning of each concept. The “monster” is represented through Christabel’s rewriting of the Fairy Melusine “*who has two aspects – an Unnatural Monster – and a most proud and loving and handy woman*” (*Possession* 174). Byatt’s reimagining represents the monstrosity of Melusine, half-serpent, half-woman, who can achieve a soul if she marries a man and if he never spies on her on a Saturday when her serpent tail is visible.

However, as Christabel’s statement suggests, Byatt figures Melusine’s monstrosity as the projected male fear of female power and does not figure Melusine as a passive angel of the house, emphasising instead her actions as a builder of castles and an expert in husbandry. Jan Shaw analyses the medieval versions of Melusine that Byatt draws on in *Possession* and places them into a Victorian context, stating that Byatt’s use of Melusine elides the complexities of the medieval versions (235). Whilst Shaw finds that Byatt’s portrayal of the Melusine story is reductive and replicates contemporary perspectives on “medieval misogyny” (235), I agree that Byatt uses the myth to explore current paradigms of Victorian culture. Despite Shaw’s argument that Byatt emphasises the most negative and monstrous aspects of the Melusine tale but does not rewrite it as liberating (235), I will argue below that Byatt’s refiguration of Melusine as an autobiographical narrative as of a woman artist foregrounds female agency.

Franken observes that Byatt’s representation of Melusine is an image of the woman artist, although she notes that other interpretations, such as Luce Irigaray’s, have figured Melusine as an image of the male fear of motherhood (98). Instead, Franken emphasises the similarities between Christabel and Melusine, as Christabel focuses on the creativity Melusine exhibits and the

autonomy she has in her private bathroom (100) and Franken compares it to Christabel's solitude and autonomy in her cottage with Blanche: "here LaMotte can be what she truly is and wants to be: a poet to the core. Thus, the narrator subverts the monstrosity attached to Melusine's private space for it is presented as a strength" (101). Whilst Franken's comments suggest that Christabel's identity is presented as a liberal-humanist core, rather than a constructed subjectivity, her case that Melusine is a form of self-portrait is convincing.

If Melusine is an autobiographical portrait of Christabel as the *woman* artist, it is not an autobiography, just as Ellen's narrative is autobiographical but not posed as an autobiography. Leigh Gilmore coins the term "autobiographics" to construct a space to analyse non-canonical autobiographical texts that are not read as autobiographies: "I want to demonstrate here how to read for a text's autobiographics, that is, how to discern in the discourses of truth and identity those textual places where women's self-representation interrupts (or is interrupted by) the regulatory laws of gender and genre" (*Autobiographics* 44-5). Byatt's Victorian women's texts complicate self-representation in *Possession* by both interrupting and being interrupted by the regulatory laws of gender and genre. Undermining the conventions that regulate femininity in (stereo)typical representations of women, both in terms of the image of women and how female texts should be written, the embedded texts interrupt, or install and subvert, the regulatory law of gender. As such, the embedded texts use autobiographical narratives to represent the woman artist and so undermine the mutual reinforcement of femininity in gender and genre. The embedded texts consequently demonstrate that the woman artist can assume agency by reclaiming and rewriting masculine forms, such as the epic poem.

The representation of Melusine as creative rewrites the script of the “monster” image in Victorian ideology and undermines the binary that constructs the woman artist, for as Christabel observes to Sabine, women are “largely thought to be unable to write well, unlikely to try, and something like *changelings* or *monsters* when indeed they do succeed, and achieve something” (*Possession* 350; emphasis added). Christabel’s poem undermines the equation of monstrosity with female power and creativity, exposing the patriarchal condemnation of female agency in the introduction to poem, “But let the Power take a female form / And ’tis the Power is punished” (292). Byatt constructs *The Fairy Melusine* as a denaturalisation of gendered traits associated with female verse and femininity, drawing attention to this through Ellen’s judgement of the poem in her journal: “it is truly original, although the general public may have trouble in recognising its genius, because it makes not concession to vulgar frailties of imagination, and because its virtues are so far removed in some ways at least from those expected of the weaker sex” (120).

The verse does not employ strategies of representation that coincide with the patriarchal discourse of femininity: “here is no swooning sentiment, no timid purity, no softly gloved lady-like *pattin*g of the reader’s sensibility, but lively imagination, but force and vigour” (120-1; emphasis original). The representation of Melusine instead emphasises her agency through her creativity, despite the tragic outcome of her story. Disassociating the representation of Melusine from the conventional female virtues and implying a certain quality of masculinity in the language, “force and vigour,” Ellen’s journal entry suggestively undermines the opposition of masculine and feminine traits, attached to each pole of the gender binary. The characterisation of *The Fairy Melusine* in Ellen’s journal resonates with Smith’s statement that

whilst ideologies such as gender ideologies rigidly script identities and differences according to apparently “natural” or “God-given” distinctions, these cultural scripts of difference remain vulnerable to contradictions from within and contesting social dialects from without that fracture their coherence and dispute their privilege.

(Smith, *Subjectivity* 21)

Christabel’s poem, to use Smith’s formulation, fractures the coherence of the cultural scripts for female writing, undermining the regulatory law that women’s writing be feminine.

Like Ellen’s journal, Christabel’s poem denaturalises the cultural script of femininity under patriarchal Victorian society by taking the sexist image of the monster, as Ellen’s does the angel, and subverting it through the parody of the values attributed to femininity. Judith Butler discusses the subversive parody that drag points towards, where gender identity is performative, not substantive, and is revealed to be a copy without an original: “although the gender meanings taken up in the parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalize and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization” (188). The Victorian women’s texts in *Possession* are not positioned as explicit parodies; the embedded texts instead parody the naturalised link between gender and genre, indicating that women’s texts need not be feminine. As Gilmore states, “the ‘feminine’ subject immersed in the ideology of gender is not the only gendered construction available to women. Indeed, the various positionings of women within and against constructions of gender provides a powerful illustration for claims against the ‘naturalness’ of gender” (*Autobiographics* 20). Whilst the Victorian women’s texts evince the

power relations that regulate women's writing as necessarily feminine, Byatt explodes the imagery that constructs that femininity.

It is striking that Byatt's female protagonists are dramatised in the act of reading or making readings of texts, analysing literary conventions and the representation of femininity. Byatt comments metafictionally on the representational practices that construct femininity and the power relations manifest in cultural images of femininity. In *Still Life* and *Babel Tower*, Frederica is subject to the regulatory effects of male-defined femininity. Frederica's attempted resistance to power relations in *Babel* are limited and Byatt represents more effective opportunities for resistance in *A Whistling Woman*, where the women use parody to denaturalise the patriarchal script of femininity. However, as Butler states, after quoting Frederick Jameson's critique of the postmodern use of parody and pastiche: "parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (189). By employing metafictional parodies of literary conventions, such as the parody of female conversation and representations of women in literature on Frederica's "Free Women" television programme in *Whistling*, as well as the dramatization of the reading process in *Possession*, Byatt denaturalises the conventions of gender and genre.

The construction of Ellen's journal and the staged reading process in *Possession* both emphasise discontinuity and necessitate readings "occurring in the margins of hegemonic discourses within cultural texts, in the social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions" (Gilmore, *Autobiographics* 42). No singular reading of Ellen's journal takes priority. The reader's encounters with

the journal itself prompt the analysis made here and this is confirmed in the partially correct readings made by the characters. Leonora intuits the journal's sexual secrets, Maud finds that its representation of subjectivity is partial and Beatrice's sense that it baffles confirms that the journal is not what it appears to be. Although the information that Ellen's life is a "lie" or "charade" comes from the direct representation, it is enacted in Beatrice's reading of the journal, identifying its misdirection in its "*panelling*" (*Possession* 220; emphasis original). The biographical material in the direct representation tempts the reader to make a biographical interpretation of Ellen's journal, giving us the author's thoughts to "furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes 147). However, Ellen's journal finally destabilises any attempts to reconstruct a unitary ego or unified meaning. The same textual strategies that appear to confirm the primacy of the biographical material in the direct narration in the end undermine the possibility of aligning the text with the referent. Ellen's journal forecloses the possibility of knowing Ellen in its text as the subjectivity it represents continually undermines itself.

The end of *Possession* might seem to conflict with the analysis of Ellen's journal here, as the endings for each timeline have been perceived as traditional and conservative, both in terms of literary conventions and politics. The twentieth-century timeline depicts Roland and Maud consummating their relationship and the nineteenth-century timeline represents Randolph meeting his daughter, Maia, unbeknownst to the rest of the characters. Adams reads the postscript as not ironic because "the ultimate vindication is offered to Ash, the privileged author who necessarily 'knows' more than the critics who come after him" ("Defending" 348) as he has met his daughter and the critics do not find this out. A further problem, particularly for feminist readings of the novel, is that

“the consummation scene establishes very traditional gender roles, and Roland finds himself assuming an unfamiliar dominant role in the romantic relationship” (Su, “Fantasies” 708). However, Campbell suggests we read this ending ironically: “some readers may find ominous the description of their final union as Roland’s taking ‘possession,’ but the narrator confesses that the phrase is ‘outdated’ and places against it language of newness and rebirth” (*Heliotropic* 134). Su also finds that the use of the word “possession” here “seems intended to strike a playful and ironic tone” (“Fantasies” 709).

The endings of *Possession*, then, can be read ironically, like endings in the Quartet. Campbell states that

Although at least one reviewer has accused Byatt of failing to leave room for contingency [...], it is precisely an acknowledgement of contingent reality that is achieved in her ending and especially in the postscript, which sends the reader back to the text with questions which prove the impossibility of final interpretations. (*Heliotropic* 136)

Ellen’s journal mirrors the concerns of the postscript: it sends the reader back to *Possession* with questions that cannot foster final interpretations.



## Chapter 5: Narrating Subjectivity in *The Biographer's Tale*

This chapter analyses life writing and postmodernism in *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) in order to counter the perception that Byatt is resistant to, or critical of, postmodernism. Certainly, a critique of postmodernism is demonstrated through the novel's narrator, Phineas, but that critique is ironically undermined by the unreliability of the narration. The apparently negative representation of postmodernism can be productively read as an interrogation of the way in which postmodernism, usually critical of metanarratives, can become a grand or metanarrative itself.<sup>41</sup> Byatt uses postmodern strategies of representation to destabilise the metanarrative of postmodernism that Phineas describes, whilst at the same time performing the complicit critique that postmodernism enacts.

The protagonist and narrator, Phineas, gives up postmodern literary studies at the start of the novel and attempts to write a biography that will emphasise the wholeness of a self, an antithesis to postmodern fragmented subjectivity. Byatt's novel certainly critiques a version of literary theory, but, as will be shown, the representation of postmodernism in Phineas's narrative is an ironic parody. Biography is positioned in opposition to literary theory, but this version of biography is also an ironic parody of biographies that naturalise a liberal-humanist unified (whole) self as the paradigmatic self of life-writing.

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<sup>41</sup> Brian McHale is insightful on the difficulty of representing a view of postmodernism that avoids inculcating a metanarrative of postmodernism in the argumentation: "this is a rhetorical problem (though not a 'merely' rhetorical one): how to persuade the reader to entertain a particular construction of postmodernism while at the same time preserving a particular construction of the provisionality, the 'as if' character, of all such constructions?" (1)

Byatt's novel installs the quest for the unified self through Phineas's narration and prevents him from realising this self, demonstrating it to be a constructed illusion. Phineas's unreliable narration conceals the ideological basis of his liberal-humanism, although the reader can identify Byatt's parodic representation of Phineas through the numerous and deliberate inconsistencies in the novel.

Ten years after the publication of *Possession* (1990), *The Biographer's Tale* returns to and develops *Possession's* plot: both novels represent the quest for biographical knowledge about authors. When the reader compares how each novel presents the quest for author biographies, it appears as if the protagonist of *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas, fails where *Possession's* protagonists, Maud and Roland, succeed. Phineas discovers very little information about the author he researches, Scholes Destry-Scholes, whereas Maud and Roland uncover a sensational affair between two Victorian poets and find that Maud is a direct descendent from their child. A more subtle analysis, however, takes into account the consequences and meaning of the quests for biographical knowledge, particularly as the apparent success of Maud and Roland's quest is undermined by the destabilisation of biographical truth in Ellen's journal, as I have shown in my analysis of *Possession* in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Ellen's journal foregrounds how the representational practices employed in life-writing affect its truth status. Byatt emphasises that life-writing is positioned as a form of factual writing that *records* and *documents* but the use of language and strategies of representation complicate its facticity. My analysis of *Possession* has implications for how Byatt's reader approaches *The Biographer's Tale*. It is clear that *The Biographer's Tale* restages *Possession's*

biographical quest and reservations about literary criticism; a number of critics have analysed the relationship between the two novels (O'Connor 380; Alfer and de Campos 130; Campbell, *Heliotropic* 216; Boccardi, *Byatt* 77). My analysis of *Possession* is particularly relevant here, not only because the themes of each novel are consonant but also because critical analysis of postmodernism in relation to these novels is inconsistent. As discussed in Chapter 4, some critics consider *Possession* postmodern and some do not; I argued that *Possession* uses postmodern devices to make postmodern points about truth, history and subjectivity.

As with my analyses of Byatt's other novels, however, I show that the use of liberal-humanist ideology in *The Biographer's Tale* is undermined by the relationship between the frame narrative and the embedded text. In researching the life of Scholes Destry-Scholes, the fictional biographer who published a work predicated on the representation of his subject as a unified, individual and whole self, Phineas discovers three fragments of unpublished texts by Destry-Scholes. Rather than confirming Phineas's supposition that Destry-Scholes's work represents selfhood as whole, these texts appear to be partial drafts and fragmentary in their themes, suggesting a discursively constructed subjectivity.

Catherine Belsey's reference to the citationality of *Possession* also applies to *The Biographer's Tale*: "these fictitious texts [. . .], all instances of pastiche of one kind or another, are themselves profoundly allusive and citational" (*Postmodern* 693). I argue that Byatt is constructing an allusive and citational parody in the embedded texts in *The Biographer's Tale*, particularly the works by Destry-Scholes. Byatt extends her use of parody to the frame narrative in this novel, as its plot and structure follow A. J. A. Symons's *The Quest for Corvo* (1934). Symons's biography of Corvo recounts the order of his

research rather than the chronology of his subject's life and denaturalises the appearance that conventional biography objectively reports a life by emphasising the biographer's construction of the subject through narrative. However, Byatt inverts Symons's research success and has Phineas fail. I argue that this plot change is a significant part of her undermining of Phineas's worldview, demonstrating, despite Phineas's assertions that he wants to "find" Destry-Scholes, that the subject does not pre-exist its construction in biographical narratives. Byatt's rewriting of the plot of *The Quest for Corvo* through parody is subtly postmodern, as she subverts the source text to make a postmodern point about the construction of subjectivity.

Critics of *The Biographer's Tale* to date have not explicitly accounted for Byatt's deliberate contradictions in her representation of Phineas, and its use of *The Quest for Corvo*, and have either partly replicated the novel's inconsistencies or partly elided the ambivalences. Critical analyses of *The Biographer's Tale* are complicated by contradictions within each argument. For example Mariadele Boccardi posits that "*The Biographer's Tale* adopts the cloak of postmodern representational techniques and some ontological questions only ultimately to reject them in favour of a world without texts" (Byatt 151). Boccardi's argument is conditioned by the novel's metanarratives, whereas Phineas's narration is in fact a parodic account of postmodernism that he opposes to concrete "facts and things" in biography and the natural world. Boccardi goes on to state that "although Nanson is granted his wish to renounce theory in favour of things, without theory he cannot make sense of things" (157). Boccardi's second statement is not consistent with the first, as the second statement indicates that "things" do not signify except within a sign system that constructs their meaning.

Whilst Boccardi is correct that Phineas gives priority to a world without texts at the end of the novel, the novel's ending is ironic. Phineas's initial attempts to encounter facts, things and unified selfhood are undermined by his encounters with texts that represent subjectivity as fragmented and meaning as constructed and contextually dependent, rather than innate or absolutely factual. The novel therefore enacts the postmodern destabilisation of liberal-humanism and inherent meaning, showing them to be illusory, ideological metanarratives.

Boccardi's analysis demonstrates the difficulty that faces critics of *The Biographer's Tale*. The novel is ambivalent and contradictory, and when its structure and narration are not made the focus of the analysis, those contradictory ambivalences carry over into the analysis. My analysis in Chapter 4 focused on the narration of Ellen's journal and the structure of the novel; this allowed me to address the apparent contradictions in the novel's representation of literary theory. My argument in this chapter will also focus on the narration and structure of *The Biographer's Tale* to analyse and undermine Phineas's rejection of postmodern literary theory and its values. I explain the contradictions in the novel through Byatt's critique of metanarratives and Phineas's unreliable narration, as well as accounting for representation of subjectivity as fragmented, absent and constructed by language.

In her analysis of Byatt's novels, Ann Marie Adams highlights that Byatt often portrays characters researching author biographies and that this affects her conceptualisation of the author-reader relationship. Adams finds that Byatt constructs a system where academics are satirised when they do not read correctly but instead impose their own interpretation onto a text. Roland cares about what the author meant and was thinking about when they wrote (Adams,

“Dead” 119-20), and is rewarded with a poetic sensibility, three job offers and a romantic relationship with Maud. I discussed Adams’s analysis of authorship in *Possession* in Chapter 4 including her observation that the novel’s endorsement of a single “theological” interpretation of literature is a rejection of poststructuralist thought (particularly the work of Roland Barthes). However, I argued in Chapter 4 that Ellen’s journal, as an embedded text, disrupts the process of textual interpretation and the values implied by the success of the biographical quest in Maud and Roland’s plot in the frame narrative. Byatt’s characters feel certain that they have discovered all the important information about the Victorians, but the deliberate limited and manipulated information in Ellen’s journal undermines that certainty.

The narration of *The Biographer’s Tale* has commonalities with Ellen’s journal, which represented an unreliable narrator. Byatt’s critics note that the novel’s homodiegetic narrator is significant (Campbell, *Heliotropic* 218; Alfer and de Campos 130; Boccardi, *Byatt* 85; Steveker 33) but they have not considered Phineas an unreliable narrator. Phineas’s rejection of postmodern literary theory at the start of the novel, as well as his dismissal of biography and writing at the end of the novel, have therefore largely been taken at face value by critics. Carla Rodriguez González’s article on *The Biographer’s Tale* is one of the more subtle analyses of postmodernism in the novel and part of the reason for her subtlety is that she considers the contradictions in Phineas’s narration.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See also Irmtraud Huber for another view of Phineas’s unreliability, although like González, Huber does not employ the term. Huber notes that *The Biographer’s Tale* appears to be critical of postmodernist theory, but “it would be a mistake, however, to take Phineas’s outspoken rejection at face value” (239). Huber accepts Phineas’s rejection of writing at the end of the novel, and so he is unable to develop this point further.

González quotes Phineas's comments on the academic seminars and notes that "Byatt has articulated similar ideas in her essays, where she has confessed a profound distrust of contemporary literary practices at academic institutions and has complained about the way critics and writers of fiction partake in a system that seems to reward homogeneity" (448). Although González does not use this terminology, her analysis implies that Byatt considers postmodernism to be a prescriptive methodology, unable to escape its own metanarrative, rather than being used to analyse and dismantle metanarratives.

However, as my argument will show, regardless of Byatt's perspective in her essays, the representation of postmodernism in *The Biographer's Tale* is complex and nuanced, both installing and subverting postmodernism itself, as well as liberal-humanism. I agree with González when she proposes that the novel "transcends what has been described as 'the way postmodernist theory deadens literary practice' by reproducing postmodern strategies in order to interrogate them from within" (449). González's position can be developed further and clarified, as the postmodern strategies extend to the narration of the novel.

Although no critic has identified Phineas's unreliable narration in their analysis, Campbell has made a perceptive comment on the novel: "despite often acting as a spokesperson for Byatt, Phineas seems to prove his creator's point when she says [...] that first-person narration can be 'an interesting barrier between the writer and the reader'" (*Heliotropic* 11). Campbell does not develop her comment further as she perceives that Phineas's critique of literary theory is aligned with Byatt's ambivalent views of literary theory.<sup>43</sup> However, as I have

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<sup>43</sup> See Chapter 1: Texts and Contexts for a more detailed discussion of critical perspectives on Byatt's views of literary theory.

argued in my previous chapters, the relationship between the embedded texts and the frame narrative complicate the idea that Byatt's views are synonymous with those of her characters who critique literary theory. The opposition between literary theory and fiction, in Byatt's novels, is more contentious than has been portrayed by critics. *The Biographer's Tale* has an equally complex relationship with literary theory and my argument postulates that Byatt's representation of postmodernism is a *deliberately* one-sided parody. This is why Byatt's criticism of postmodernism is more readily apparent than her usage of it, as the ironic parody is not perceived.

Lena Steveker considers *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale* to be "biographic metafiction" (19-20), a term developed from Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. Despite her references to postmodernism, Steveker finds that the identity formation of Byatt's male protagonists, Roland in *Possession* and Phineas in *The Biographer's Tale*, is liberal-humanist and Romantic: neither character can be considered postmodern (46). Other critics similarly find that *The Biographer's Tale* represents a liberal-humanist perspective in Phineas's initial rejection of postmodern literary theory (for a liberal-humanist quest for a "whole" self), as well as his eventual rejection of writing and texts for the natural world (substituting sign systems for access to the referent). Jane Campbell's review of the novel notes the novel's poststructuralist and postmodernism concerns, but implies that humanism triumphs in the novel: "Phineas is saved from despair because he cannot abandon the ideas of self and meaning altogether; like the 'primeval reader,' he needs these concepts" ("Review"). Alfer and de Campos find that although the novel is sceptical of the value of literature as well the humanist values of the realist novel (129), they consider Phineas's failure to write a humanist biography



positive, as it allows him contact with the concrete, natural world (130-1). Alfer and de Campos's analysis reproduces the dichotomy of representation and reality, rather than deconstructing the dichotomy or the novel's dichotomised relationship to postmodernism and humanism.

The novel's complex approach to semiotic systems and Phineas's attempts to access the referent, which is ironic, are largely elided in the critical perspectives I have discussed here. The narration sets up a paradox of semiotics from the start. Phineas gives up postmodern literary theory because it imposes interpretations whereas biography discovers the "real," "whole" person by arranging facts about their life into a narrative form. Phineas therefore seeks the referent of biography, as opposed to the constructed sign systems imposed on texts by literary theory. Given that Phineas cannot find facts and things that act as a biographical referent as the subject of biography is a linguistic construct he rejects sign systems in favour of what he believes is access to the "real" and unalienable referent, the natural world. However, Phineas's continual attempts to exchange sign systems for the referent are flawed, as the referent is part of the sign.

However, the narration of the novel, combined with Byatt's presumed liberal-humanism and her ambivalent view of literary theory, have meant that the novel's representation of postmodernism and semiotics has been misread. It is not that Phineas's biographical quest fails (where *Possession's* succeeds) and therefore that Byatt prioritises the natural world in *The Biographer's Tale*. Instead, the ironic narration indicates that meaning does not exist prior to sign systems, that all meaning is constructed and that the novel demonstrates that Phineas's paradigms, liberal-humanist biography and his conceptualisation of the "natural" world, are always-already ideological.

Linda Hutcheon observes that debates about postmodernism show that “it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the ‘natural.’ But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited)” (*Poetics* xi). *The Biographer’s Tale* renders the natural problematic and reveals its ideological construction, particularly through the ending of the novel. The endings of Byatt’s novels generally are ironic, or in some way destabilising, although the ending of *The Biographer’s Tale* has been considered as a straightforward turn to nature. I argued in Chapter 3 that the ending of each of the Quartet novels is ironic, especially the final novel, *A Whistling Woman* (2002). Byatt repeatedly thematises the literary conventions of endings throughout *Whistling* and stages a re-reading of the end of Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* as ironic through Frederica’s father, Bill. Like Hutcheon’s conceptualisation of postmodernism as providing answers that are provisional, contextually determined and limited, Byatt’s endings are a strategy of representation that she uses to undermine and destabilise the apparent certainties depicted in the frame narrative, as well as unmasking and denaturalising the ideologies implied by the literary conventions she employs.

The first section of my chapter on *The Biographer’s Tale* analyses the unreliable narration and the primary life-writing intertext, A. J. A. Symons’s *The Quest for Corvo*. I argue that Phineas’s unreliability as a narrator is one of the strategies of representation that allows Byatt to destabilise the liberal-humanist ideology in the frame narrative. Byatt’s parody of *The Quest for Corvo* and the inverted plot allows her to further undermine Phineas’s narration. The second section of this chapter analyses how the relationship between the frame narrative and the embedded texts, particularly Destry-Scholes’s biographical

fragments, destabilises Phineas's research programme and ideological position. My analysis of the novel suggests that Phineas's attempt to "find" the "whole man" is an imposition of a naturalised humanist ideology. Phineas gives up biography for the same reasons he gives up literary theory, and instead turns to the natural world to escape meaning that is mediated; I will show that Phineas's conceptualisation of the natural world as unmediated is fallacious. The final section of the chapter analyses the role of the reader in *The Biographer's Tale*, arguing that the reader is warned against attempting to unify the fragmentation of the narrative through connecting and linking metaphors.

### 1. Structure and Unreliable Narration in *The Biographer's Tale*

Readers encounter difficulties when attempting to interpret *The Biographer's Tale*, as the narrative is inconsistent and fragmentary. I propose that the narrative is deliberately inconsistent and fragmentary because Byatt writes Phineas as an unreliable narrator to demonstrate that his values are based on illusory conceptualisations of selfhood and naturalised ideology. Rather than exemplifying Byatt's apparent liberal-humanist politics and conceptions of self, Phineas is the vehicle for Byatt's *critique* of liberal-humanist metanarratives – a critique that is partly constructed through her use of life-writing tropes. This section will analyse Phineas's unreliable narration and the structure of the novel, which is a postmodern parody of *The Quest for Corvo* by A. J. A. Symons. In *The Biographer's Tale*, Byatt's use of *The Quest for Corvo* inverts Symons's success and uses this inversion to undermine the ideology that informs Phineas's liberal-humanist view of life-writing.

At the start of the novel, Phineas gives up a PhD in postmodern literary theory and looks for an alternative way to structure his life (*Tale 3*). Phineas's plot employs a metanarrative of postmodernist literary theory, where he

represents literary theory as a framework that homogenises disparate texts by imposing identical readings onto them, regardless of historical specificities and themes (1). He seeks an alternative that embraces the solidity of facts and things, and takes up biography as the apparent antithesis to literary theory. A colleague, Ormorod Goode, introduces Phineas to Scholes Destry-Scholes's great work of biography on Victorian polymath, Sir Elmer Bole, a text that emphasises wholeness and unity rather than postmodern fragmentation of identity and the body. For Goode, Destry-Scholes's work is the paradigmatic biography, expressing the Platonic ideal of what biography should be: "what can be nobler, he reiterated, or more exacting, than to explore, to constitute, to open, a whole man, a whole opus, to us?" (5). Goode's definition of biography invokes a metaphysics of presence, implying that the self as represented in biography precedes the narrative, or language, that represents it.

I will discuss the metaphysics of presence staged by Byatt's use of life-writing genres further, as well as the theme of absent subjectivity, later in the chapter. At this stage, it is pertinent to note, as Laura Marcus states, that following the influence of deconstruction, "autobiography became largely focused on 'the subject', through the categories of presence/absence, unity/alienation, self/text" (*Auto/biography* 182). *The Biographer's Tale* engages with the dichotomised categories that Marcus identifies. Phineas's narration represents his affinity with one term of the dichotomies, particularly presence and unity, terms that align with the Western foundational metanarrative in life-writing.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss the defining metanarrative that produces a model of the autobiographical subject: "'Autobiography' celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story. Its theorists have

installed this master narrative of ‘the sovereign self’ as an institution of literature and culture, and identified, in the course of the twentieth century, a canon of representative narratives” (*Reading* 3-4). This sovereign autonomous self is a pervasive concept in the history and theory of life writing and Byatt’s representation of life-writing through Phineas and Goode is coterminous with the master narrative that Smith and Watson identify. However, as Smith and Watson state, the master narrative of the sovereign self has been destabilised by postmodern and post-structuralist theory (*Reading* 136). The conceptualisation of biography at the start of the novel employs the very liberal-humanist self that post-structuralism deconstructed and replaced with the concept of the subject. Phineas is attracted to Goode’s paradigm of biography as he perceives it as opposed to the intellectual world he has rejected.

Alfer and de Campos state that Goode’s description denotes a unified self: “Goode describes biography as a celebration of the uniqueness of the human self, a liberal-humanist vision which Phineas initially finds appealing” (130). Alfer and de Campos’s use of the word “initially” is telling, because as Phineas progresses in his research, the evidence he finds undermines his conceptualisation of selfhood in life-writing. However, the statements Phineas makes about his research in the course of the novel do not acknowledge that his conceptualisation of biography and postmodern literary theory are both ideological metanarratives.

The unacknowledged competing metanarratives do not appear parodic because they are presented as Phineas’s firmly held views and, as the novel is focalised through his narration, Byatt thereby easily establishes the conditions for the reader to be sympathetic to his perspective. The sympathy elicited by the narration is reinforced when Phineas’s views appear to coincide with Byatt’s

stated views on literary theories. Wayne Booth's study of narration is illuminating here, as he states that representing the narrative through a homodiegetic narrator affects the reliability of the narration: "when a character speaks realistically, within the drama, the convention of absolute reliability has been destroyed, and while the gains for some fiction purposes are undeniable, the costs are undeniable too" (175).<sup>44</sup> The cost Booth refers to is that the reader may struggle to discern whether the homodiegetic narrator is treated with irony or not, potentially destabilising the reader's ability to construct meaning in the work and rendering the work meaningless: "whenever an impersonal author asks us to infer subtle differences between his narrator's norms and his own, we are likely to have trouble" (321).<sup>45</sup>

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's work in the 1980s on the narrator builds on Booth's work, and she states that "there can, of course, be different degrees of unreliability. But how can the reader know whether he is supposed to trust or distrust a narrator's account?" (100). Rimmon-Kenan, however, provides some guidelines for distinguishing the trustworthiness of a narrator: "the main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement and his problematic value-scheme" (100). Phineas's exhaustion with literary

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<sup>44</sup> However, it should be noted that Tamar Yacobi presents an alternative view, as he states that a homodiegetic narrator is not a condition for unreliability, as a heterodiegetic or third person omniscient narrator can be unreliable and homodiegetic narrator can be reliable: "as my epigraphy points out, there are no package deals in narrative, least of all between surface forms or features and their effects. Instead, given the endless variability of context, the same form or formal pattern can always serve as means to different effects, and vice versa" (223).

<sup>45</sup> On impersonal narration, Booth states that: "since Flaubert, many authors and critics have been convinced that 'objective' or 'impersonal' or 'dramatic' modes of narration are naturally superior to any mode that allows for direct appearances by the author or his reliable spokesman" (8).

theory is a theme that appears in Byatt's other novels, particularly *Possession*, and so the reader may be encouraged to take the critique of literary theory at face value. However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 4 on *Possession*, the apparent critique of literary theory in the novel is complicated by the position of Ellen's journal in the novel and her unreliable narration. Byatt enacts the same strategy of representation in *The Biographer's Tale* but here she focalises the frame narrative through the narrator of the novel itself, rather than through a marginal character.

Byatt's use of the heterodiegetic omniscient narrator, derived from Victorian fiction, provides a reliable commentary on her characters, demonstrating the difference between their assumptions and actuality.<sup>46</sup> Byatt's use of embedded narratives demonstrates that the heterodiegetic narrator provides only partial commentary, as the counter-narratives constructed in the novels contradict the values that the heterodiegetic narrator appears to proclaim. Byatt states that "my own short novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, is about these riddling links between autobiography, biography, fact and fiction (and lies)" (*Histories* 10). Given that Byatt generally uses a narrator who appears to comment reliably on the action of the novel and that Phineas's "problematic value-scheme" aligns with Byatt's presumed liberal-humanism, it is unlikely that

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<sup>46</sup> Frederica is one of the most direct examples of this. Byatt frequently uses the narrator to demonstrate the limitations of Frederica's perspective on herself, events and other characters. A fairly typical example is from *The Virgin in the Garden*, regarding Frederica's choice of nightdress: "she liked to imagine this garment falling about her in folds of fine white lawn. It was in fact made of nylon, the only available kind of nightdress, except for vulgar shiny rayon, in Blesford or Calverley. It did not fall, it clung to Frederica's stick-like and knobby limbs, and she disliked its slippery feel" (58).

Phineas would be conceptualised as an unreliable narrator in commentaries on the novel.

Analysing Byatt's use of Symons's *The Quest for Corvo* indicates how Phineas's conceptualisation of life-writing is constructed from a liberal-humanist metanarrative and points to his unreliable narration. None of the major full-length studies of Byatt's fiction considered here mention *The Quest for Corvo* in their analyses of *The Biographer's Tale* and this affects their ability to identify Phineas's unreliable narration.<sup>47</sup> Erin O'Connor's article on the novel mentions Symons's work as structuring Byatt's novel (380), but she uses her analysis of the novel to question the marginal position of biography within literary studies.

Elizabeth Podnieks situates Symons's work within the canon of biography studies: "in the early twentieth century modernist writers such as Harold Nicholson, Lytton Strachey, A.J.A. Symons, and Virginia Woolf experimented with the genre, earning for it the label 'The New Biography'" (*New Biography* 1).<sup>48</sup> Symons's biography takes as its subject the late Victorian writer Frederick Rolfe, one of whose many pseudonyms was Baron Corvo.<sup>49</sup> The plot of Byatt's novel, like Symon's biography, represents the chronology of Phineas's quest to research Scholes Destry-Scholes's life. On reading Corvo's novel, *Hadrian the Seventh* (1904), Symons set out to find out more about the writer and attempt to locate his lost works. By the end of *The Quest for Corvo*,

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<sup>47</sup> Alfer and de Campos do include the 2001 reissue of *The Quest for Corvo* in their bibliography, but that is because Byatt wrote an introduction to the text.

<sup>48</sup> See also Laura Marcus's work: *Auto/Biographical Discourses on New Biography* and her chapter in *Mapping Lives*, "The Newness of the 'New Biography'", the latter of which references Symons's work within the context of New Biography.

<sup>49</sup> For simplicity, I shall refer to Rolfe as Corvo throughout this chapter.



Symons has encountered an abundance of facts about Corvo and read his lost works.

Byatt's representation of Phineas's research failure should be more striking to readers once it is recognised as an inversion of *The Quest for Corvo*, leading readers to question why Byatt uses her intertext in this way. *The Biographer's Tale* is a deliberate parody of Symons's text, whereas Phineas's narration follows the structure of Symons's text because he cannot find enough facts to write a traditional, chronological biography. At the start of the novel, Phineas aims to organise his eventual biography on Destry-Scholes around a particular motif he identifies in Destry-Scholes's writing style in the life of Bole, characterising Destry-Scholes's approach to biography as a "resourceful marshalling and arranging of *facts*" (*Tale* 15; emphasis original).<sup>50</sup> The concept of arrangement appears neutral and concrete; and is directly opposed to Phineas's characterisation of literary theory as a discourse that imposes meaning onto texts. The motif of arrangement combined with the idea that biography should represent the "whole man" in his entirety conditions Phineas's approach to his research.

Arranging facts suggests that the biographical narrative is a transparent medium, implying that the narrative is simply the means by which the unbiased arrangement of facts is transmitted to the reader. Byatt undermines Phineas's certainty that a life-writing narrative consists of a neutral arrangement of facts by limiting the facts he can find. Even the most fundamental aspects of

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<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, emphasising a motif in the life of the subject is one of the defining features of New Biography (Marcus, *Newness* 196). Byatt sets up many parallels between New Biography, Symons and Destry-Scholes through Phineas's narration, although for the sake of brevity, I only discuss those parallels that are part of her strategies of representation that destabilise Phineas's worldview.

biographical research, such as the name of the subject and their death, create epistemological uncertainty in *The Biographer's Tale*. Destry-Scholes changed his name for no discernible reason (24); it is not known exactly where, when or how he died (22). The paltry and epistemologically uncertain facts Phineas locates cannot be arranged into a narrative predicated on transmitting the wholeness of a self to the reader.

Phineas's adoption of the image of arrangement is a deliberate elision of the construction inherent in any narrative and the effects of the biographer's subjectivity in, at the very least, determining the arrangement of facts. Symons's narrative structure emphasises how the biographer's subjectivity partly constructs the biographical subject. Laura Marcus observes that, in *The Quest for Corvo*, "the elements which become more or less explicit are, first, the biographer's identification with or desire for the subject whom he pursues and, second, the nature of the 'evidence' and the means of its gathering" (*Newness* 211). Marcus's astute analysis of Symons's work is illuminating for Byatt's novel, as Phineas's narrative is in tension with an unwillingness to perceive the extent that the biographer constructs his subject and the epistemological uncertainty of the evidence he finds. The next section analyses the impossibility of Phineas's attempts to *discover* the meaning of the objects Destry-Scholes's owned, as meaning is differentially constructed in language, not inherent to the objects. Phineas's problems with life-writing stem from his ideological position, believing that the biographical referent can be discovered, when in fact the subject of life-writing is constructed through the writing itself. As Smith and Watson state in *Reading Autobiography*, "readers often conceive of autobiographical narrators as telling unified stories of their lives, as creating or discovering coherent selves but both the unified story and the coherent self are

myths of identity. For there is no coherent 'self' that predates stories about identity, about 'who' one is" (47). Byatt plays with the ideas Smith and Watson identify, setting Phineas on a course to discover a coherent self but denaturalising that self by marking its absence.

Byatt's use of *The Quest for Corvo* is a postmodern parody because she uses its plot to thematise the absent subject, whose construction in language does not constitute a metaphysics of presence.<sup>51</sup> However, because Phineas has conceptualised biography as the antithesis to literary theory's interpretative fallacy, he is unable to see that a biographer constructs their narrative from the material available and unavoidably makes an interpretation of the material.

"Finding" or "discovering" are not opposed to "imposing." A biographical narrative cannot neutrally "arrange" its material to represent the *whole* self of its subject, even if that narrative employs exhaustive material; in her analysis of New Biography, Marcus notes that taking "a point of view" characterises New Biography works: "brevity, selection, and an attention to form and unity traditionally associated with fiction rather than history" (*Newness* 196).

Something as straightforward as the selection of material and its arrangement will be discursively conditioned by the dominant ideology and biographical forms available in the historical period. Phineas can diagnose the ideology that constructs Victorian hagiographical biographies but he cannot recognise that his

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<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, *The Quest for Corvo* is considered by Edwards Saunders to be a metabiography, a genre that is, according to Saunders, a precursor to postmodernism: "these kinds of text start with question marks instead of biographical subjects. They then perceive and build up an account of their subject in whatever way they find. They are fundamentally metabiographical, in that texts like these make the process of writing a biography visible to the reader" (333).

approach to biography – rooted in liberal-humanism and literary tradition – is itself an ideological position.

Phineas states that his failure to find out who Destry-Scholes *really* was resulted from his lack of interest in his own selfhood (*Tale* 100). However, Byatt's reader can perceive that Phineas misreads his failure: he fails because his conceptualisation of biography proceeds from a flawed perspective. Phineas states that Destry-Scholes is *absent* from his narrative (214), perceiving the absence as a failure of his specific research rather than the condition of subjectivity, constructed from language. As Gilmore powerfully states, "the autobiographical subject is a representation and its representation *is* its construction. The autobiographical subject is produced not by experience but by autobiography" (*Autobiographics* 25; emphasis original). The plot of *The Biographer's Tale* repeatedly demonstrates that the subject of life-writing is produced by narrative and not by experience. Phineas's attempts to research the experiences of Destry-Scholes and to derive the life from those experiences are a fantasy of the real. Phineas's conceptualisation of Destry-Scholes's Bole biography as solidly factual is an effect of the reading process and the conventions of life-writing, rather than arising through objects associated with the life of the subject and the arrangement of facts into a biographical narrative.

Byatt's postmodern fictional exploration of the destabilisation of biographical truth reflects back on life-writing as a genre. As Caitriona Ní Dhúill observes, this effect is typical of fiction with similar concerns to *The Biographer's Tale*:

Such fiction stages biographical research and representation as an impossible task that ultimately throws the would-be biographer back on herself. In its inventive concern with the unknowable life

of an imaginary other, pseudobiography offers a vital counter-point to the concern with self-expression, self-construction and self-representation which predominates in contemporary theories and practices of life-writing. (287)

Blurring the boundaries of fictional and factual texts in the novel baffles Phineas, who is unwilling to read the Destry-Scholes fragments as a postmodern destabilisation of solid fact. *The Biographer's Tale* is a postmodern meta-commentary on biography, using *The Quest for Corvo's* metabiographical narrative as an intertext whose closure is subverted.

## 2. The Embedded Text and the Quest for the Referent

*The Biographer's Tale* contains a variety of embedded texts written by the characters. The most significant of the embedded texts for the purpose of my analysis are the three fragments of biography by Destry-Scholes, found under the drawers of the minimal Destry-Scholes archive. However, the fragments pose a number of problems for Phineas's research paradigm. The pages are found in one packet, but are possibly three separate works and the pages are not in the correct order (*Tale* 35). Phineas debates whether the three narratives should be considered part of one larger work, as there are similarities between them (98). The fragments, however, do not tell Phineas anything about Destry-Scholes himself, unless Phineas can work out *why* Destry-Scholes chose these three figures. His speculation on their commonalities is undecidable (236), but more importantly, the fragments undermine what Phineas thinks he knows about Destry-Scholes. Although Phineas understands Destry-Scholes as a biographer who privileges the truth about his subject, the fragments instead contain a "tissue of truths and half-truths and untruths" (118).

The fragments destabilise Phineas's conceptualisation of the factual basis of biography and its representation of the subject, as Destry-Scholes alters his methodology, indicating that the representation of the subject in biography is constructed, not "found" or "discovered." The fragments do not name their subjects, except by initials, and Phineas muses that "it could be argued Destry-Scholes himself, in evading the identification of his 'characters' for so long, was intending to show that identity, that the self, is a dubious matter, not of the first consequence" (97). Phineas later considers that Destry-Scholes "was conducting an experiment into the nature of biographical narrative" (165). However, Phineas does not develop or analyse the possible effects of such an experiment, but instead ends this section of the narrative with more confusion:

Why did he tell lies and write parodies? I was finding it increasingly difficult to disentangle his ideas about his three Personages – and the threads ran out all the time, from Linnaeus to Artedi, from Galton to Darwin and Pearson – from my own quest for a way to look at the world, for some kind of direct collision on my part with *things*. (167)

Phineas adds that objects become reflections of our preoccupations (167) and he implies that projecting subject-object relations onto material things is exacerbated by the tendency of literary theory to remake the world in its image. He therefore tries to see beyond what he considers to be the ideological assumptions of literary theory into the "real". However, as Catherine Belsey states "there is no unmediated experience of the world; knowledge is only possible in terms of the categories and the laws of the symbolic order" (*Critical* 38). Phineas's impasse therefore demonstrates that the liberal-humanist

attempt to locate the “real” of life-writing is ideological, as the biographical referent is an illusion. Byatt’s novel installs and subverts Phineas’s assumption of liberal-humanist ideology and demonstrates that his desire to understand the world prior to mediation is fallacious, as knowledge is always-already mediated. I will discuss Byatt’s concern with representing the physical world below, perceiving “the thing itself” as prior to mediated knowledge, as if the referent could be accessed by bypassing the sign. Byatt returns to this idea continually in her fiction, particularly in *Still Life*, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Boccardi states that the novel has a “cloak” of postmodern representation, quoted above, and her point is accurate for *Phineas’s* narration but it does not adequately describe Byatt’s commentary on Phineas’s narration. Positioning the fragments as embedded narratives enables Phineas to reflect on them, but – crucially – by providing the fragments for the reader’s consumption, the reader can see that Phineas’s characterisation of the fragments is unreliable. Phineas’s commentary on the fragments is visibly refracted through his ideological position – his search for the humanist whole man emerging from an arrangement of facts – and so he cannot make sense of the fragments as they do not signify within his value system. Phineas feels baffled when he tries to interpret the fragments within a humanist framework because they foreground the destabilisation of the fiction / real binary in a way that is typical of postmodern texts, “suggesting that the non-fictional is as constructed and as narratively known as is fiction” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 76). Destry-Scholes’s fragments mix fact, fiction and lies. His “facts” about his subjects thematise blurred boundaries between scientific and non-scientific discourses, suggesting a further commentary on the role of narrative in science and, in particular, the narrativisation of scientific fact. The fragment on Linnaeus

emphasises such blurred distinctions in its representation of him: “CL was an inhabitant of that borderland between magic and science, religion and philosophy, observation and belief, where most of our fellow men still wander, questing and amazed” (*Tale 42*).

Phineas’s confusion when faced with the fragments is significant and is derived from the destabilised distinction between fact and fiction: “I thought about Destry-Scholes who, it was beginning to appear, had romanced further what Linnaeus had already romanced” (112). By contrast, the Bole biography appears to align with the conception that biography is an arrangement of epistemologically stable facts and a conceptualisation of selfhood that arises from the amassed factual material, rather than an ideological position. The fragments instead undermine Phineas’s conceptualisation of the biographer’s role as a neutral conduit, there simply to arrange facts, and emphasises their role in actively shaping the material.<sup>52</sup>

If Phineas’s narrative dichotomises “finding” and “imposing,” positing that biography, in its arrangement of facts and things, *finds* meaning rather than *imposing* it, then Destry-Scholes’s fragments destabilise the dominant

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<sup>52</sup> See also Allen Hibbard and Carol Gelderman. Hibbard states that any biography necessarily contains the presence of the biographer, “even if subtly” (21) but some narratives are experiments in biography “that stretch and reconfigure the genre, often ones that involve the biographer’s more explicit and pronounced presence in the story and its telling” (23). Gelderman finds that the kind of narrative described by Hibbard can be “narcissistic” (329). However, Gelderman also adds that “any responsible biographer tries to let the facts speak for themselves, but in arranging these facts to create a narrative, he imposes on them his unique sensibility. And herein lies the trouble. Even an ardent admirer is intrusive, introducing an alien point of view necessarily different from the mixture of self-recrimination and self-justification that the biographee has made the subject of his/her lifelong conversation with him/herself” (333-4).



ideologies in the frame narrative and Phineas's values are undermined by the fragments. The fragments instead emphasise that all narratives are constructed and mediated, because they expose the false dichotomy that opposes "finding" and "imposing," as well as the unstable borderline between facts and lies and fiction, and therefore undermine Phineas's paradigm of biography.

Despite Phineas's conscious use of arrangement as a motif that represents biography and the wholeness of the self, his narrative unconsciously thematises fragmented subjectivity. The novel begins by Phineas describing a literary theory seminar, where "we were discussing, not for the first time, Lacan's theory of *morcellement*, the dismemberment of the imagined body" (1). Phineas recalls the seminar later in the novel and notes that the repeated analysis of the fragmented body in the literary theory seminars contrasted with and "threw into brilliant relief Destry-Scholes's real achievement in describing a whole individual, a multi-faceted single man, one life from birth to death" (214). At another point in the novel, Phineas juxtaposes *The Life of Bole* with the three biographical fragments, musing as to whether these, when taken together, suggest something about Destry-Scholes or his project (236), as all three "had concerned ghosts and spirits, doubles and hauntings, metamorphoses, *dismemberment*, death" (237; emphasis added). The fragments therefore relate thematically and linguistically – in the use of the word "dismemberment" – to the seminars mentioned at the start of the novel and the very concept that stands for his abandonment of postmodern literary theory.

The biographical fragments, then, ironically undermine his attempt to escape literary theory, as Phineas encounters in the fragments precisely the themes he is trying to avoid. Instead of facts and things, he is faced with "fictive fragments of biography, where the biographer has quite deliberately woven his

own lies and inventions into the dense texture of collected facts” (236). Phineas, however, cannot decide the meaning of the fragments, although it is plain to the reader that the fragments could be interpreted by use of the literary theory he has rejected. It is significant that Phineas decides to give up his biographical project at the point where he uses the word “dismemberment” to characterise the fragments (237-8). Byatt deliberately situates the narrative as a circular repetition of the beginning of the novel to demonstrate that each discourse employs narrative representation and is equally constructed.

Although Phineas’s opposition of literary criticism to biography is illusory, Byatt stages one of the major contentions of life-writing theory through the imagery of fragmentation in literary criticism and wholeness in biography. Marcus states that deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory affected the conceptualisation of how autobiography should represent identity: “either the autobiography serves to create the illusion of a unified self out of the fragments of identity, or the text reveals, in its fissures, its doubleness and incompleteness, the fragmentations of the subject and its lack of self-coincidence” (*Auto/biography* 218). The paradigms of the illusory unified self and the fragmented subject have the status of equally parodic metanarratives in the novel. The sustained cognitive dissonance Phineas experiences when attempting to analyse the fragments is one of the major ways by which Byatt indicates that Phineas’s worldview is problematic, in Rimmon-Kenan’s formulation. The fragments occur relatively early in the novel (*Tale* 37-95) and Byatt reinforces the cognitive dissonance occasioned by the fragments through Phineas’s encounter with Destry-Scholes’s suitcase of objects and therefore further undermines the ideology of Phineas’s worldview. The suitcase of objects is owned by Vera, Destry-Scholes’s niece, and contains a variety of things both

mundane (clothing) and unusual (a trepanning instrument), as well as a bag of marbles accompanied by a list of marble names, a box of photographs and a card index containing numerous short texts.

The texts on the cards in the index are revealed to be quotations from other texts and none of them have references as to their sources. Phineas attempts to interpret the cards by considering them a collection with a taxonomic principle that he aims to uncover:

I had the idea, which turned out to be hopelessly idealistic, that I should approach them with a completely open mind, a kind of researcher's version of the *tabula rasa*, in order to understand the whole of Destry-Scholes's purpose (if he had one) in accumulating the collection, and the subtleties (if any) of the ordering of the cards. (144)

The narrative implies that if Phineas could discover the taxonomic principle behind the collection – the reason why *these* quotations were written out rather than any other quotations – it might reveal something about Destry-Scholes's mind and so help him discover the “whole man.” However, the cards do not have either an intelligible order as they are found in the box nor any distinct thematic continuities that would suggest an appropriate reordering. Neither organisational principle suggests a viable organising principle that would reveal Destry-Scholes's priorities and interests. Several cards could belong to several themes, just as several of the marbles could be assigned to one entry from the book of marble names or one entry could apply to several marbles (172).

Phineas aims to approach the card index with an open mind, to perceive the cards according to Destry-Scholes's purpose and to avoid imposing his own interpretative framework onto the cards. The statement that the *tabula rasa*

approach to the cards is “hopelessly idealistic” is not, in itself, ironic, but it is hopelessly *idealistic* in that it is a *fantasy*. Phineas cannot approach the cards with an open mind, as he is conditioned by his conceptualisation that an open mind should find meaning and not impose it – he references Wallace Stevens here and reiterates his rejection of literary theory because it imposes meaning (144). However, the practice of finding meaning rather than imposing it is, as I have discussed above, false and Phineas’s dichotomy simply causes him to impose meaning in a way that naturalises the ideology of an “open mind.”

Phineas hopes to discover the meaning by drawing out similarities in consecutive cards. However, analysing the similarities in consecutive cards equally – by Phineas’s paradigm – imposes meaning by perceiving potentially misleading similarities, as the cards could in fact be randomly ordered, just as the fragments contain “intriguing, pointless symmetries” (98). Conceptualising the cards as belonging to an “arrangement” reinforces Phineas’s motif or “key” to Destry-Scholes’s personality as a biographer who arranges facts (15). If literary theory homogenises texts by imposing preformed analyses and biography simply arranges facts, then perceiving the motif of Phineas’s projected Destry-Scholes’s biography as an arrangement is a metafictional comment on biography, arising from Phineas’s metanarrative that dichotomises literary theory and biography. However, just as Byatt prevents Phineas from discovering the “whole man” by limiting the biographical facts he finds, she demonstrates, with amusing irony, that Phineas’s motif of arrangement is an imposition as the cards resist any naturalised ordering principle. This destabilises Phineas’s research paradigm and reveals its ideological position, as Phineas’s use of arrangement as a motif is of the same order as the literary theory seminar’s repeated application of the same theories to disparate texts

(1). Byatt therefore constructs Phineas as an unwittingly unreliable narrator whose intentions are contradicted by his naturalisation of an ideological position that is an imposition. Phineas seeks unmediated access to the world, believing it is possible by focusing on facts and things (rather than texts) and when he discovers this is impossible through biographical research, he instead looks to the natural world for unmediated access to the referent. However, as I will demonstrate, Byatt treats Phineas's shift from literary theory to biography to nature with irony; she does not privilege the natural world in opposition to literary theory, as such a view is another false dichotomy that stems from Phineas's problematic worldview and ideological position.

Ann-Marie Adams finds that Phineas's eventual turn to nature is opposed to the fallacy of academic study; in "abandoning the academy in favor of what can be learned in and through nature, Phineas follows the romanticized path of the 'scholar gypsy' made famous in Arnold's poem" ("Defending" 347). However, as I will go on to argue, this is a false dichotomy and Phineas's turn to nature is ironically undermined. In my earlier discussion of *Possession*, I contested the opposition of postmodern literary criticism and humanist literature in Byatt's fiction, where the latter is privileged. The same conceptualisation applies to *The Biographer's Tale*. Byatt frustrates Phineas's attempt to locate the authorial intention in Destry-Scholes's work and therefore his self.

Even when Phineas is in the presence of Linnaeus's collection of objects and focuses his mind on these objects, his mind nonetheless automatically enacts a chain of signifiers, linking Linnaeus to Foucault (*Tale* 115). The referent cannot be accessed as it is always-already mediated and part of the sign system. Phineas implicitly recognises that conventional biography cannot provide the contact with facts and things he desires, although he considers it a

failure of his research rather than that his research paradigm is an illusory construct. Phineas therefore shifts his search for the referent away from biographical research, where it has eluded him, to the natural world. Campbell states that “by the end of his tale he robustly asserts the natural world exists independently of our structures; it is both fragile and beyond language” (“Review”). Phineas’s narration constructs a dichotomy between literature and the natural world, stating that “Sir Philip Sidney thought that poets made better flowers than nature” and that it is “not so. As long as we don’t destroy and diminish it irrevocably, the too-much-loved earth will always exceed our power to describe or imagine, or understand it” (*Tale* 259).

Following these statements, Phineas stops writing, concluding his affair with literature both in terms of his writing and its value. His rejection of writing is coherent as it is a sign system and Phineas wants to access the referent. Phineas therefore does not simply reject writing for access to the physical world in favour of a robust sense of meaning, he rejects meaning making through narrative because he implicitly recognises that meaning, as well as narrative, is constructed. However, things and facts cannot be made to mean, even in scientific research, except through representation. As Hutcheon states: “we may see, hear, feel, smell and touch [reality], but do we know it in the sense that we give meaning to it?” (*Politics* 33). The world is never unmediated and Phineas’s research problems and his interpretative cul-de-sac are caused by his attempt to conceptualise objects prior to mediated knowledge.

Brian McHale’s commentary on postmodernism is particularly useful here, as he distinguishes not only the impossibility but the undesirability of attempting to get to the “world” behind its representations:

We may suspect, with Nelson Goodman (1978), that, while there may well be somewhere a “world” underlying all our disparate versions of it, that world is finally inaccessible, and all we have are the versions; but that hardly matters, since it is only the versions that are of any use to us anyway, and the putative world-before-all-versions is, as Rorty [. . .] says “well lost”. (4-5)

The world is never unmediated; Phineas’s research problems and interpretative *cul-de-sac* are caused by his attempt to understand objects and facts prior to mediation. Phineas’s preoccupations stem from the way in which the Bole biography appears to be an unmediated *arrangement* of self-evident facts accumulated by Destry-Scholes’s careful research. The life of Bole conceals its construction in its narrative and the fragments disturb Phineas because they reveal the construction of their narratives. When Phineas realises that he has not discovered Destry-Scholes’s self, his understanding of biography is revealed as an illusion and so he gives up biography.

Byatt has previously written about the impossibility of trying to access the referent, “the thing itself,” and Phineas’s project should make the careful reader of Byatt wary. In *Still Life*, when Alexander tries to write about what physical objects mean, separated from their cultural inscription, the narrator notes that “it couldn’t be done. Language was against him for a start. Metaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower, which not only turned towards but resembled the sun, the source of light” (*Still Life* 2).<sup>53</sup> Alexander cannot apprehend the thing in itself, as language is constructed metaphorically and objects are not separable from cultural contexts. The mind will always connect to that cultural context.

Alexander’s failure is a *mise-en-abyme* for Byatt’s original plan for the novel:

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<sup>53</sup> See also Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things* (11-12) for a treatment of this topic generally in literature.

I had the idea that this novel could be written innocently, without recourse to reference to other people's thoughts, without, as far as possible, recourse to simile or metaphor. This turned out to be impossible: one cannot think at all without a recognition and realignment of ways of thinking and seeing we have learned over time. We all remake the world as we see it, as we look at it. (208)

The reader of Byatt can therefore ascertain that Phineas's project is likely to fail. Phineas's perceptions cannot be taken as an accurate perspective on the events of the novel and his role as Byatt's mouthpiece is complicated by his unreliability.

### 3. The Role of the Reader in *The Biographer's Tale*

In all of Byatt's novels considered here, the reader is continually required to take an active role: to recognise the counter-narratives built into the fiction that make sense of the contradictions and ambivalences in the novels. However, the reader of Byatt's fiction should also resist attempting to resolve the deliberate ambiguities that the novels construct. Byatt's use of postmodernism is Janus-like, facing both ways as it installs and subverts paradigms of thought and the conventions of literature. Any reading that emphasises, in Hutcheon's terms, the complicity over the critique will produce an interpretation that elides the complexities of the novels.

All of Byatt's novels are constructed from metaphors and entice the reader to perceive the novel predominantly in terms of those metaphors.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Byatt has stated that "in my experience I know what the form of a novel is when I find what I think of as the 'ruling' metaphor. In the case of this novel [*Virgin*] this was a metaphor of metamorphosis – of flesh into stone, or of flesh into grass – and a concomitant metaphor of language itself as flowers" (*Passions* 9-10).



Annegret Maack finds that the patchwork narrative of *The Biographer's Tale* can be unified by the reader: "the fragmentation of Byatt's text, offending to some critics, is counterbalanced by the author's use of metaphors which are a device for making connections, thus establishing patterns of connectedness" (286).<sup>55</sup> Whilst Maack also notes where Byatt warns against analogous thinking in a number of her novels (280-1), she nonetheless finds that analogy and metaphor are the correct way to make sense of chaotic, lived experience (286).<sup>56</sup> A particularly evocative warning against analogous thinking can be found in *Still Life*, referring to the debilitating sexual experience between Lucas Simmonds and Marcus in *Virgin*: "Frederica's friends would have pounced on Marcus's history and the cleistogamous flower and thought that they had understood something because they had seen an analogy. Whereas in fact, part of such an instant vision is the closing-off of other ways of seeing" (*Still Life* 302). Rather than attempting to unify the novel by way of its metaphors, the reader of *The Biographer's Tale* should be aware of and preserve the contradictions, as the ironic narration undermines attempts to unify the novel.

There are, however, metaphors in *The Biographer's Tale* that appear to unify the novel. Maack states that the ruling metaphor is mosaic-making (280). The novel's structure appears to imitate the act of making mosaics. Campbell confirms the point: "the narrative structure of *The Biographer's Tale* is best

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<sup>55</sup> Boccardi finds another way to unify the fragmentary plot strands in the novel through the concept of taxonomy (*Byatt* 85), although, as I have argued above, taxonomy is complicated by Byatt, given that she prevents Phineas from achieving a rigorous taxonomy of the card index and the box of photographs, and instead uses his failure to reinforce his problematic worldview.

<sup>56</sup> See also Celia Wallhead, "Metaphors for the Self in A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*" for a view on metaphor that does not prioritise unification of the novel.

described in Phineas's metaphor of the mosaic" (*Heliotropic* 220). The metaphor of the mosaic is elegant, as it aligns very neatly with Phineas's conceptualisation of biography as an arrangement of facts. Perceiving the mosaic as a unifying metaphor is cognisant with Phineas's theme and practice of arrangement, in that it both thematically and structurally replicates Phineas's strategy for biographical research. The critics therefore follow a major theme in the book by situating the mosaic as a unifying metaphor. However, my interpretation of the novel suggests that caution should be employed in replicating Phineas's perspective and strategy. I have argued that Phineas's narration is unreliable and his motif of arrangement is undermined in the novel as it is symptomatic of his flawed ideological perspective.

The mosaic is also problematic, although the metaphor accounts for the structure of the novel and its extensive use of intertextuality, because it affirms a metaphysics of presence that the novel continually destabilises. The mosaic concept is prompted by Phineas's discovery of Destry-Scholes's "lifted" sentences, when he uses lines from other texts without identifying them as quotations (29). In one sense, writing by Destry-Scholes should confirm the presence of his self but the writing actually denotes its absence, as the sentences are not his. The lifted sentences share the problem of the card index: the careful copying of quotation on Pearson's thoughts on biography could confirm the presence of Destry-Scholes, in his approval or his disapproval of the sentiment, but Phineas is unable to distinguish why the quotation was selected and copied out (163). The point Byatt makes here is that writing cannot confirm the presence of the writer's self, as language denotes absence, not presence. As Gilmore states, "gender, genre and identity, and therefore autobiography, are similarly 'grounded' in the belief that representation is layered over

substance [...] however, this seeming *real* is, in no small part, fantasy” (*Autobiographics* 16; emphasis original). The novel stages and plays with the idea that representation is layered over substance.

Destry-Scholes comments that he is writing with the excitement of A. J. A. Symons in *The Quest for Corvo* (*Tale* 16) and Phineas states that “[Destry-Scholes] could write like a connoisseur of faience, like brisk strategic analyst, like A. J. A. Symons or even like George Eliot” (19). Such comments imply, for Phineas, that there is a substance underneath the text; he hopes to find traces of the presence of Destry-Scholes in the adoption of different voices and styles. Except, of course, Phineas finds no substance layered underneath the text, as Byatt deliberately prevents Phineas from locating any material that could viably construct the illusion of a unified self behind the writing. The variety of voices in Destry-Scholes’s work instead strongly suggest the discursive construction of authorship, where Byatt emphasises an intertextual parody of genre styles, recalling Roland Barthes’s description of a text as “a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (146). Byatt therefore uses the failure of the biographical quest plot and her construction of Destry-Scholes’s texts to demonstrate that language cannot denote presence and that the unified self is a fantasy constructed from language.

Late in the novel, Phineas reflects that, in failing to find Destry-Scholes and represent the “whole” man, “I have to respect his scrupulous *absence* from my tale, my work” (*Tale* 214; emphasis original). The metaphor of mosaic making elides the significance of the novel’s emphasis on absent subjectivity that is unrepresentable and that undermines the quest for the liberal-humanist self. Phineas also states that his writing, given Destry-Scholes’s absence, has therefore been forced to represent “my own *presence*” (214; emphasis original).

Although this statement is accurate and indicates the mechanism of representation at work in the novel, it misdirects the reader. The statement focuses the reader on the representation of subjectivity (Phineas's instead of Destry-Scholes's) rather than the significance of Destry-Scholes's absence. Phineas is unreliable as he still appears to believe that Destry-Scholes *could* be represented, if only he could find enough facts and documents. However, as Marcus states, the rise of deconstruction meant that autobiography critics could "use autobiography as an exemplary instance of the impossibility of self-presence, the radical split between the self that writes and the self that is written, and the crucial role of language in the constitution of the subject" (*Auto/biography* 182). Phineas's attempt to find Destry-Scholes's through his written work conflates the self that writes and the self that is written and cannot therefore "discover" the "whole" of that self; the novel proves time and again that it is Phineas's interpretative framework that is at fault, as the information he finds is not interpretable within that system.

*The Biographer's Tale* represents Phineas's relationship to texts as conditioned by his value system. When the texts and objects he encounters challenge his value system, Phineas does not re-evaluate his beliefs but instead exits the scene of writing and textual interpretation. Phineas writes that "I was nearly put off what turned out to be my vocation by the urging of pedagogues who assured me I would 'discover myself' by reading, that I would 'understand myself' by 'identifying' with – well, whom?" (*Tale* 99). He then lists a number of characters, before saying that the real reader "is looking for anything but a mirror" (100). Phineas's distaste for identifying with characters in novels is a contentious issue in literary criticism. Mark Currie cites Wayne Booth's views, noting that identification causes a loss of distance; it "not only specifies a moral

or quasi-visual gap between the reader and characters: it also characterises a mature, aesthetic experience of narrative” (*Postmodern* 22).

However, Currie states that the distance necessary for the mature, aesthetic experience that Booth endorses limits the effect a text can have on the reader and the possibility of the text affecting their world view: “identification, on the other hand, touches my subjectivity in a more profound way, because I have seen myself in fiction, projected my identity into it, rather than made a new friend. This gives fiction the potential to confirm, form or transform my sense of myself” (28-9). The texts Phineas encounters in the novel do not have such a transformative effect on his world view. Rather than understanding that the referent he seeks is illusory (the self in biography discovered through facts and things) and so replacing it with a nuanced view of subjectivity, Phineas rejects conceptualising subjectivity by giving up writing and engaging with the natural world. Throughout the novel, Phineas uses language that indicates that he believes he can “find” Destry-Scholes’s self, rather than recognising that his work would construct the subjectivity of Destry-Scholes. As a result, Phineas’s narrative is constructed through the binary of absence and presence, substituting Phineas’s presence for Destry-Scholes’s absence. The dichotomy of absence and presence is not interrogated by Phineas’s narrative, and so his paradigm of subjectivity is unchanged.

Byatt’s reader should feel profoundly unsettled, rather than attempting to resolve the ambivalence in the narrative. As Hutcheon states:

The unsettled reader is forced to scrutinize his concepts of art as well as his life values. Often he must revise his understanding of what he reads to frequently that he comes to question the very possibility of understanding. In doing so he might be freed from

enslavement not only to the empirical, but also to his own set  
patterns of thought and imagination. (*Narcissistic* 139)

Byatt's reader has to continually revise their patterns of thought and imagination, as the novels appear to metamorphose as they are read, undermining the reader's expectations as the novels progress. Byatt's use of intertextuality and embedded narratives challenges the reader, as they typically destabilise or complicate the apparent values of the frame narrative. *The Biographer's Tale* is particularly demanding because the frame narrative is ironic, but not obviously so. Byatt puts the reader through Phineas's frustrating experience of unsuccessful biographical research to enable the reader to identify with Phineas but uses irony to also distance the reader from Phineas. Following Currie's observations on the process of identification with literary characters, the effect of Byatt's doubled narrative means that the reader is changed by the experience of identification. However, the use of irony enables the reader to ascertain where Phineas's world view could have been fruitfully and progressively amended by the texts he encountered. Byatt's novel is a metafictional construction of textual encounters that cause the reader to consider the way in which subjectivity is constructed.

## Conclusion

Each chapter of this thesis has analysed Byatt's exploration of authorship and her strategies of representation to provide a new perspective on the politics of her novels. Byatt's critics discuss postmodernism in relation to her fiction but, as has been seen above, generally understand her to be ambivalent or mostly critical of postmodernism. I have argued that Byatt uses postmodern techniques of representation through her embedded texts which both install and subvert literary conventions and ideology. Byatt employs realism in a postmodern form, destabilising its apparently transparent, mimetic coincidence with the world and liberal-humanist selfhood. In Byatt's fiction, the embedded texts provide her with metafictional strategies that allow her to comment insightfully on the conventions of fiction and paradigmatic world-views of the historical periods she represents.

Byatt's strategies of representation that use and critique literary conventions also indicate how her fiction can be read within a feminist context. Feminism, like postmodernism, is considered ambivalently in Byatt's fiction, as although her attention to female equality is unmistakable, academic feminism is criticised within the novels and female characters do not always display effective agency. One of the tenets of liberal-humanist selfhood is its tendency to position a masculine perspective as universal, subsuming the feminine; this is a propensity which I have discussed in relation to life-writing theory. Byatt critiques the liberal-humanist self through the embedded texts by representing female subjectivity and resistance to definitions of femininity, both through self-representations in life-writing and through identifying patriarchal ideology in literary conventions and genres.

Byatt's fiction is characterised by ambivalence, as Christien Franken rightly states (xv). Developing Franken's argument, I contend that ambivalence

has a distinct political purpose in Byatt's fiction. The extensive use of ambivalence has stimulated contradictory critical responses to Byatt's fiction, particularly in the case of the politics of the novels. Ambivalence, however, is an objection to any form of totalising ideologies, even in the case of progressive movements like feminism. Byatt's fiction recognises that postmodernism can degenerate into language games and political quietism and that feminism risks essentialising gender. Her visible critique of postmodernism and feminism, coupled with Byatt's statements in interviews and critical texts, has led a number of critics, discussed in Chapter 1, to understand Byatt as a humanist or apolitical author. However, I maintain that the inclusion of critiques of postmodernism and feminism allows Byatt to comment on the way that totalising ideologies can exclude other perspectives by becoming metanarratives.

By representing dissenting perspectives to postmodernism and feminism, critics have misrepresented Byatt's fiction as *only* criticising these branches of literary criticism. I have shown that the critique is present, although her apparent humanism is subverted by postmodernist strategies of representation and feminist strategies of resistance to patriarchal ideology. My argument throughout this thesis has been that Byatt's fiction appears to use conflicting strategies of representation, both with regards to the postmodern aspects of her fiction and to the feminist aspects, as postmodernist texts "deploy hybrid forms and *seemingly mutually contradictory strategies* [that] frustrate critical attempts (including this one) to systematize them, to order them with an eye to control and mastery – that is, to totalize" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 37; emphasis added). In Byatt's fiction, postmodernism and feminism cannot be separated if the mutually



contradictory traits are to be analysed in a way that explains them without falsely unifying the novels or adopting a totalising framework of analysis.

Byatt's construction of authorship in the frame narrative often appears to embody "traditional" and dominant conceptualisations of authorship, including Alexander's attempts to represent the unique "truth" of individuals from history in the Quartet and Roland's assumption of a Romantic poetic identity in *Possession* (1990). However, the relationship between the embedded texts and the frame narratives destabilises the apparent validity of these authorial subject positions. Moreover, Byatt's use of prolepsis in *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (1985) constitutes an approach to historical fiction that undermines the liberal-humanist self, emphasising that history and subjectivity are both constructed through discourse. Prolepsis in these novels destabilises the authorial identity that Alexander claims, prompting the reader to reconsider Byatt's representation of authorship. Byatt's use of prolepsis is one of the "mutually contradictory strategies" that Hutcheon identifies, as the static "truth" of history that Alexander attempts to portray in his writing is in fact historical discourse, informed by the dominant ideology of the writer's time period.

Although there are few fictional female authors in Byatt's novels before *Possession*, her female protagonists engage with concepts of authorship through their relation to the canon and contemporary literature. In *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) and *The Game* (1967), all three female protagonists struggle with masculine models of authorship when attempting to write. Anna in *Shadow* is portrayed as in the shadow of her father, Henry Severall, who Byatt represents as the Romantic genius. Oliver Canning, Henry's critic, also overshadows Anna, whose demands that she face up to the fact that she is not a literary genius, are conditioned by a form of social realism. It is not so much

that Oliver's academic position is undermined, devaluing the academic perspective generally and raising the creative writer, but that the war between Oliver and Henry is enacted upon Anna, leaving no possibility for female writing.

Anna's conception that she could just marry rather than worrying about a career or a calling (*Shadow* 159) is not simply an admission of the restrictive nature of gender relations in the 1950s, but also an acknowledgement that women are conceptualised through patriarchal definitions of femininity. Anna is invited to parties at Cambridge because she is Henry's daughter and only conceived of in that light: "and when I got to their parties, they didn't say, This is Anna, they say, Come and meet Henry Severall's daughter" (158). Alternatively, Anna is asked if she is a "Lawrentian woman" (159). Anna is repeatedly defined by her gender, which is a patriarchal construction conceptualised through the literary canon in the novel. The possibility of reclaiming her gender as a creative force is limited in this novel, particularly as Anna is only partly conscious of the patriarchal discourses that define her.

In *Still Life*, Frederica is portrayed as coming to an increasing awareness of the masculine bias in literature. Frederica and her contemporaries discuss *Lucky Jim* (1954), and she finds that the novel's progressive attitude to class occludes its sexism. Upper class imperialist identities are displaced by the Angry Young Men's idealisation of working-class decency, but the movement nonetheless represents women as ciphers, simply as reflections of male sexuality, naturalising and universalising the masculine perspective. Byatt critiques the androcentricity of the Angry Young Men's otherwise egalitarian and class-conscious protests through Frederica, using a gendered subject position to demonstrate the universalised masculine bias that Amis's fiction exhibits.

Frederica is not yet a writer in *Still Life* and her writing, when it occurs in *Babel Tower* (1996), is a protest against gendered narratives that construct patriarchal definitions of femininity and reproduce such definitions through genre. In *Babel*, Frederica rejects narrative, as she finds that the adversarial British legal system requires a narrative of her marriage that only admits her husband's offences and not her own. Frederica is appalled by this and believes that such a document, although necessary for the law's conceptualisation of marriage breakdown in the 1960s, is a lie. She struggles ethically to author and authorise such a narrative of her marriage. The legal narrative is further complicated by the opposing counsel's use of narrative and tropes of stereotypical femininity to discredit Frederica. The use of falsehood by her husband's legal team forms a continuum with Frederica's perception that her solicitor's legal narrative of her marriage is a lie in its one-sided representation of the relationship. Frederica uses a non-narrative technique, derived from William S. Burroughs's cut-ups, to privately protest the way that the legal discourse uses narrative to construct deliberately one-sided representations of marriage and conventional gender roles.

Frederica's resistance to authorised narratives and authorial identity is a recurrent theme in Byatt's fiction, as her female protagonists struggle to speak against a tradition that figures femininity as a projection of the male psyche and that devalues female voices. *Possession* emphasises the difficulties female writers face. Christabel LaMotte is represented as the archetypal Victorian female poet, subject to the prescriptions of patriarchal ideology and finds only a limited readership in her own time. However, Christabel's imagery of female agency and violence is identified by feminist academics in the twentieth-century and repositioned within the canon. Although, despite the success and reputation

of Leonora Stern and Maud Bailey as female academics canonising neglected female writing, women's studies in the late 1980s held a precarious position in universities, indicated by the reference to the Women's Resource Centre in Lincoln University as underfunded and therefore undervalued (*Possession* 437).

*Possession* however also constructs differing, but not competing, images of the female author. The novel avoids essentialising female writing through authoritative canonisation that valorises one type of female writing as definitive. Similarly, Byatt does not devalue academic approaches to texts, prioritising creative writing over critical writing. Although Leonora's critical paradigm is satirised in the novel, as I argued in Chapter 4, her methodology, which appears to impose preformed concepts onto texts, is accurate in interpreting Ellen's journal. None of the female scholars have a monopoly, as each of their perspectives is partly correct. Ellen's journal disrupts the apparent priorities of the frame narrative and her skilled writing is constructed to conceal and reveal at the same time. The journal provides a portrait of the woman author who uses prose to indicate the limitations of female agency and the anxieties of authorship through its imagery that complements Christabel's poetic imagery of imaginary fairy tale female agency.

The representation of subjectivity in Ellen's journal destabilises liberal-humanism in its deliberately partial and fragmented representation of Ellen. Whilst the partial representation of subjectivity and events is necessary to point to the secret affair between Randolph and Christabel, it also denaturalises the construction of femininity. Ellen can assume an authorial position by drawing on the dominant ideology of femininity in representing the angel of the house, but she also denaturalises that ideology by portraying it as a cipher: not true femininity but a construction imposed on women. A similar process is enacted in

*The Biographer's Tale*, where Phineas attempts to utilise the history of life-writing as a genre to write a biography, of the fictional biographer Scholes Destry-Scholes, within a liberal-humanist paradigm, having left a PhD in literary theory because of its tendency to impose ideological interpretations on texts. Phineas's perception of literary theory and biography are metanarratives, ironically employed by Byatt to unmask and destabilise the ideology implicit in his accounts of them. He tries to find an unmediated reality through biography initially and then the natural world once biography proves to be discursively constructed. Phineas of course is mistaken and Byatt deliberately frustrates his attempts to discover a liberal-humanist whole man to indicate that such a self is illusory. In trying to exchange the subject for the self, Phineas is confronted with numerous subject positions that are constructed by discourse, although he is unwilling to recognise this.

One of the most striking ways that life-writing is represented in the novel is through the discourse of gender, as life-writing (particularly the authorised genres of biography and autobiography) has historically represented exemplary male lives. However, Byatt's use of a male narrator does not resuscitate or reconstitute the patrilineage of life-writing, but significantly undermines the subject of life-writing by making the biographical subject unrepresentable. No evidence of the exemplary and heroic male life can be found in the scanty information about Destry-Scholes. The fragmented archival texts by Destry-Scholes that Phineas located displace the heroic male life as they contain representations of fantasised events that did not happen. The reader can perceive the biographical fragments as departing from the priorities of life-writing that codifies the masculine as determined by heroic pursuits that are "real". In the place of Phineas, who expects them to coincide with a liberal-

humanist ideology, the reader can interpret the fragments differently; as part of Byatt's strategies of representation that undermine liberal-humanism and necessitates a conceptualisation of subject positions constructed by discourse.

Rather than conceiving the novels from *Possession* onwards as constituting a turn away from realism and towards postmodernism, I have argued throughout this thesis that Byatt's fiction prior to *Possession* uses postmodern devices. However, *Possession* does indicate a threshold in the development of Byatt's fiction in terms of its representation of authorship, as she portrays characters using representational practices as a form of resistance to dominant ideology. In particular, female characters resist patriarchal images of femininity by using representational practices to rewrite the cultural inscription of gender. Whilst both Julia and Cassandra are writers in the early novel, *The Game*, they do not harness writing to rewrite femininity. Julia's work addresses the limiting gender roles of the 1960s, but her work is not depicted as an appropriation of representational practices to deconstruct patriarchal femininity in the way of the later novels. Part of the reason for this development in Byatt's fiction can be attributed to the advent of second-wave feminist literary theory, although of course writers such as Virginia Woolf, typified by *A Room of One's Own* (1928), have been concerned with the representation of women prior to second-wave feminism.

Byatt's fiction prior to *Possession* contains instances of resistance to power relations by the female characters – my argument in Chapter 2 detailed the power relations in *Still Life*. However, *Possession* onwards portrays female characters appropriating representational practices as a form of resistance to the construction of femininity and to represent women differently. *Possession* in particular offers different forms of writing that nonetheless avoid essentialising

and naturalising the cultural construction of femininity through masculine representations. Byatt's female characters denaturalise the discursive construction of femininity through the parodic and ironic citation of femininity. In the appropriation of representational practices to rewrite the feminine, Byatt's fiction has an ethical dimension that is a commitment to unmasking the ideology that is implied in particular forms of representation, such as realism.

Byatt's most recent full-length novel, *The Children's Book* (2009), complicates her portrayal of female authors who rewrite femininity by appropriating representational practices in a different way. Olive is a mother and writer in the novel who largely leaves her children in the care of her sister, Violet, so that she can devote herself to her art. Olive's neglect of her children is juxtaposed with her psychologically intimate relationship with her eldest child, Tom; the novel implies that her writing damagingly constructs his subjectivity as her double. My reading of Tom's narrative emphasises the way the image of the double represents Tom's subjectivity, in order to analyse Byatt's portrayal of subject positions and the discursive construction of subjectivity. In *The Children's Book*, the double is a figure for the way an individual is comprised of subject positions. Tom's subjectivity is developed from the narrative that Olive writes, which indicates to the reader the importance of subject positions rather than the conceptualisation of the self as a whole or core.

Whilst the female cultural producers in Byatt's novels often use writing and other art forms to resist patriarchal power relations as I have discussed above, Olive's writing is not positioned in this context. Instead, the relationship between the frame narrative and the embedded text, Olive's writing, points to Byatt's construction of doubles as figures for subjectivity. The concept of the double appears in a number of the narrative threads in the novel, emphasising

different aspects of the discursive construction of subjectivity through different characters. Tom's subjectivity is constructed in relation to his double in Olive's writing (where Tom is also partly the double for Olive), whereas his cousin Charles conceptualises himself as double because his outer appearance of upper-class conventionality contrasts with his Marxist activism, reinforced by his amended name, "Charles/Karl." Byatt uses the reification of self and other through the concept of the double to comment on the multiplied subject positions that constitute subjectivity, particularly in relation to Charles's/Karl's narrative and his relationship with the working class Elsie. The double both stands for the damage done to Tom's subjectivity through Olive's writing and also Charles's/Karl's imaginative conceptualisation of the conflict between a subject position that conforms to societal roles and another subject position that might challenge the values of society.

Discussing the representation of history in post-war fiction, Steven Connor observes that

the very persistence of the problem of address in the post war novel of history, in questions concerning who history is for, to whom it is addressed and belongs and who it is entitled to speak of and for it, indicates that there remains in the form of the novel, only in muted, utopian form, an aspiration to some inclusiveness of address. (164)

*The Children's Book* explores the questions Connor raises by recasting themes from her earlier work around the ethics of fictionalising real lives. I read Olive's fiction as an embedded text in order to show that Byatt revisits ethical considerations in relation to authorship, but it is in the frame narrative that she develops the ethical component of her fiction through the intersections of



differing subject positions and the interpellation of its characters as subjects of historical discourse. Byatt's fiction up to *The Children's Book* has portrayed subjectivity as discursively constructed, as well as the regulation of gender through conventional narratives, demonstrating that regulatory narratives can be resisted by denaturalising narrative conventions through irony and parody. Whilst the fiction up to *The Children's Book* has demonstrated the postmodern contention that narrative is always a partial representation of events or characters from a limited perspective, *The Children's Book* emphasises the *ethics* implicit in the creation of a narrative, as a narrative must be, to some extent, a misrepresentation. Byatt therefore builds on her earlier engagement with the way that cultural narratives and tropes construct subjectivity and, in *The Children's Book*, portrays other ways of resisting the power relations implied by discursivity.

In *The Children's Book*, Tom does not become fully separate from Olive and the story that she writes for him, *Tom Underground*, forms a continuous link between their imaginations. Not only do Tom and Olive collaborate on the story, but Tom's subjectivity is defined by it. *Tom Underground* is written alongside Tom's childhood and so from the start is part of his development. Olive constructs Tom's story, and therefore his subjectivity from the unresolved psychic trauma of her family dying in the mines. *Tom Underground* is situated in underground tunnels, as the name suggests, and features her father's stories of the conditions of working in the mines as well as the myths (*Children's* 84-5). In a perceptive comment, Isobel Armstrong demonstrates the trauma that Olive's story perpetuates: "it is a projection of the part of Olive that has never dealt with her own experience of the underground, the tragic coal-mining district where she grew up" (*LRB online*).

Prince Tom in the story has his shadow stolen by a rat and so is shadow-less under the sun. In the novel, Tom Wellwood is represented as shadow-less as well: “it was noon. The sun was high and shone directly down on her golden boy, who was not reflected in the moving surface of the sea” (*Children’s* 187). It is also significant to note that this scene takes place before Tom goes to school – at this point, the identification of Tom with the story is unproblematic. Tom also repeats *Tom Underground* at school by going under the school into the boiler room to read instalments of Olive’s story (Hadley, *Artists* 151). The story also provides him with a way of dissociating himself from actions of the chief bully, the aptly named Hunter: “Tom reading *Tom Underground* was real: Tom avoiding Hunter’s eye, Tom chanting declensions, Tom cleaning washbasins and listening to smutty jokes was a simulacrum, a wind-up doll in schoolboy shape” (*Children’s* 198). Tom’s dissociation, however, persists and other characters begin to describe him as “odd” and a “recluse” (244).

Tom’s dissociation of his subjectivity is never fully healed. When Tom sees his character from *Tom Underground* played on stage by a woman, he is alienated further from himself by his male-impersonated double. The character of “Tom” on stage is described as “the Tom-thing” (525). Being confronted by a reification of his double from the story that constitutes his subjectivity is beyond comprehension for Tom, demonstrated by his response: “all that mattered was to move, to be on the move, to use his body and not his mind” (526). The symbolism in the complex narrative that Byatt constructs with Tom turns on the image of the double. Initially, the shadow and Lancelin are doubles. It is no accident that Byatt morphs Lancelin, the original name of the character in *Tom Underground*, into Tom at the time Tom goes to school, emphasising the link between them. The trauma at school is the trigger for the point where Tom’s

subjectivity becomes problematic. However, even before he goes to school, Tom describes himself as a simulacrum of a boy (163), suggesting that adolescence affects his subjectivity prior to the trauma at school.,

Tom's siblings all have stories written by Olive but do not have the combination of trauma at school, nor the replication of Olive's trauma in their stories. Tom, however, cannot keep art and reality separate as his psychological development has blurred each, so his double on stage is an unacceptable confrontation with the symbiotic relationship between art and life. The representation of Tom is, in part, a continuation of Byatt's interest in the ethics of writers using the people in their lives as models for their fiction, a theme that is particularly evident in *The Game*, where it leads to Cassandra's suicide, and in *Possession*, where Christabel is the driving force behind Randolph's great love poem cycle, *Ask to Embla*.

The representation of Tom's subjectivity as constructed through *Tom Underground* is also an instance of how literature as a discourse, that is part of the historical context of an era, constructs subjectivity. Olive's writing forms part of the development of a children's literature, marked by a new "sense that fun was now permitted" at the death of Queen Victoria: "people talked, and thought, earnestly and frivolously, about sex. At the same time they showed a paradoxical propensity to retreat into childhood, to read and write adventure stories, tales about furry animals, dramas about pre-pubertal children" (*Children's* 300). At the same time, along with the adult parody of childhood, is the beginning of a psychological discourse of childhood through Sigmund Freud's research (396).

Joseph Bristow critiques *The Children's Book* and characterises its method of representation – which includes so many historical details and

figures from its period – as “enumerative” (69) as well as “inexhaustible” in its “retelling of encyclopaedic information” (68). Bristow wonders if Byatt was worried that without such detail, she would be perceived as not representing the history of the period accurately (69). There is, however, another way to read the period detail in the novel that takes into account the novel’s relationship with Byatt’s other fiction. Byatt deliberately includes a wide variety of historical details not simply to construct the cultural and political context of the novel (although it partly has that effect) but to install and subvert the realism that she uses to represent the characters. Interludes such as the extensive description of the multitudinous artworks the characters encounter at the Paris Exhibition (*Children’s* 243-76), as well as the preparations for and production of a day of talks on “The Woman of the Future” (116-23; 290-8), affect the momentum of the realist plot through accumulation of period detail. In Chapter 32, Byatt further disrupts and denaturalises realism by inserting a six page discourse on the defining features of the Edwardian era (391-7). The discourse is then followed by a proleptic section that lays out certain aspects of the characters’ lives between 1902 and, for the most part, 1907 (399-409). Chapter 33 then returns the narrative to 1902. As with Byatt’s earlier uses of prolepsis in *Virgin* and *Still Life*, she employs it in *The Children’s Book*, along with the enumerative representation of the history of the period, to comment on the conventions of realism and subvert the realist frame narrative.

Katharina Uhsadel states that the large cast of characters “pays tribute to the Victorian narrative technique of portraying a social panorama. This wide scope enables Byatt, who is renowned for her breadth of knowledge and interests, to link many contemporary tendencies to individual characters” (73). Uhsadel’s analysis suggests that the dominant method of representation is

Victorian and implies Victorian realism. I argue, however, that *The Children's Book*, like Byatt's prior use of realism, is destabilised by the representation of history. The reader cannot passively consume the realistic narrative of the characters because Byatt's enumeration of the historical context disrupts the reading experience. As Hutcheon states, such representational tactics challenge "the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness" and prompt readers "to become aware of the means by which we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture" (*Politics* 53-4). By disrupting the "seamlessness" of realism, Byatt requires the reader to reassess the realism that constructs the historical context. Realism is therefore subverted, as the characters are interwoven with heavily detailed historical events and a large cast of historical figures that decentres the primacy of character's subjectivities to the reading experience even when the narrative is focalised through them.

Byatt's method of historical representation in *The Children's Book* and its construction of "childhood" as a concept across different discourses points the reader to the wider significance of Tom's position in the novel. Olive appropriates Tom's subjectivity in her representation of his double, constructing it through her (understandably) damaged psychology. However, Byatt contextualises the representation of Tom with the detailing of late Victorian and Edwardian conceptualisations of childhood and how those lives are curtailed by the destruction of the First World War. As Uhsadel notes of Tom: "this lack of development in one of the novel's central male characters is linked to, and intensified by, the historical events that decisively 'end' the period covered by *The Children's Book*" (78).

I have focused on Tom's narrative in detail because how Byatt portrays him is a *mise en abyme* for her representational strategies in the novel as a whole. Byatt represents her character as discursively constructed through his relationship to the text Olive writes and history, standing for the destruction of the children's generation in the War. Tom's subjectivity as double and a simulacra suggestively implies that subject positions construct the identity of the characters, rather than the liberal-humanist whole or core associated with realism. The representation of the characters in terms of subject positions is another way realism is destabilised. Whilst the novel certainly suggests that it uses the Victorian epic mode (Uhsadel 73), constructing the characters from subject positions denaturalises the ideology of Victorian realist representational practices.

Although subject positions are not limited to two opposing positions, the double figures in the novel as an indication of conflicting subject positions and also stands for the interaction with the "other," both for the characters and for the reader's engagement with history. The double also symbolises the interaction between public and private identities. However, rather than implying a veneer of a socially-acceptable false self that coincides with the dominant ideology and the "true" self, the double points to the interstices of multiple subject positions. Through the ethical commentary on the appropriation of the imagination of another person and the formative role of story-telling in the representation of Tom, and its use of the double, Byatt indicates that ethics and the double are linked. Byatt then uses the image of the double in the narratives of her characters to demonstrate that the representation of the "other," conceptualised through their othered subject positions, constructs an ethical commentary.

The double is explicitly theorised in the narrative of Charles/Karl, Tom's cousin. The double lives of Tom and Charles/Karl differ, as the latter has a literal double life, following both the pursuits of an archetypal upper-class male and identifying as an Anarchist, as he feels the gap between the rich and poor is unethical. Charles/Karl's name becomes doubled, as he adopts Karl for Karl Marx (*Children's* 171). He is subsequently referred to in the novel as Charles/Karl, not simply as one name or the other, continually reminding the reader of his doubled and split subjectivity. Although Charles/Karl begins to ask himself if other people are doubles and whether they have a secret life, he realises that neither the "real" nor "secret" life is more valid than the other. Focalising the narrative through Charles/Karl, the narrator notes that his tutor, Vasily Tartarinov, is both a committed Anarchist and passionate about Latin poetry (174). The two subject positions are neither mutually exclusive nor dichotomised as real and false.

The point the novel makes through Charles/Karl is that multiple subject positions construct an individual subjectivity. Although Charles/Karl has an awareness of his privileged class position, his sense of privilege as an Englishman is unconscious. Byatt deliberately uses the word "chauvinistic" but this judgement arises from the narrator, not from the character. The characters in *The Children's Book* are constructed from intersecting privileges, some of which they are conscious of and some that are unconscious. Jane Campbell finds that

Goodness, understood again in relativistic terms, is important to Byatt. She has never forsaken her Leavisite faith in the moral force of fiction. She values Murdoch's statement that virtue, like freedom, has to do with "really apprehending that other people

exist" [...] and her fiction is filled with characters who fail to acknowledge the uniqueness of others. (*Heliotropic* 14)

Although Campbell's analysis is characterised by a humanistic conception of the self, she points to the way that Byatt continually wrestles with the problem of the misrepresentation of characters in the novels.

Campbell's statement can be reformulated in the terms of my argument regarding subject positions, discourse and dominant ideology. Byatt's fiction demonstrates that defining a character by a particular subject position, which is in turn determined by the dominant ideology, is unethical because in doing so it will misrepresent them. The problem here is not that the uniqueness of the individual should be recognised, but that individuality is illusory. Instead, each character should be considered as the intersection of different subject positions, none more vital than another; those subject positions are discursively constructed and so may only reflect the dominant discourse.

However, Byatt also indicates that an individual can resist the imposition of subject positions by denaturalising the ideology that constructs them. *The Children's Book* stages an instance of the denaturalisation of discourse in an exchange between Charles/Karl and Elsie Warren (an unmarried mother and sister to Phillip Warren, apprentice potter). Elsie's ironic statements undercut and denaturalise tropes of femininity current in Victorian culture, as well as indicating that multiple subject positions construct those tropes: "I am both working-class and not respectable. I am a Fallen Woman. I have a daughter. You don't want to be talking to me as if I were a *person*, Mr Wellwood" (*Children's* 440). On the one hand, Elsie's statement acknowledges that "respectable" society would define her not as a person but in line with an unruly feminine sexuality, the cultural construction of the Fallen Woman. On the other



hand, her irony in acknowledging her social position indicates that identifying her with her social position is simply social snobbery and reductionist. By representing herself as a non-person, Elsie demonstrates that the definition of “person” is limited because it only includes those who are deemed respectable.

*The Children’s Book* is a neo-Victorian fiction and develops aspects of the neo-Victorian genre Byatt employs in *Possession*. In Chapter 4, with respect to women in *Possession*, I discussed the recuperative function of neo-Victorian fiction that gives voice to those who have been historically silenced. Louisa Hadley considers neo-Victorian fiction as a response to Margaret Thatcher’s nostalgic use of “Victorian values” that elides the complexity of the Victorian period: “in their commitment to historical specificity, [neo-Victorian novelists] often seek to highlight the underside of the Victorian era that Thatcher effectively wrote out of her political rhetoric” (*Neo-Victorian* 14-15). Hadley’s contention that history is used to construct and justify later ideological positions is powerful and raises questions about how the discourse of history is perceived and utilised in the present. Jessica Evans, writing on heritage, asks *whose* inheritance is preserved (and who is again silenced) when arguments are made for the conservation of national culture:

Does not the rhetoric of “a nation’s inheritance” precisely reproduce the mythical idea that Britain is composed of a single culture, in which the narratives of those others who do not fit into this culture (be they the chambermaids of the country house, or the slaves who underpinned the British shipping trade and are absent from most maritime museums) and whose very presence is testament to a history of conflict, are either romanticized or sanitized as a discrete moment of error in the past? (5-6)

Byatt represents national heritage and juxtaposes it to international events in *The Children's Book*, subjectivising history through the characters' trips to meet Anarchists in Germany and to the Paris Exhibition. However, she represents her characters as discursively constructed not only by national and international culture but also through class and gender in their daily lives. The plot featuring Elsie tells a version of the narratives that are left out of History but it is Byatt's representation of Elsie's use of language that enacts local and limited resistance to power relations, like Stephanie's use of language in the birth narrative in *Still Life*. Not, of course, that Charles/Karl is deliberately using the power implied by his social position to subjugate Elsie; in fact he is trying to disrupt that power, but Byatt's point is that power relations implicitly condition all social interactions.

In Chapter 4, I also quoted the work of Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn who suggested that what distinguishes neo-Victorian fiction from narratives that romanticise or sanitise (to use Evans's formulation) is a critical relation to the representation of the Victorian period. Byatt constructs her representation of the historical setting in *The Children's Book* to destabilise the narrative's realism, as the enumerative historical detail interrupts the continuity of the narrative and so changes the reader's pace. The characters are also constantly juxtaposed with historical events that emphasises the discursive construction of subjectivity. The image of the double in both Tom's and Charles's/Karl's plots foregrounds the relation to the Other as an ethical commitment to avoid either imposing narratives that misrepresent the Other or interpreting the Other simply in terms of their relationship to tropes and the subject positions that society imposes.

In *The Children's Book*, Byatt refigures the ethical dynamics of authorship and representation that have been a recurrent concern in her novels.

Gaining access to the authorisation and authority that the role of the author implies is problematic for women in Byatt's novels, and her portrayal of Olive, although to an extent sympathetic, highlights the ethical implications of authorship. Using representational practices to rewrite patriarchal conceptualisations of femininity has, however, been a significant aspect of resistance to power relations in Byatt's fiction. In *The Children's Book*, Elsie's ironic reference to tropes of femininity refigures the use of parody and irony on the "Free Women" television programme in *Whistling*. Elsie employs Victorian tropes, such as the Fallen Woman, ironically, similarly to Ellen's use of the Angel in the House in *Possession*. Both *The Children's Book* and *Possession* effect a destabilisation of Victorian tropes in their ironic citation of them, denaturalising the ideology that constructs such figures of femininity. Byatt's fiction consistently represents the themes that characterise realist novels and uses postmodern strategies of representation to undermine those themes to make a feminist point.

The installation and subversion of liberal-humanist ideology and the conservative politics of realism is evident in all of Byatt's novels considered here. The embedded texts are sites of disruption in Byatt's fiction, staging and pointing to the discursive construction of authorship and subjectivity in the novels. I have focused on Byatt's strategies of representation to clarify her use and destabilisation of grand narratives; the embedded texts either employ metanarratives of history (and are shown to be failures as both literary and history) or they undermine historical metanarratives. Byatt's fiction has been perceived as ambivalent towards postmodern literary theory, but her representation of the construction of historical discourse through the medium of narrative aligns the novels with historiographic metafiction. My analysis of

Byatt's strategies of representation and her portrayal of authorship demonstrates the complicit critique her fiction enacts and suggests a reevaluation of her place in the post-war literary canon.

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