The story, or in medieval terms the matter of Melusine lies at the centre of A.S. Byatt’s Booker Prize-winning Possession (1990), a novel telling stories about those who tell stories, which juggles the multiple senses of “possession” and ends in being possessed by the stories it tells. Melusine herself was a half-fairy cursed, for harming her human father, to change every Saturday into a serpent from the hips down, unless she could marry a man who would never see her that day. She met Raymond of Poitiers by a fountain called “Soif,” or the “Well of Thirsty Gladness,” after he had accidentally killed his lord and patron while hunting, and offered him health, wealth and happiness if he married her under the tabu. She fulfilled her promise to the tune of three (or nine, or ten) sons and much wealth, notably the castle of Lusignan, but disappeared when he broke his promise, lamenting that she must now change till Judgement Day. Before any of her descendants died she could be heard wailing round the towers of Lusignan. In Possession, the poem “Melusina” is the masterpiece of Christabel La Motte, Victorian poetess, whose love affair with R.H. Ash, Victorian poet, produced two epics, a treasure-trove of letters, a daughter, a suicide, and the novel’s primary plot, as modern academics squabble over the biographical spoils.

Possession is subtitled, “A Romance.” At first I presumed this is because Melusine and many of the other incorporated stories come from medieval romance. But it could also mean that the “organizing action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman” (Cawelti, cited Mussell, 74). That would hold true for both the Modern and Victorian narratives. Or, as suggested by the epigraph from The House of the Seven Gables, it could be that the unlikely rules. There is a coup de foudre kiss, a disinterment in a midnight churchyard that tastes like a tongue-in-cheek replay of Dracula, a miraculous lost heir, and a villain foiled by a conveniently falling tree. Or it could be a haze of general happy foolishness, like the mass reconciliation of the letter-hunters at the closure,
such as made Northrop Frye classify Romance as the Summer Mythos. Or Byatt could be invoking the equation of romance with women’s writing that Mary Wollstonecraft scorned as “romantic unnatural fabrication[s]” from the pen of “a very young lady” (cited Langbauer, 210), the antithesis of the novel form’s sophisticated complexity.

One could hardly call *Possession* either simple or naive; nor does it come from a young lady’s pen. But though the rest of the above will apply, there are more important resemblances to medieval romance than the stories’ source. The romancers were as accomplished at weaving a crazy-quilt of fairytale as they were at unpicking and reweaving story lines, and a thicket of plots and allusions also flourishes on Byatt’s double narrative. The first allusion is intertextual: the hardcover dust jacket reproduces Burne-Jones’ *Merlin and Vivien*, prefiguring the encounter of the older Ash and younger Christabel, she a virtual recluse, he a literary lion. They meet, he falls, she acquires his skills and produces “Melusina.” Her Breton cousin Raoul tells the tale of Merlin and Vivien, meeting at “the old Fairy Fountain” (353), and his daughter Sabine sees Christabel as entrapping Raoul too. A *Merlin and Vivien* is the treasured work of Christabel’s painter-lover, Blanche. “Christabel,” of course, evokes Coleridge’s menacing Geraldine. Christabel and Sabine rewrite the Lyonesse myth, a spurious folk-tale (Bivar, 167) about the sunken city of Ys, where the priestess’ obsession with a lover lets her city drown. Christabel loses both her lovers, her illegitimate daughter, her home, her peace of mind. “La Motte,” and her descendant’s surname, “Bailey,” the name of the modern male protagonist, “Roland,” echo the guarded castles of courtly love, female keeps, the Dark Towers of noble knights. Byatt underlines that allusion with Roland’s “variations of indirect assault” as he “entered and took possession of all her white coolness” (507), when he and Maud finally go to bed.

Melusine is woven throughout in details as small as Maud and Christabel’s green shoes. Christabel is left a solitary “old bat” (79), a “sorciere” (501) haunting her kinsman’s tower. Byatt constructs the first part of “Melusina,” translating and telescoping the romances of Jean d’Arras and La Coudrette, using 92 yet more lavish pentameters to reach the fairy, at the end of a “narrow track within a cleft” that “wound in and down” to the fountain, a quintessential female landscape (Moers, 253-55), where on a rock “low amid the curl/ Of dim-discerned weeds,” “a lady sat and sang” (Byatt, 294-97). Roland meets Maude Bailey, beautiful, inaccessible, under Lincoln University’s “white-tiled towers” (39).
Melusine is Maud, is Christabel, is a leitmotif for Byatt. In her earlier novel, *Still Life* (1985), the protagonist Frederica falls for Raphael the limp-wristed Cambridge don because he wears the face of her childhood fantasy, a wounded knight succoured by the dreamer in her pastoral paradise.

One could go on chasing patterns and resonances, as the Victorian lovers pursue and avoid each other, as the modern American academics pursue the modern British academics chasing the Victorians, as everybody, including the reader, pursues the letters, a paper-chase that runs to the novel’s end. It threads through the accumulated literary paraphernalia, endless quotations from Ash’s poetry, from Christabel’s poetry, Blanche’s journal, Ellen’s journal, Sabine’s journal, her romance. The biography by Cropper, the American academic, institutionalising Ash with its wonderfully fussy footnotes, satirising Eliot satirising scholarship in “The Waste Land.” The article by the other American, Leonora, reframing Melusine in gynocentric feminist theory. Letters to and from everybody central or peripheral, their cynosure the lovers’ correspondence: “In the literature of love ... the letter is the central form” (Moers, 149). *Possession* appears to have intervened in Byatt’s projected quartet with its “complex double time scheme” that looks back to the 1950’s as a Second Elizabethan Age (Blain, *et al*, 166), which began with *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life*. *Possession* widens the concepts of centring the novel on a character’s writing, such as Alexander’s plays in both *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, and the use of letters “in a different voice,” which in *Still Life* was the authentic artist’s voice of Van Gogh. In *Possession*, however, all this detail is more integral than in the post-Laurentian Yorkshire landscapes of the earlier novels, where I would automatically skip a paragraph of furniture inventory every time we entered a new room. Here it makes the novel polyphonic, a kaleidoscope of viewpoints amid the thicket of imagery. This mimics the tactics of the romancers, who, when really “inventing,” will cite “stori stif and stronge” (Tolkien and Gordon, 1.34) as phony authorities.

Underlying all this in a most unmediaeval manner are the title’s manifold resonances. One reviewer listed a couple of meanings for possession: “... of the lover by the beloved, the biographer by his subject” (*Evening Standard*). Possession cuts both ways. Roland possesses the drafts of the letters, is possessed by the chase for Christabel. Cropper is possessed by desire to possess the letters. The lover is possessed by and possesses the beloved, as Ash is possessed by and possesses Christabel.
And is possessed by Ellen, his lawful wife, who rules his death-bed and chooses, an echo of Tristan and Isolde, not to let Christabel in. Possession is a need for Blanche and a terror for Maud, whose looks make her “a possession” (506). There is possession by legends, old narratives that have their own compulsion, by readers’ demands. For a Quest, for a Chase, for a Grail. “All old stories,” Christabel tells Sabine, “will bear telling ... again in different ways” (350). But when you retell a story, do you possess it, or does it possess you?

The romancers who constructed “Melusine” took unhesitating possession of both fairytale and history. Over the rock of a real thirteenth century family they embroidered the tale of a fairy bride (Thompson, 490) told in Germany, Wales and Brittany (Skeat, xii). The Lusignans, a turbulent, scoundrelly set of Poitevin barons became Raymonde the haunted, remorseful knight and his illustrious progeny. And Melusine? Mindful of Stephen Knight’s comment that a fairy mistress signified “private compensation” (109) my first question about the romance was, is there an heiress? Skeat found Eustachie Chabot, heiress to the Lusignan holding of Vouvent (xii), whose descendants became, as La Coudrette claims, kings of Jerusalem and Armenia (Warren, 67). Or there was Isabella of Angouleme, a great heiress betrothed to one Lusignan, married by John of England, widowed to marry the next Lusignan, to whom she did bear nine sons. The betrothal quarrels undid John. Her own illwill to Louis IX helped overthrow the Lusignans (Labarge, 74-76), and banish her till death in the Abbey of Fontrevault (Lucas 48-49). Whichever it was, a faceless or shrewish Poitevin heiress became a fairy-mermaid whose tail was elegantly “barred with silver and Asure,” the heraldic quarterings of Lusignan (Skeat, 1. 100, Note, 249). What more could be asked of a romance?

What else the romances gave supplies their deepest resemblance to Possession. Whether performed by nineteenth century mythologers like Baring-Gould (cited Skeat, xii), or present-day feminists like Silvia Vegetti Finzi (Byatt, Acknowledgements), readings of Melusine that concentrate on the mermaid-serpent obscure the dual nature of the medieval romance. The romancers do slide gaily between history and folk or fairytale, but as Stephen Knight shows, their project is to reinforce the blend of “cavalry and chivalry” that, in the common world of medieval France and England, justified the ascendancy of the “bellatores” (Hallam, 9), and reconciled the rest to being fought over. In La Coudrette and Jean d’Arras, Melusine and her fountain form a small part of tales largely devoted to the kills and
conquests of her male kin, which are at once justification of chivalric ideology, and the expression of chivalric fantasies. That Raymonde slays one lord by accident and another for losing him Melusine can be seen as an attempt to justify revolt against feudal suzerains. The sons’ exploits are fantasies of might acquiring land and wealth. And Melusine’s exile after endowing her husband with sons and castle is a chivalric fantasy about an heiress. Have her, blissful unreality, propose to you, possess her money and her womb, then be conveniently rid of her.

_Possession_ also satisfies a ruling class’s fantasies while endorsing a status quo that, like feudal chivalry, is international; for want of a better word, patriarchal. Jane Miller spends three careful pages arguing the simplistic and universalising dangers of the term, then concludes it may be used “If ‘patriarchy’ is allowed to stand for those powers which construe and confirm women as inferior ...” (233). And after all its lush writing, its academic wit and satire and its polyphonic _tour de force_, this was the centre of my disappointment with _Possession_: that what it really did was to endorse the ruling ideology, to construe and confirm the inferiority of women from the matter of Melusine, because when Byatt re-told her stories she let them possess her.

I picture Byatt raising her brows at this reproach, but not in surprise. Speaking to Juliet Dusinberre, she said she felt critics like Ellen Moers reduced literature to a “source of interest in women” when “literature has always been ... my escape from the limits of being female,” and claimed “I still believe in the liberal concept of the individual” (186). She felt that “There have not been deep prejudices against women writers, except that a woman writer may be set aside and praised like a dog for walking on its hind legs ...” (186-87). So this dispraise would not surprise her, as it may a good few readers. For beyond doubt, here is a “massive, complex story ... an emotional voyage of discovery ... an unbearably moving love story” (Cosmopolitan). It is “intelligent, ingenious and humane” (TLS), “delicious” and “profound” (Evening Standard), it “[bristles]” with symbolism and symmetries, [shimmers] with myth and legend” (Sunday Times). It even voices the theories of feminism. And its narrative roles, its reader positions, place women exactly where they were under the masculinist ideology of medieval romance.

Jean d’Arras is supposed to have written the first “Melusine,” in Latin, to amuse the Duc de Berry’s sister (Skeat, ix), but even in the English translation she was apparently expected to assume the double position that Teresa de Lauretis argued is imposed by mainstream cinema
on a female audience (143-44). She might identify with Melusine, but mostly she would be spectator to a succession of male fantasies where she had to admire men admiring her and fighting for themselves. La Coudrette wrote the second version for a male patron, underlining the romances’ bias toward the male, more powerful section of their chivalric audience. In Possession male readers can identify from the first with Roland, a worthy but impoverished knight—er, academic. Female readers have to assume the “split” position. It is true that many canonical works demand the opposite role from men, and Byatt’s polyphonies allow a shift to everyone; but the male and female roles remain traditional. The questing Roland finds Maud, who overawes him, being both intelligent and beautiful. An excellent start for the modern female reader, did it not form the stereotypic courtly love situation, with exalted lady and lowly knight. Maud is articulate and plays an active part in the search for Christabel. Maud also proves to be the lost heiress to whom the entire academic treasuretrove belongs. And having solved the mystery and collected three job offers, Roland, his knightly—er, academic-self-esteem assured, is granted, in the old courtly term, “benison.” Like Raymonde, he comes to possess the heiress, and with her, implicitly, the treasuretrove. The woman inherits, the man wins. The man seeks, the woman is sought. Both male and female readers can participate in the traditional patterns and most will go away thoroughly satisfied, especially impoverished but ambitious academics—er, knights—of the British middle-class.

Less happily, the romantic ending that gains Maud a gentle, sensitive modern man sites him squarely in another formulaic role, that of the hero in female romance. The Gothic romance, in particular, prizes kind, gentle, feminised heroes to the point of fantasy. Nancy Chodorow gives this a psychological basis in her analysis of the gap a Western upbringing leaves between men’s and women’s expectations of each other. Men want an object of desire and fear a powerful mother, women want both a sexual partner and the emotional support of women’s relationships, and are acculturated, impossibly, to expect both from one man (66-78). In Still Life and The Virgin in the Garden Byatt examined unsatisfactory academic objects of desire. Roland does at least bed his Maud competently. But in aiming for Cawelti’s sort of romance without leaving the narrative patterns of medieval romance, Byatt falls into the trap of female romance. Her beautifully-built character becomes indistinguishable from the modern woman’s dream, purveyed by Mills and Boon, of a “perfect” fantasy mate.
The traditional narrative paths prove more disturbing with the Victorian characters, especially the women. Byatt works hard to make Ash a believable, kindly, passionate but non-macho male. But though he suffers the misfortune of a "frigid" wife, a lost love and a misplaced child, he still does the seeking and the courting, and Christabel's last letter renounces her view of herself as Vivien to his Merlin to see him as the Miltonic "dragon" to her "tame villatic fowl" (502). And for all his Angst, on his deathbed he is lovingly tended by his faithful wife. I find his trials moving, but in the end, as much an ideological smoke-screen as the lamentations of Raymonde over his dead lord or his lost Melusine. Lament he may, but possess he does.

Ellen, too, is given a voice only to express traditional female silence, female ambiguity. She gives up her own potential as a writer to serve Ash. She knows about the adultery. With traditional female jealousy, Blanche tells her. She reads Christabel's letters begging to see Ash, and does not destroy them, but does not answer. Her own journal, says her modern academic researcher, is designed to "baffle" (220): she cannot convey "the truth of how it had been, of the silence in the telling, the silence that extended before and after it, always the silences" (453). And however moving and subtle Byatt's conveyance of this ambiguity, this silent speaking which is itself a feminist reconstruction of the speech of women, it never takes Ellen beyond that traditional pattern. Did Byatt possess the story of Patient Griselda, or did it possess her?

Christabel, who leaves her "motte and bailey defences" (504), and breaks her "egg" of self-sufficiency, enjoys a meeting of minds and a brief idyll of meeting bodies. For it she pays with pregnancy, the loss of an eventually uncaring daughter, the guilt of Blanche's death, and exile in her tower. Before feminism, her poetry is forgotten. Even when recovered, her theft of Merlin's skills backfires, for "Melusina" is to Roland "very like some of Ash's poems ... sounds often as if he wrote it" (265). Her best work is thus more his than hers. Her final letter speaks of her "punishment" for keeping the child from Ash, questions, as Ellen does, if she could have been a greater poet without him, finds it "fine" that he flamed and she caught fire (502) — and then says, "I would rather have lived alone, so, if you would have the truth." But "that might not be — and is granted almost to none" (503). Why might it not be? I am reminded strongly of the recent film, Frankie and Johnny, which succeeds in letting a woman speak, to express very much the same desire for self-sufficiency that Christabel voices, and to be overrun by the man's urgent need for
union; by a human reality or an ideological conviction? Must the same
conviction force Christabel and Ellen into a Victorian triptych of wife and
mistress, both crippled in some way by the man between them, with a
complacent implication of "sad, but this is how women are"? To Marion
Zimmer Bradley, more forthright about feminism than Byatt, "women who
have proved themselves competing against men are not very sympathetic
to the protected women's spaces and quotas" (1986, 64). But in The Mists
of Avalon (1982) she reshuffled the Arthurian triangle so Morgan's
inexplicable evil made a feasible, well-intentioned motive for tragedy. Did
Byatt possess the story of Arthur, Morgan and Guinevere, or did it possess
her?

Then there is Blanche. It is laudable that Byatt makes a lesbian
visible. But was it necessary to make her possessive, neurotic, sinking
from hysterical illnesses to malicious interference with the lovers' letters,
hence to visiting Ellen as a "poor mad white-faced woman," "venomous
and distraught" (454), who betrays the adultery before she commits suicide?
All the grace-notes of her portrayal, all the pity and guilt the characters
lavish on her cannot alter the signals that say, the only proper sexuality for
women is heterosexual. Like Maud, we only become human after
penetration. As well be back with Swinburne sighing in pious prurience
over "the Lesbians kissing across their smitten/ Lutes" before "the land
was barren,/ Full of fruitless women and music only . . ." ("Sapphics," 49-
50, 70-71). To be sure, this section of the novel portrays Victorian
England, and it sounds authentic. But Byatt claimed it is a Romance. Why
then did she not exploit the licence the term suggests? Why did she not
follow Hawthorne, whose own romance blew a hole in the status quo,
forgive the cliché, as big as a house? He used a Gothic plot of ancient
crime and modern retribution to overthrow capitalist might and restore the
house to the lowly dispossessed. And even the medieval romancers were
able to translate Eustachie/Isabella from history into the "transitional
space" of play, of literature (Winnicott, 13). Maud discusses Melusine as
escaping into a transitional area outside the female gender trap (334). Why
then did Byatt imprison her own Melusine in the fifties ideology of women
competing for men, women's hostility to women, that has been combated
by twenty years of feminism (Neustatter, 18-19)? Why did she not let
Blanche fall in love with Ellen and have them run off for a Yorkshire idyll?
Perhaps the answer is that like her character Frederica, Byatt attended
Cambridge when it was a male preserve. Frederica never has a woman
friend. Nor, except for Blanche, does Christabel. Maud has moments of
fellowship with female characters, but mostly when she is cozening them for information. It seems that Byatt remains one of those women for whom “there’s no room ... if she’s not a he” (Cixous, 292). She has not been able to escape the patriarchal discourses that Jane Miller calls women’s second language (11). For all its virtuosity, I see her, sadly, as the last of the novel’s enchanters, taken captive by the casting of her own spells. Did she possess the story of Merlin, or did it possess her?

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