Ice, Glass, Snow: Fairy Tale as Art and Metafiction in the Writing of A. S. Byatt

Everybody knows it’s fiction, but then everybody knows the whole thing is fiction.

A. S. Byatt, qtd. in Wachtel 88

The award of the Booker Prize to A. S. Byatt’s novel Possession: A Romance in 1990 cemented Byatt’s position as a literary figure and sparked the steady stream of academic attention that has greeted both Possession itself and Byatt’s other works. Among her works, fairy tale and folklore form a recurring theme, both explicitly and implicitly within larger works. Her interest in fairy-tale and folk forms is, however, both subsidiary to and emblematic of her far larger interest in form, writing, and narrative tradition as a whole. An intensely intellectual and literary writer, Byatt betrays in all her works an interest in the presence and repercussions of literature itself. Much of her work is highly self-aware and self-reflexive, her protagonists tending to reflect her own identity as academic, writer, or narratologist. This gives her writing an intelligence that James Wood has identified as “Byatt’s greatest problem as a writer.” Wood argues that “while part of her imagination yearns for a visual immediacy, the other part constantly peels away into analogy, allegory, metaphor, and relations with other texts” (121–22). As a result, she continuously explores and deconstructs the nature and workings of her own narratives as well as the problematic relationship between narrative and reality. Fairy tale, as one of the more essential forms of story, is the vehicle by which this interest is most strongly expressed.

In her self-consciousness about the artistic process, Byatt is thus a recurrently and integrally metafictional writer, continually aware of the operation of
narrative form. Patricia Waugh has defined a metafictional text as one that “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). In the structures of fairy tale, Byatt finds a form whose deliberate nonmimetic artificiality exemplifies precisely those metafictional elements Waugh describes. Propp comments: “Obviously, the fairy tale is born out of life; however, the fairy tale reflects reality only weakly” (96). Participation in the marvelous universe of fairy tale—the enjoyment of the wonder that fairy tale can evoke—depends entirely on recognition of the artificiality of that universe, the fact that it is a work of art that makes no attempt to reproduce reality with any accuracy. “Once upon a time” is a precise evocation of constructedness that signals an explicitly non-mimetic function, a transition to a different reality from our own. Fairy tale’s unashamed presentation of the marvelous, as well as the unrealistic use of pattern and repetition in describing events, similarly draw attention to a nonrealist form of representation—to tale as crafted object, artifact.

In this sense, then, fairy tale has some elements that could be said to be inherently metafictional, and thus it is particularly well adapted to the kind of self-conscious play in which Byatt engages. Her sophisticated play with fairy-tale form, however, conforms more powerfully to Waugh’s definition than does traditional fairy tale, in that the shift and play between realist depiction and fairy tale is often consciously explored within a single work, questioning the status not only of the text but of the reality it purports to describe. In her essay “‘Sugar’/Le Sucre’” Byatt recounts her delight in the discovery of Proust and the possibility for a text to be realist and “at the same time to think about form, its own form, its own formation, about perceiving and inventing the world” (Passions 22–23). Byatt’s writing, realist as well as fairy tale, highlights constructedness as inherent to narrative in a way that problematizes reality itself as well as the literature that represents it. In her work art and literature both reflect and create the world.

Issues of story are thus inextricable, in Byatt’s lexicon, from issues of art itself, the status of text as artifact. Byatt’s keen sympathy for the aesthetic and creative value of art is rendered complex by its reflective and refractive capacities in her novels and by the relationship between the structures of art (visual or literary) and her ongoing interest in realist depiction. Julian Gitzen notes the tendency for Byatt’s characters to “remain tirelessly alive to both the bond and the gap between words and their referents and between art and its subject. Her fiction persistently dramatizes this distinction by making it either a significant feature of the narrative or the very focus of action” (84). Thus the lives of the protagonists in Possession are both reflected in, and come to reflect, their literary productions—Christabel’s fairy tales, Ash’s poetry, or the Freudian criticism of Roland or Maud. Reality, or rather the fictional represen-
tation of reality, becomes structured in literary or fairy-tale terms, emphasizing Byatt's interest in fairy tale as simply the most extreme example of literature's ability to refigure reality in terms of structured text. This is particularly striking in the case of Byatt's realist tales that slide into classic fairy-tale forms—the middle-aged narratologist given three wishes by a genie, the artist in France whose swimming pool becomes inhabited by a potential fairy bride in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" (Elementals). The story shape and the realist setting are coequal, mutually influential, inextricably involved. The processes used by humanity in reflecting its experience as narrative are reflected over again in Byatt's own narratives in an act of ongoing creation. The process recalls the tendency of metafictional texts to "explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (Waugh 2).

Byatt's interest in this relationship between reality and storytelling accounts for her characteristic use of embedded tale, most explicitly in Possession and "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," although it also turns up in short stories such as "Crocodile Tears." 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. Embedded stories signal themselves unavoidably as tale rather than mimesis, and they highlight their own structured narrative voice through the existence of the narrator as a character in the frame narrative. It becomes easy to see why Byatt's fascination with folktale and fairy tale becomes partially subordinate to her writing of novels and novellas. Actual stand-alone fairy tales are rare in her literary output: most of her tales are called into service to develop thematic and structural aspects of longer texts. Even the tales in The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye include two of the embedded stories from Possession: in terms of individual fairy tales, Byatt has produced only "The Story of the Eldest Princess" and "Cold." 1

A Pattern I Know: Structure and Intertext

The awareness of fairy-tale structure is present in Byatt's work in two main forms. More rarely, she undertakes direct intertextual retelling of actual folktales or fairy tales such as the Fairy Melusina or the Grimms' "The Glass Coffin," but mostly her tales are original variations on fairy-tale themes and offer a sustained and investigative sense of the recurring patterns and expectations of classic fairy tales. Reworked tales will characteristically be infused with awareness of a broader range of texts: "The Threshold," for example, invokes Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, and "Gode's Story" contains echoes of Andersen in addition to a more generalized play with folkloric elements. This focus on known exemplae of pattern and structure is integral to Byatt's self-consciousness as a writer: not
only the writer and reader but Byatt’s characters themselves need to be wholly aware of the fact that they are “caught in a story” that is, above all, familiar. The Eldest Princess herself exemplifies both structure and realization when she says, “I am in a pattern I know, and I suspect I have no power to break it” (Djinn 48).

Recognizable patterns and shape, rather than narrative voice, thus define Byatt’s sense of the fairy tale; “The Story of the Eldest Princess,” while not actually retelling a known tale, works around the classic pattern of three siblings. Propp has noted how the fairy tale adheres to rules of structural similarity: “the actors in the fairy tale perform essentially the same actions as the tale progresses, no matter how different from one another in shape, size, sex and occupation, in nomenclature and other static attributes. . . . The functions of the actors are a constant: everything else is a variable” (94). Thus, Byatt’s Eldest Princess sets out to attempt the quest that will save her country, only to realize that she is doomed to failure. In fairy tales, the eldest two siblings always set out, only to be “turned to stone, or imprisoned in vaults, or cast into magic sleep, until rescued by the third royal person, who did everything well, restored the first and the second, and fulfilled the quest” (Djinn 47). In that moment of essentially postmodern realization, the Eldest Princess becomes aware of her place in a narrative that imposes pattern and thus predictability on her actions. It is interesting to note the frequent recurrence of words such as “fate” and “destiny” in Byatt’s tales, offering a sense not only of the magical predestinations of fairy tale but also of their power to illustrate the equally powerful predestinations of narrative itself.

In terms of Byatt’s metafictional project, this awareness of pattern is central to the awareness of narrative as story, artifact, construction. Fairy tale offers a convention of narrative that is stripped down to an essence of representation—once upon a time, three princes, a magical horse, a princess in a tower, three wishes—and which thus exposes the artifice and constructedness of narrative. Gillian Perholt comments, of her paperweights, “I like the geometrically patterned flowers best. . . . More than the ones that aim at realism, at looking real” (Djinn 275). The conventions of fairy tale problematize their own relationship with reality as much by the artificialities of pattern and repetition as anything else. “The Glass Coffin” underlines this aspect of narrative continually in its recurring insistence on craftsmanship, the little tailor as “a fine craftsman” whose pie is “decorated . . . with beautifully formed pastry leaves and flowers, for he was a craftsman, even if he could not exercise his own craft” (Djinn 3–5). Likewise, his eventual choice of the glass key is because he is himself an artisan “and could see that it had taken masterly skill to blow all these delicate wards and barrels” (Djinn 7). Similar issues of artistry inform the glass sculptures of “Cold,” which are very much akin to Gillian’s paperweights.
Central to this structuredness of narrative shape is the notion of narrative closure, which twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers have come to associate unavoidably with fairy tale, despite the more ambiguous shape of some folkloric narratives. Byatt's strong awareness of this relates once again to her sense of the two-way transformations of reality into narrative and narrative into reality. Toward the end of Possession, Roland articulates the problem that "coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable" (422); his comment identifies the human need to impose shape onto our experience of reality. Byatt comments: "I stumbled . . . across the idea that stories and tales, unlike novels, were intimately to do with death. . . . Whether we like it or not, our lives have beginnings, middles and ends. We narrate ourselves to each other in bars and beds" (Histories and Stories 132). This tendency to experience reality as narratively shaped is, however, ambiguous, not least because of the postmodern context in which Byatt is writing. While admitting the existence of a "genuine narrative hunger" in readers, Byatt suggests that such an interest is only valid "as a technical experiment" (qtd. in Wachtel 88). More importantly, as Jane L. Campbell notes, narrative structure and coherence gives rise to a problem of overcontrol: "[Byatt] is especially concerned with the life-denying consequences of attempting to control another's life by becoming its author, and explores this subject in an early novel, The Game" (106). The omniscient narrator of realist fiction cannot be allowed to impose absolute structure on the tale, precisely because its author is interested in metafiction, and metafiction, in Waugh's terms, relies on the instability of the text. Any novel has dialogic aspects, a "conflict of language and voices" that realistic fiction resolves "through their subordination to the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, godlike author. . . . Metafiction displays and rejoices in the impossibility of such a resolution" (Waugh 6).

The effect of this in Byatt's writing is a paradoxical awareness of fairy-tale structure and a tendency to examine and hence disrupt that structure, denying the authority of its narrator or narrators. Byatt's narratives largely refuse fairy-tale closure, remaining open-ended. In "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," the djinn comments to Gillian that her tales are "strange, glancing things. They peter out, they have no shape" (Djinn 242). The delays and refusals of closure in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" are thematically interesting in that they serve to explore and reflect the issues that confront Gillian—old age, a decaying body, and ultimately her own, inevitable death. As the narrative delays closure, so is Gillian's death delayed indefinitely by the wish granted by the djinn. Even "The Glass Coffin," which faithfully reproduces the Grimms' fairy-tale ending (marriage and happiness), tries to disrupt it with the tailor's offer to allow the rescued princess her freedom (Djinn 21). The tailor's failure to escape
narrative predestination could be attributed to the tale's place in Possession, as a tale told by Christabel LaMotte, and thus part of a Victorian realist narrative tradition that renders her capable of accepting closure more easily than her twentieth-century descendants. The more postmodern Eldest Princess, having resisted and rejected the narrative closure of her fairy-tale identity, arrives at the end of her story without achieving any closure at all. Instead, she finds a place where she can be both free and content, telling stories in the forest with the old woman and her creatures: it is "a good place to go to sleep, and stop telling stories until the morning, which will bring its own changes" (Djinn 72). Likewise, Gillian Perholt, having released the djinn, continues uneventfully with her life, the tale ending with the djinn's return to see her, briefly, and with the possibility of future visits left ambiguously open-ended. Byatt thus tries to escape the closure and hence the intrinsic entrapment of narrative in an essentially postmodern reinterpretation of the structure of fairy tale. This awareness of the potential for entrapment in the shape of narrative is integral to her writing and provides one of its strongest recurring themes.

**Glass, Ice, and Narrative Entrapment**

Images of glass and ice pervade Byatt's fairy tales—Gillian Perholt's glass paperweights, the glass bottle in which the djinn is imprisoned, the glass key and box in Byatt's retelling of the Grimms' "The Glass Coffin," the ice of "Cold." The most sustained example of this is perhaps Gillian's glass paperweights in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye":

Gillian collected glass paperweights: she liked glass in general, for its paradoxical nature, translucent as water, heavy as stone, invisible as air, solid as earth. Blown with human breath in a furnace of fire. As a child she had loved to read of glass balls containing castles and snowstorms, though in reality she had always found these disappointing and had transferred her magical attachment to the weights in which coloured forms and carpets of geometric flowers shone perpetually and could be made to expand and contract as the sphere of glass turned in her fingers in the light. (Djinn 182)

Glass and ice similarly illustrate an essential aspect of Byatt's narratives, which, like Gillian's paperweights, have a "paradoxical nature": like a glass bottle, they both enclose and reveal; they are simultaneously transparent and containing, invisible yet entrapping. Like the djinn's bottle or the glass paperweight, these substances appear to be solid, to hold meanings that seem to offer themselves transparently to our view; yet like Gillian's paperweight, they shift and change as they are tilted, to offer multiplicity of meaning within their apparently sim-
ple stasis. Both ice and glass are thus images of art itself, of artifact and the creation of artifacts. In her essay “Ice, Snow, Glass” Byatt notes that ice and glass stories all “have images of art. The queen in Snow White is entranced by a black frame round a window. . . Snow White . . . becomes an object of aesthetic perception, framed in her glass coffin” (Histories and Stories 156). Later, she comments on her own enjoyment of the Grimm’s tale “The Glass Coffin”: “A fabricated world in a glass case gives a delight an ordinary castle doesn”t” (157). Glass and ice are often structured in her works: geometrically patterned paperweights, or the snowflakes and the plethora of shaped glass creations of “Snow.” As in “The Glass Coffin,” the glassworks of “Snow” often enclose miniature realities—the glass castle, the glass beehive full of bees (Elementals 141-44). In this enclosure or entrapment, glass and ice operate not only like art itself but like narrative. Meaning is thus captured in stasis within the work of art—another aspect of fairy tale’s particularly transparent structure that perhaps accounts for Byatt’s tendency toward allegory and for her ongoing awareness of entrapment within allegory, or narrative, or art itself.

The glass metaphor continues to be appropriate to the sense in which meaning shifts, is opaque, even in something as transparent as a fairy tale, but is ultimately subordinate to form, to the nature of the tale itself as tale rather than embedded message. The fairy tale is a form of narrative that is complete in itself, independent of message, and in which message is always subordinate to form. The glass key in “The Glass Coffin” operates as a powerful metaphorical motif in this context. In the paradoxical manner of glass, the meaning that the key offers is both obvious and hidden: while transparent, it also contains nothing, so that its clearly offered meaning is actually invisible. Like fairy tale itself, the key is transparent, apparently empty, its meaning contained entirely in its shape rather than its content. Both pot and purse are, like bottles and paperweights, containers; the key is just a key, an object that presupposes a container to be unlocked but which will unlock rather than contain, and which offers release rather than enclosure. Like a glass paperweight, the tale’s function is simply to exist as an artifact, a construct that is complete and legitimate in and of itself. As in Gillian’s description of glass, the fairy tale “is not possible, it is only a solid metaphor, a medium for seeing and a thing seen at once. It is what art is” (274).

It is easy to see how Byatt finds fairy tale a particularly powerful medium for exploration in this context, since, as Zipes comments, fairy-tale form and content are effectively the same thing—form is meaning, meaning is integral to structure: “It is through the structure or composition of the tale that we can gain an understanding of its meaning or enunciation, what it is trying to communicate” (5). Here, of course, the expectations and ritualized repetitions of the fairy-tale form itself are central. Recognizable and recurring patterns
entrap the protagonists of the tale into making choices that are dictated by the conventions of the tale itself. Certainly many of the tales in Possession repeat the entrapment images: the choice made by the Childe in “The Threshold,” for example, when the protagonist, faced with the choice between gold, silver, and lead, knows that the correct choice is always lead, despite his personal preferences—or, indeed, the preferences of the writer. Likewise, the tailor in “The Glass Coffin” is entrapped by the narrative that comes into play at the moment of his choice of the glass key, which leads him into an adventure described and thus predestined by the little gray man. It is easy to account for Byatt’s interest in this particular tale, which repeats many of the elements of the Grimms’ original story. The young woman in her glass coffin and the miniature castle under its glass dome contain and enclose not only the woman and the place but the narratives that explain them, which are released when the glass is broken and the woman tells her story.

Within the narrative of “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” the predicament of the djinn himself illustrates most powerfully this process of entrapment. Imprisoned in his bottle by the actions of a jealous King Solomon, the djinn is doomed to allow three wishes to any person who releases him. The whole mechanism of the Arabian Nights tales thus sets up the expectation of the djinn as servant to the bottle, as obliged to grant the wishes of the bottle’s owner, thus neatly conflating elements of “The Fisherman and the Jinni” with the lamp-genie of “Aladdin.” At the same time, since the djinn reveals his history in the form of narratives told to Gillian Perholt, the effect is that of the djinn imprisoned in his own narratives, in the history he relates. These narratives are constructed in the manner of fairy tales: each story is framed by the opening of the bottle and the exhausting of the three wishes, thus achieving a ritualized and repetitive effect. Gillian’s encounter with the djinn invokes the series of narratives, entrapping him neatly in the fate of his bottle curse and appearing to predestine him to another cycle of release, three wishes, and return to imprisonment. However, it is also this process of tale-telling that finally frees him, in that his stories both reveal and endear him to Gillian, and, in revealing his imprisonment, lead her to desire his freedom. Gillian’s own comment on this is interesting: “The emotion we feel in fairy tales in which the characters are granted their wishes is a strange one. We feel the possible leap of freedom—I can have what I want—and the perverse certainty that this will change nothing; that Fate is fixed” (Djinn 259).

This brings us, then, to the opposite aspect of narrative in Byatt’s work: paradoxically, like the glass of a paperweight, narrative both encloses and empowers; its patterns entrap at the same time they offer the potential for release. Above all, narrative empowers when careful choice is employed: while containing, enclosing, and defining through its inherent structure and nature,
it also offers, through that structure and nature, the potential for release, freedom, and choice. Perhaps this is one of the issues articulated by Byatt’s tale “Cold,” which remains consistently aware of the paradox at the heart of glass—cold and transparent, like ice, but created by fire.

Ice/Fire, Intellectualism/Passion

While images of ice and glass illumine Byatt’s interest in narrative entrapment and empowerment, there is a sense in which they are also symbolic in a particularly gendered sense, one highlighted by Byatt herself in her essay “Ice, Snow, Glass.” Here she discusses her sense of “the conflict between a female destiny, the kiss, the marriage, the child-bearing, the death, and the frightening loneliness of cleverness, the cold distance of seeing the world through art, of putting a frame round things” (Histories and Stories 156). Ice and glass become a metaphor both for art itself, “putting a frame round things,” and for intellectual distance. Both of these are held up in contrast to the demands on women made by marriage and childbearing and to the warmer, more emotional qualities of sexuality itself. Byatt addresses this in an interview with Nicholas Tredell, in which she articulates the desire to be “both at once, a passionate woman and a passionate intellectual” (qtd. in Franken 28). Franken later refers to Byatt’s “use of the word ‘lamination’ to explain her desire to keep these layers of identity—the passionate woman and the intellectual—apart” (28). Intellectualism and sexuality are thus, to Byatt, separate rather than integrated, in sharp contrast to the Leonora Stern school of sex-in-everything; they thus translate rather well to the symbolic and metafictional exploration in which Byatt engages.

The symbolic potential in ice or glass is exemplified most strongly in the story “Cold,” which uses warmth and cold to polarize male and female in a way curiously similar to the light/dark imagery of George Macdonald’s story “The Day Boy and the Night Girl.” Where Macdonald’s Victorian sensibilities lead to a simplistic rendering of sexual difference, however, Byatt’s apparently obvious allegory is complex and, ultimately, both paradoxical and compromising. In “Cold,” cold and heat (ice and desert) are contrasted to illustrate female coolness and intellectualism threatened by the male through emotional warmth and sexual love. Fiammarosa, the icewoman princess, is both an artist and an intellectual in her cold solitude—“She studied snow-crystals and ice formations under a magnifying glass” and “produced shimmering, intricate tapestries that were much more than ‘good enough’” (Elementals 134). In love with her desert prince, she loses something of that hard, self-contained identity, becoming aware that “Inside her a little melted pool of water slopped and swayed where she had been solid and shining” (157). At the same time, however, the point of
intersection between herself and Prince Sasan is glass, which brings together the hard, transparent beauty of ice and the sand and heat of Sasan’s desert kingdom. Fiammarosa’s icewoman nature is likewise two-edged, and Byatt resists the oversimplified equation of physical cold with sexual coolness: Fiammarosa’s experience of cold is intensely sexual. “All along her body, in her knees, her thighs, her small, round belly, her pointed breasts . . . she felt an intense version of that paradoxical burn. . . . Snow pricked and hummed and brought her, intensely, to life” (126). Her feelings are strong enough that she chooses to marry Sasan and live in his desert kingdom, even though the climate threatens her with dissolution and death. Byatt thus seems to be making a fairly straightforward feminist point about the subordination of women to marriage and the loss of female identity created by the overwhelming feelings of sexual love. It is, after all, Fiammarosa who makes the sacrifices, in keeping with her own cynical realization that princesses are “gifts and rewards, handed over by their loving fathers . . . princesses are commodities” (135). The symbolic poles of the tale are in this sense similar to more obviously feminist rewrites such as those of Angela Carter, although infused with Byatt’s own intellectualism, her feeling that there is “something secretly good, illicitly desirable, about ice-hills and glass barriers . . . something which was lost with human love, with the descent to be kissed and given away” (Passions 155).

“Cold” is rescued from feminist allegory by its complexity and compromise, the fact that what saves this apparently doomed union is, in fact, art. If glass and ice are akin in texture despite their very opposed origins in heat and cold, they are also alike in that Byatt associates both mediums throughout with artistry, creativity, and artifact. Ice is the stuff of snowflakes and Fiammarosa’s geometric tapestries; glass enables Sasan to create marvelous images and the incredible glass caverns that eventually provide Fiammarosa with a home in which she can survive. Art not only bonds the polar oppositions of gender but, more importantly, creates the medium in which sexual love can exist and be expressed. As with any Byatt work, this functions at yet another level of meaning: the love story is made possible not only by art/glass but through and within the artistic creation of narrative itself, particularly the highly structured and patterned narrative of fairy tale. Recurring elements of patterning and structure relate back to fairy tale, its structure of repetition and expectation paralleled in the geometric precision of the snowflake or the lovingly crafted fantastic worlds of Sasan’s glass sculptures. In a sense, Fiammarosa and Sasan exist only because of story itself, because fairy-tale narrative supposes the existence of princes and princesses and provides such strong symbols in which to encapsulate and enshrine their lives. Ultimately, this is yet another manifestation of Byatt’s interest in romance, the structured and self-consciously unrealistic narrative that insists on the artifact of the happy heterosexual resolution. However, both romance and feminist explo-
ration are transcended, characteristically for Byatt, by the affirmation of fairy tale as metafiction, the validity of art itself.

The woman as artist becomes a recurring figure in these symbolic representations of sexual difference and is seen again, very strongly, in the Melusina figure of Possession. Here the recurring glass/ice images of Byatt's writing are figured slightly differently, in the related images of water: the watery Melusina herself, but also her fountain in LaMotte's poem, the physical watery landscapes of Yorkshire, and, rather more mundanely, bathrooms. Bathrooms seem to recur in Byatt's fiction generally—not only the numerous and idiosyncratic spaces of Possession but as the site of epiphany in The Shadow of the Sun, or a moment of enjoyment for Gillian in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye." Bathrooms are watery places, and water has properties similar to those of glass—both are marvelous and ambiguous liquids, reflective, transparent, malleable. Bathrooms are also places of shining tile, mirrors, semi-transparent shower curtains and panes of glass, not to mention extremes of hot and cold. In Possession bathrooms not only refigure the discovery scene of the Melusina story (in the perfect folkloric moment of Roland caught peering through the keyhole at Maud in her dragon dressing gown) but literally reflect the personalities of their owners. In Maud's bathroom, "a chill green glass place" with "glass tiles into whose brief and illusory depths one might peer, a shimmering shower curtain like a glass waterfall" (Possession 56), one finds not only a marvelous, fairy-tale realm but the perfect symbolic expression of Byatt's desire for cool, clean, intellectual dispassion. This withdrawn privacy is integral to Byatt's sense of the female artist-figure, and the folkloric Melusina is constructed in precisely these terms, as a builder of castles and cities. Franken argues for LaMotte's obvious fascination with "a concept of autonomy and creativity and a relationship between the two. The fact that Melusina owns her own space on Saturdays in which she is left alone and the fact that she creates madly and is applauded for it is attractive to LaMotte" (100).

The perverse femininity is thus marginalized in favor of a redefinition of the folkloric motif in essentially artistic terms: Melusina is not only a "tragic portrait of motherhood," echoing LaMotte's own experience (Franken 97), but also a threatened artist, as LaMotte is, and as Byatt, presumably, fears to be herself. Images of water are thus integral to art, but the stereotyped feminist interpretation of water as feminine, sexual, and generative, as in Leonora's analysis of "hidden holes and openings through which life-giving waters bubble and enter reciprocally" (Possession 244), are invoked only to be undercut by the novel's gentle ridicule of Leonora. Byatt's actual interest in water is not in its sexually creative symbolism but in its relationship to glass and its more abstract ability to mirror and reflect the demands of art.

Ultimately, the strongest intersection of the woman as artist with the motif of glass comes with the invocation of yet another folkloric, or perhaps
romance, pattern, that of the Lady of Shalott. Byatt's writing continually betrays, both explicitly and implicitly, her affection for the Victorian romances of Tennyson and Pre-Raphaelite art, which provide familiar patterns of narrative in a way very similar to fairy tale itself. The cracked mirror of the Lady is yet another incarnation of the glass surface, expressing most strongly the betrayal of female artistry at the heart of LaMotte's story, the perfect, creative solitude destroyed violently by the intrusion of a male figure and sexual passion. Byatt writes: "The Lady has things in common with the frozen death-in-life states of Snow White and of the lady and her castle in the glass coffins. She is enclosed in her tower, and sees the world not even through the window, but in a mirror, which reflects the outside life, which she, the artist, then weaves into 'a magic web with colours gay'. . . Preserving solitude and distance, staying cold and frozen, may, for women as well as artists, be a way of preserving life" (Histories and Stories 157–58). In some ways the complexity of glass and water in Byatt's work attempts to redeem and rethink the too-perfect structures of the Lady's doom, to refigure the relationship between men, women, and art in more ambiguous terms that allow the possibility of freedom rather than insisting on the certainty of destruction.

**Genies in Bottles, Jewels in Toads' Heads:**  
**Narrative Embedding**

Perhaps one of the most notable aspects of Byatt's exploration of fairy tale is her tendency to embed her fairy tales in longer, often realist narratives. This is significantly different from the practice of most other contemporary fairy-tale writers, who, like Angela Carter, tend to publish collections of stand-alone tales, as Byatt herself does in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*. Even that, however, is misleading in Byatt's case, since two of the five tales in that volume were previously embedded in *Possession*, and "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," the longest tale in the collection, makes sustained use of embedded narrative. It is as though Byatt's hyperawareness of the constructed nature of fairy-tale narrative, and hence of its intrinsic need for a narrator, cannot conceive of such narratives as separate from the frame that gives the narrator concrete identity. Even "The Story of the Eldest Princess," which, with "Cold," is Byatt's closest approach to the stand-alone fairy-tale narrative, embeds multiple mini-narratives within its relatively simple fairy-tale frame, as does "The Glass Coffin," providing another reason for Byatt's interest in this particular tale from the Grimms. Embedding, of course, is about fictionality; it is central to Byatt's metafictional project. Italo Calvino's essay on "Levels of Reality in Literature" discusses the extent to which any form of literature embeds levels of narrative within the text, using the *Decameron* and the *Arabian Nights* as examples of
explicit embedding. Either way, his conclusion is that "literature does not recognize Reality as such, but only levels. Whether there is such a thing as Reality, of which the various levels are only partial aspects, or whether there are only the levels, is something that literature cannot decide. Literature recognizes the reality of the levels" (120–21). Embedded texts problematize reality and thus signal fiction as metafiction, reality as constructed artifact.

The embedding process works to emphasize Byatt's notions of reality and narrative, creating in effect two levels of operation in which the artificial (the marvelous, patterned, and familiar form of the fairy tale) highlights the "real" of the frame narrative. This is similar to the effect Calvino notes in Boccaccio's Decameron: "Between the tales and the framework there is a clean stylistic split that highlights the distance between the two planes" (117). In Byatt's work the effect is particularly obvious in the novel form of Possession, which contrasts the omniscient narrator's modern account of Roland and Maud with the very distinctive voice and texture of LaMotte's fairy tales, both entire and fragmentary, included within the narrative. A similar but more complex effect can be seen in the detailed contemporary setting of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," which is textured largely as realist novella despite the obvious fairy-tale nature of its djinn and three wishes. A fascinating process of overlap occurs, however: the frame tale in both these texts slides continually between marvelous and realist, as slippage from the embedded tales infects the frame narrative. The mock-fantastic opening of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" characterizes our own time as one when "men and women hurtled though the air on metal wings . . . when pearly-fleshed and jewelled apparitions of Texan herdsmen and houris shimmered in the dusk on Nicaraguan hillsides" (Djinn 95); this renders the mundane vividly magical while simultaneously denying the possibility of the marvelous. The playful anti-realism alerts the reader to the forthcoming embedded tales as well as to the frame narrative's ultimately fairy-tale shape.

In its detail and complexity, the frame narrative's account of Gillian's life lacks the recognizable sparseness of fairy-tale texture: its psychological insights and meticulously described mundane settings at least partially contradict the narrative's fantastic structure. The familiar fairy-tale texture that would legitimate the marvelous, which is obviously lacking in the frame narrative, is restored in the tales Gillian and her colleagues explore in critical retellings and in the oral tales told by the Djinn. In Possession, slippage from the embedded tales affects Roland and Maud, whose life begins to resemble the romances of LaMotte in its sexual inevitability and in the lost-descendant revelations that conclude the novel. The interactions of frame narrative with embedded tale act to elide and overwrite the contrast in textures: resonating structures simply highlight the fact that the frame tale is fairy tale as much as the embedded narratives. The realist illusion of the frame narrative is thus
disrupted in true metafictional fashion, once again highlighting constructedness, artifice, and the fiction of realism. Embedding, and the resulting contrast and slippage between fairy tale and realist frame, permits Byatt explicitly to brandish the self-conscious artifice of the tale in a way that a stand-alone tale can do only implicitly.

The same self-consciousness is true even when the frame tale is far from realist, an effect seen most strongly in “The Story of the Eldest Princess” and “The Glass Coffin,” which effectively offer fairy tales embedded in fairy tales. In the former, the fairy-tale frame is host to a series of oral, folk-style narratives (the stories of the Scorpion, the Toad, and the Cockroach) that both invoke popular folk beliefs and provide cautionary exempla to the Princess. It also includes brief fairy tales that are embedded as literary fragments rather than represented orally, as the old woman tells the Princess the tales of her two sisters. “The Story of the Eldest Princess” is particularly effective in that its embedded narratives are the only site of closure in the tale, whose open-ended conclusion proposes to continue indefinitely with the process of embedding stories in the frame. The old woman actually claims the process of embedding as liberation from the need for the frame tale itself to accede to the demands of story: “We collect stories and spin stories and mend what we can and investigate what we can’t, and live quietly without striving to change the world. We have no story of our own here, we are free, as old women are free, who don’t have to worry about princes or kingdoms, but dance alone and take an interest in the creatures” (Djinn 66). Embedding, then, allows the ultimate demonstration of narrative power, which rests, not in the tales themselves, but in those who tell them and are thus free of them and in control. Similarly, “The Glass Coffin” conflates embedding with issues of power: the old man’s narration of what the tailor will experience functions as an embedded narrative with strong predictive power, since things simply will happen as the old man describes. The lady’s embedded story works in the opposite direction, to give the history of her entrapment: paradoxically, the telling of the narrative both re-creates that entrapment and signals her freedom from it. The embedded tales play continually with the flow of time in the story, allowing jumps forward and back in a way very different from the usual placid flow of fairy tale. However, through this process Byatt is able to reaffirm the identity of the tale as a whole, created object that can be accessed at any point without disrupting its integrity.

Whether fairy tale within fairy tale or fairy tale within realist frame, perhaps the most important result of the recurring presence of embedded narratives in Byatt’s work is the way they continually encourage the reader to draw parallels between the frame tale and the embedded narratives. Mieke Bal points out the extent to which the embedding of obviously discrete texts in a frame text allows texts to partake of the characteristics of both discrete and
subordinate discourses—a kind of literary having your cake and eating it too. The result of this is increased signification: "An embedded unit is by definition subordinate to the unit which embeds it; but it can acquire relative independence. This is the case when it can be defined as a specimen of a more or less well-delimited genre. It then has more or less complete signification. This is enriched, set off, even radically transformed by its relation with the embedding unit, but it has absolutely no need of it to be coherent" (48). In remaining separate yet related, embedded texts endow meaning and signification with added depth and complexity; fairy tale is perhaps the most extreme example of Bal's "well-delimited" genre, and hence it contributes particularly strong forms of signification to the frame narrative. This, more than textural contrast, is perhaps the greatest implication for Byatt's practice of embedding. Byatt herself writes: "I have myself become increasingly interested in quickness and lightness of narrative—in small discrete stories rather than pervasive and metaphoric metaphors as a way of thinking out a text" (Histories and Stories 130).

Embedded tales are able to function as warning—and thus as empowerment to potentially entrapped characters—because they are simultaneously independent of and involved with the frame narrative; they retain their shape even while their events resonate across to the frame narrative. In "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," the folkloric and fairy-tale traditions invoked are largely those of the East rather than the Western tradition from which Byatt most often draws. The djinn's tale-swapping with Gillian, and particularly his status as an entrapped individual within the bottle curse, identifies him as well as Gillian with the figure of Scheherazade, the strategic tale-teller from the frame narrative of the Arabian Nights. In the tradition of Scheherazade, the tales told gain additional importance and urgency because of their implications for the frame narrative. At the most obvious level, Scheherazade will survive another night, the djinn may persuade his owner to free him. In addition, however, "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" parallels the way in which the actual content of the Arabian Nights tales tends to invoke and revisit the theme of the frame narrative—feminine infidelity, the justice of sultans, the survival of fairy-tale protagonists against all odds. At one point the djinn tells Gillian, "In harems the study of apparently uneventful personal histories is a matter of extreme personal importance" (206), thus firmly placing the tale within a tradition of tales whose telling is strategic rather than simply pleasurable. Other peoples' tales are important because the patterns of narrative they offer function as warnings, and thus potentially as empowerment, to the characters of the frame narrative; they are also expressions of power on the part of the teller. The tales of Patient Griselda and the wishing-monkey, as well as the djinn's stories of harem life, codify and display the knowledge Gillian needs to make sense of her wishes.
At times this causes Byatt's use of fairy-tale form to approach the moral pointedness of the fable. A striking example occurs in “Crocodile Tears” from the *Elementals* collection, where the story of the Companion, a classic fairy tale of the magical helper to the fairy-tale hero, provides an emotional warning to the tale's protagonist. This, again, is in the image of ice, but here ice and death, the undesirable extreme of the process of withdrawal from the world that Byatt sees as necessary to the artist. Resonating with the frame tale, the story of the Companion allows Patricia, the protagonist, to reevaluate death as both closure and obligation and to reenter the world she has left. Its presentation, orally retold in a partially fragmentary fashion, allows focus on those elements of the tale that are most appropriate to the frame narrative, while nonetheless retaining a sense of the tale's overall structure and coherence.

In terms of the functioning of the fairy tales themselves, their embedding in various texts naturally changes their meaning and implication; it is no longer possible to sink into the comforting mimesis of narrative, the illusionary world created by the tale's omniscient narrator. Instead, the reader is forced to confront the tale's structured status and to acknowledge the reciprocal influences of frame narrative and embedded artifact. Richard Todd points out that “‘The Glass Coffin’ and ‘Gode’s Story’ are absolutely transformed by their existence within the narrative matrix of *Possession*, even though the wording of the tales may be identical outside that context in *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye*” (43). The resonance of LaMotte’s “The Glass Coffin” and the oral Breton narrative of “Gode’s Story” with the life of LaMotte herself adds new layers of meaning to the apparently bland surface of the tales’ incarnation in *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye*. “The Glass Coffin” becomes, in addition to its emphasis on art and entrapment, a parable for the happy, sequestered coexistence of Christabel and Blanche, disrupted by the “black artist” (*Possession* 66) who stands for Ash. The tale's gender distributions are interesting: the apparently sexless sibling relationship of the lady and her brother both recaptures the intensity of Christabel's life with Blanche and hints at a transgressively sexual partnership in the regendering of one of them, presumably standing for Blanche against Christabel's lady-behind-glass. At the same time, the tale could be reread with Blanche as “black artist” (she is a painter) attempting to deny Christabel the happy heterosexual union offered by the tailor (Ash). The tale is hence rescued from parable or allegory by the wide possibilities offered by its symbols in play with the frame narrative, so that the reader must engage in continual reinterpretation as both tale and novel unfold.

“Gode’s Story” is an even stronger example of this process. My experiences teaching *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye* at third-year level suggest that the story is almost completely opaque when extracted from the frame of *Possession*. Students were unable to account for the “little dancing feet” of the story, or the
moment of “an owl cry, or a cat miawl” in the barn, and “blood on the straw” (Djinn 31), until learning of the frame circumstances of Christabel's illicit pregnancy and the ambiguity around the possible death of her child. Alone, “Gode's Story” provides a particularly folkloric and emotionally compelling ghost story that operates with a great deal of the “thickening mystery” attributed to Matty's tale in “Morpho Eugenia” (Angels and Insects). Within the frame of Possession it contributes materially to the unraveling of Christabel's story, providing slanting references to pregnancy and transgression that resonate particularly strongly with the later significance of the séance in the Victorian narrative.

Another consequence of Byatt's use of frame narrative is seen in her ability to embed what are no more than fairy-tale fragments in the wider narrative, in the form of partial tales from LaMotte's work, Tales for Innocents, out of which “The Glass Coffin” is taken. This results in a process almost of invocation rather than reproduction: it is unnecessary to complete the partial tale, since we know the shape and can extrapolate the whole structure from the suggestive fragments. In this process, the fragmentary tales are ultimately given coherence and completion through their resonance with frame events. This is seen strikingly in “The Threshold,” which forms the threshold of Possession itself, signaling the moment of revelation and choice of future path experienced by Roland and Maud as well as the Childe within the tale. The three ladies, gold, silver, and dark, need no explanation: they exemplify fairy-tale choice in familiar, classic symbols whose outcome, as Byatt notes, is inevitable: "He must always choose this last, and the leaden casket, for wisdom in all tales tells us this, and the last sister is always the true choice" (Possession 155). At the same time, however, the embedding of the fragment in the frame tale of Possession means that the tale becomes fully meaningful only when we realize its implications for the choice made by Christabel LaMotte. In choosing the dark lady, LaMotte has rejected sexual passion (gold and sunlight) and artistic seclusion (silver, associated with cool and water, and hence intellect in Byatt's system); what she is left with is neither, but a kind of abdication, the "Herb of Rest" (154). Other fragments of Tales for Innocents are equally recognizable tale openings (51–52), but their meaning is only decodable with reference to LaMotte and other frame characters; they variously signal artistic longing (the queen who desires the silent bird) or rejection of Victorian domesticity (the clumsy third daughter). Perhaps the most extreme example of this fragmented embedding is in the frequent references to Christabel as a princess in a tower; together with images of Maud's long, blond hair, these fragmentary evocations implicitly construct an embedded Rapunzel tale despite the fact that such a tale is never actually retold.

Fragments of fairy tale in Possession share with retold tales in “The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye” a meaning peculiar to the frame tale's circumstances:
such fragments are rendered meaningful not only in their resonance with events of the frame but through their analysis by characters in the frame tale. Thus the feminist import of Gillian’s and Orhan’s various stories is deconstructed for us by the academic characters of the frame narrative, rounding out the fragmentary nature of their retelling. The effect is one of increased richness of texture while the flow of the frame narrative is only momentarily disrupted, rather than the full switching of reading mode required by a fully recounted tale. Once again, the range of effects possible in the use of fairy-tale forms is materially increased by the fact of their embedding, and Byatt’s considerable sophistication and layering is both enabled and emphasized.

Byatt’s focus in general is literary in the extreme, referring continually to books and the process of writing. However, her use of embedding, in particular, provides a logical and fruitful site for play with the oral voice; as I have noted above, embedded oral narratives have the potential to embody the narrator in the frame narrative. While this is obviously an artificial emulation of the oral tale, the frame tale’s apparent mimesis enables the illusion of spoken tale rather than the literary, written retelling which it is in fact. However, a literary re-creation of an oral tale can only gain strength and legitimacy from its insistence on the reality of the narrator, whose character not only infuses the tale with personality absent from the flatter surface of a literary tale, but who is present in person in the frame narrative. The oral illusion also places emphasis on the metafictional nature of the tale as artificial, a told construct within the larger context whose assumption of reality highlights the lack of reality in fairy tale. In keeping with the resonance of frame tale with embedded tale, the site and circumstances of the retelling become vital for the tale’s meaning. “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” provides ample evidence of this, in the sharp contrasts between tales retold as conference papers, or tales told in more vital and immediate surroundings—the museum guide’s retelling of the Gilgamesh tale, or the Djinn’s stories given erotic and immediate circumstance by his presence on Gillian’s hotel bed. “Gode’s Story,” too, offers a village folktale whose immediacy rests largely in the character of Gode herself, repository of folk wisdom; her distinctive voice and status as perceptive wise woman lend authority to the tale’s moral symbolism. Likewise, the setting of the Breton coast during the midwinter storytelling festival legitimizes the mythic setting of Toussaint, ghosts, and hauntings within the story.

Geometrically Patterned Flowers: Literature as Structure

In some ways it is perhaps misleading to analyze Byatt entirely as a writer of fairy tale. Like many other modern fairy-tale writers, she employs fairy tale as only
one aspect of her varied literary output. Her interest in fairy tale is not, in fact, for its own sake; fairy-tale and folkloric techniques are simply one item in the formidable toolbox with which she approaches the mechanisms of literature as a whole. Discussing her writing of Possession, she comments: "The pleasure of writing . . . was in handling the old, worn counters of the characterless persons, the Fate of the consecutive events, including the helpless commentary of the writer on the unavoidable grip of the story, and a sense that I was myself part-taking in the continuity of the tales by retelling them in a new context in a way old and new" (Histories and Stories 131). What she is interested in is, as she says above, "the grip of the story" and "the continuity of the tales." In some ways, her approach recognizes the status of fairy tale as the most inherently self-conscious literary form, one whose strong patterning is ideally suited to the deconstruction not only of its own conventions but of those of literature itself. Like Carter, Byatt provides a particularly complex and playful response to the essentially symbolic aspects of fairy tale, the "old, worn counters of the characterless persons," but her dense systems of symbol are absolutely unlike Carter's feminist symbolism in that they are endlessly recursive. The apparent resonance of glass or ice, heat or cold, enclosure and entrapment in Byatt's work is only peripherally a feminist project, or any other sort of project at all. What her fairy-tale symbols do is to reflect, not ideas, but themselves—the nature of fairy tale, and hence the nature of narrative, literature, and art itself. Such an awareness of art is, however, unavoidably linked to the awareness of reality, unable to exist except in a relationship with reality. She concludes that "'Happy every after' is, as Nooteeboom said, a lie, a look in a mirror. Ordinary happiness is to be outside a story, full of curiosity, looking before and after" (Histories and Stories 150). Exploring the "happy ever after" of fairy tale is to be aware of it as tale, to be able to explore and expose, with happy curiosity, the artifice of the literary.

Notes

1. I have not included "Dragon's Breath" in this assessment, since by my definition it is not a fairy tale at all. Written as part of an anthology in commemoration of Sarajevo, it is more allegory than anything else. I lack the space here for a sustained discussion of allegory in Byatt's work, but I have undertaken it more fully elsewhere (see Marvellous Geometry, forthcoming).

2. "Caught in a Story" is the title of the anthology for which "The Story of the Eldest Princess" was written (see acknowledgments to The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye 280).

3. A rather tongue-in-cheek but nonetheless entertaining and literate account of bathrooms in Possession is given by Patrick Wynne in an article written for the Tolkien fan journal Butterbur's Woodshed, which identifies Melusina as "a Bathroom Myth, pure and simple . . . this story is just another example of that age-old question posed by every man who has ever been forced to pace for hours outside a locked bathroom door, namely 'What the hell is she doing in there?'"
4. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Byatt identifies this desire (also articulated by the academics in Possession) for “being able to be alone in a white room, with a white bed, and just think things out” (Wachtel, “A. S. Byatt” 86). The same impulse is seen in “The Threshold,” where the cool, watery, silver lady offers “a closed casement in a high turret, and a private curtained bed where he would be most himself” (Possession 154). In addition to being watery and glassy, bathrooms are intensely private spaces.

5. Neil Jordan’s film The Company of Wolves creates a similar effect, although he is working with the considerable advantages of film, already an aural and visual medium, and the immediacy of actors retelling tales in voice-over, rather than the flatness of words on a page.

Works Cited