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WOMEN OF STONE AND ICE IN A. S. BYATT'S TALES OF THE UNREAL

Margarida Esteves Pereira

ABSTRACT: A. S. Byatt's work contains a number of examples of what can be called the postmodern rewriting of the fairy tale. This essay aims to analyse some of the short stories by A. S. Byatt, in order to understand the way(s) whereby the author uses the fairytale to question acquired notions of womanhood that underlie the fairytale tradition. We will focus, particularly, on stories where women are the locus of a struggle to transcend what seems to be represented as the prison of their own female bodies, seeking a life outside the constraining condition of marriage and motherhood into a world of rationality and of creativity. Stories like "Cold", "A Stone Woman", or "The Glass Coffin", among others, take us to a fantasy world where women long to free themselves from an incarcerating cycle of marriage and childbearing by way of metamorphoses, which, paradoxically, may turn them into ice or stone. On the other hand, the essay seeks to address these metamorphoses from the point of view of the fairytale traditions from which they derive.

Keywords: A. S. Byatt; fairy tale; gender; postmodern; rewriting.

RESUMO: A obra de A. S. Byatt contém uma série de exemplos do que se pode chamar a reescrita pós-moderna do conto de fadas. Este ensaio visa analisar alguns dos contos de A. S. Byatt, a fim de compreender a forma como a autora usa o conto de fadas para questionar noções adquiridas de feminilidade que subjazem à tradição dos contos de fadas. Focaremos, particularmente, histórias onde as mulheres são o *locus* de uma luta para transcender o que parece ser representado como a prisão de seus próprios corpos femininos, buscando uma vida fora da condição restritiva do casamento e da maternidade, num mundo de racionalidade e de criatividade. Contos como "Cold", "The Stone Woman", ou "The Glass Coffin", entre outros, transportam-nos a um mundo de fantasia onde as mulheres anseiam por libertar-se de um ciclo de encarceramento de casamento e maternidade por meio da metamorfose, que, paradoxalmente, pode transformá-las em gelo ou pedra. Por outro lado, o ensaio tenta abordar essas metamorfoses do ponto de vista das tradições de contos de fadas das quais derivam.

Palavras-chave: A. S. Byatt; conto de fadas; gênero; pós-moderno; reescrita.

1. Introduction: about Fairy Tales and Their Use in A. S. Byatt's Work

That A. S. Byatt's work is pervaded by an acute knowledge of the fairy tale and of children's stories is more than anywhere else made evident in one of her most recent novels *The Children's Book* (2009). A novel set in Edwardian England, *The Children's Book* sets out to enquire after, comment on and even rewrite this age through, among many other things, the reading of the children's stories it fostered, such as J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* or Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. At the centre of the novel there is Olivia Wellwood, a writer of children's stories and the matriarch of a big and bizarre family, enmeshed in stories and secrets. The novel impresses, as *Possession: A Romance* (1990) had done, by the historical breadth and the omnivorous knowledge that is displayed by A. S. Byatt in the vivid depiction of a large group of characters that are made to move in a historical universe and mindset that determines their actions. By displaying a deep knowledge of the scientific, educational, artistic, cultural and philosophical *milieu* where it is set, the story both evokes and questions our knowledge of the period, as well as of our own time. But the reason why this essay opens with an evocation of *The Children's Book* has to do, especially, with the way it explores and draws on children's literature and, implicitly, on the fairy tale – with many of its characters delving on the tradition of children's literature in England and elsewhere. In this sense, this novel is also close to the concerns and themes that are present in a variety of previous fictional and critical texts by Byatt.

Of the four collections of short stories written by A. S. Byatt, at least in two of them we can find good examples of the postmodernist trend of parodying the fairy tale and rewriting the fairy-tale tradition¹. Especially, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (first published in 1994) comprises stories that, as the subtitle exhibits, were consciously written in accordance with the genre. All the five stories contained in this volume use elements of the fairy tale. They all begin, for example, with the formulaic phrases that are connected to the oral tradition where the genre originates², such as, "Once upon a time..." or "There was once...". Moreover, they present all the characteristic traits of the genre, including, the fantastic elements that come in the guise of magical objects and animals (like the glass key and the animals in "The Glass Coffin") metamorphoses (as in the rejuvenating of Gillian Perholt, the protagonist of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye"), eerie voices and sounds (as in the more

¹ In relation to this, v. Jack Zipes, who states that "experimentation linked to magic realism and a postmodern sensibility have become the key words in the fairy-tale genre from 1980 to the present" (Zipes, *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* xxxi) and cites, as examples of this trend authors like Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie and A. S. Byatt.

² In relation to the origin of the fairy tale in folklore and oral tradition v. Jones (1-6) and Zipes (*Oxford Companion* xv), although Jack Zipes cuts a clear distinction between the oral folk tale and the literary fairy tale.

gothic fairy-tale of “Gode’s Story”), as well as the motif of the quest (as in “The Story of the Eldest Princess” or “The Glass Coffin”), among others. In another collection, entitled *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), we can find the story “Cold” that also perfectly fits the genre and in the last published collection of Byatt’s short stories, *The Little Black Book of Stories* (2003), there is a very interesting fantastic short story called “A Stone Woman”, which may also be associated to the fairy-tale genre.

Apart from these collections of rewritten fairy tales, most of A. S. Byatt’s work contains references to the world of fairy tales or children’s literature be it by presenting protagonists (usually female) who are writers of children’s books, be it by introducing in the novels or short stories fragments of fairy tales or even complete tales. Thus, from Olivia Wellwood (*The Children’s Book*) to Christabel LaMotte (*Possession: A Romance*), from Matty Crompton (“Morpho Eugenia”) to Agatha, Frederica’s house companion in the last novel of Frederica’s quartet, we can find a range of women storytellers and writers. And certainly a whole lot of fairy tales and children’s stories can be found inside these novels or in the shorter texts.

Of all these stories, of particular interest for the purposes of this essay are the ones that display the magic element of metamorphosis, for in them we see opening up before our eyes the possibilities of changing identities. On the other hand, it is in metamorphosis that, according to authors such as Jack Zipes or Marina Warner, lies the essential characteristic of the fairy tale. Marina Warner states in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995): “More so than the presence of fairies, the moral function, the imagined antiquity and oral anonymity of the ultimate source, and the happy ending (though all these factors help towards a definition of the genre), metamorphosis defines the fairy tale” (xv-xvi).³ The fantastic essence of the fairy tale is also emphasized by Byatt in her introduction to Maria Tatar’s edition of the Brothers Grimm under the title *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (2004), where she mentions her own childhood attraction to fairy tales or the fantastic, by saying: “I never really liked stories about children doing what children do – quarreling and cooking and camping. I liked magic, the unreal, the more than real” (xvii).

The transformation undergone by the characters in some of the postmodern fairy tales written by A. S. Byatt invites a sense of wonder which the author sees as the magic allure of fairy tales, but the shape-shifting that befalls the characters in the stories that will be discussed in this essay do more than that; they project into the story a sense of the possibility of identity change

³ In the same manner, writing about the wonder tale (which he differentiates from the literary fairy tale), Jack Zipes states: “If there is one ‘constant’ in the structure and theme of the wonder tale that was also passed on to the literary fairy tale, it is transformation – to be sure, miraculous transformation. Everybody and everything can be transformed in a wonder tale.” (Zipes, *Oxford Companion* xvii).

which is inscribed in Byatt's own gender questions and dilemmas. As Clare Hanson rightly stresses, Byatt's fiction is structured around the "mind/body dilemma", "the conflict which the 'educated woman' experiences between the claims of the intellect and the experience of the body" (Hanson 121). In some of her writings Byatt shows that she is aware of this problem, demonstrating the difficult position a woman of her generation would be in if she wanted to succeed professionally. In interviews and other non-fictional writings we will find evidence of the awareness the author shows about the implications of biology, the body, for a woman who was so interested in procuring an intellectual life; she mentions, in an article published in *The Guardian* (14th February, 2004):

I see now, as I didn't dare to then, that the mind-body problem of an intellectual woman in the 1950s was also one of rigorous conflict. In those days the body required sex and childbearing, and quite likely the death of the mind alongside. My thesis supervisor, Helen Gardner, truly believed that women scholars should be nuns, renouncing the body for higher things (Byatt, "Soul Searching").

Byatt writes, for example, about the difficulty she experienced in managing her professional and her domestic life, to concentrate on her creative writing while having to attend to the needs of her young children. In an interview with George Greenfield, Byatt describes the pains of trying to write while raising her children, in the following terms:

The most terrible thing about children and writing is the total uncertainty of being able to plan ahead. Because the moment you sit down, they fall off a wall, they get measles... you plan to go to the library and finish a track of thought but the phone will ring and the teacher will say, 'I'm sending Miranda home, she's not very well today.' You feel terrible in all directions all the time." (Greenfield 47)

In this, she is close to the concerns displayed by several female writers who recurrently mention the same problems and difficulties, as writing does require a focus and retirement that are not quite compatible with the urgencies of baby care.⁴

In that sense, her fairy tales are in accordance with the themes and motifs that are to be found in all her fictional work, be that the neo-Victorian novel *Possession* (where two of the fairy tales of the *Djinn* collection first appeared),

⁴ In *Delighting the Heart: A Notebook by Women Writers* (1994 [1989]), edited by Susan Sellers, many writers make the same remark in relation to their "Starting Points", describing how difficult it was to write without being interrupted. See, particularly, statements by Carol Rumens, "Starting Fiction" (3-6), Carole Satyarmuti, "Lady Scribbler" (14-17), Medbh McGuckian, "'Room of calm, room of thunder...'" (25-26), Emma Tennant, "A Strong Story-Telling Impulse" (27-28).

be it in the Frederica Quartet or in the two novellas that make up the volume *Angels and Insects*. In many of the short stories the woman's body is made the *locus* of denial, bringing to surface the difficult being of women's difference. Thus, many of the heroines undergo a metamorphic process that enables them to exist outside reality in a fantastic world of their own.

But the fairy-tale genre opens up possibilities of creation that are not to be found in the more constricting and realist format of the novel. In Byatt's view of the fairy tale as a form of the "unreal" there is an implied criticism of the moralizing effects some groups of people ascribe to the genre, namely the feminists. She writes about this in the already quoted "Introduction" to the Grimm's stories, saying: "I am not sure how much good is done by moralizing about fairy tales." (xxiii). She also states: "[...] many modern feminist defenses of the witch against the docile daughter (Snow White, for instance) take apart the form of the tale and leave us with not very much" (xxiii-xxiv). She has, in fact, spoken (in interviews) and written disapprovingly both of feminist criticism⁵ and of the feminist drive to rewrite the fairy-tale genre in what she views as a moralizing uninteresting manner. Perhaps even more so than in interviews and other writings, it is in the stories that we find the sharpest critique of feminist readings of the fairy-tale tradition. For example, in "Cold" there is a comment on the part of the narrator that evokes the attacks on the fairy tale by feminists in the 1970s, namely, by people like Marcia K. Lieberman or Andrea Dworkin (cf. Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince* 5), who saw the fairy tales as a form of acculturation of women to their roles of passive and helpless housewives and mothers. When Princess Fiammarosa (in "Cold") is confronted with the inevitability of marriage, she thinks:

It would appear, Fiammarosa had thought as a young girl, reading both histories and wonder tales, that princesses are commodities. But also, in the same histories and tales, it can be seen that this is not so. Princesses are captious and clever choosers. They tempt and test suitors, they sit like spiders inside walls adorned with the skulls of the unsuccessful, they require super-human feats of strength and cunning from their suitors, and are not above helping out, or weeping over those who appeal to their hearts (Byatt, "Cold" 135).

This does not mean that the author is not aware of the misogynist implications of fairy tales. However, as the example taken from "Cold" shows, she is also

⁵ She has stated, for example, in an interview given long ago: "I'm a political feminist. [...] I'm interested in feminist themes, women's freedom. *Literary feminism is a much more dubious thing*. I meet a lot of people who have spent so much of their time being educated by women about women's writing. They don't notice perfectly obvious things because they've not looked at anything else that might have contributed to this woman's life or writing other than woman". (Miller)

aware that the genre is not strictly and exclusively pervaded by ideological instances of women's oppression, it is also full of clever and strong women, creating opportunities of positive representations of womanhood. This argument was also made by Marina Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde*. In the "Introduction" to her study of women in the fairy tales, she mentions:

Fairy tale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas: women's care for children, the prevailing disregard for both groups, and their presumed identity with the simple folk, the common people, handed them fairy tales as a different kind of nursery, where they might set their own seedlings and plant out their own flowers (Warner xix).

So, although A. S. Byatt does not always like to admit the feminism inherent to her work in general⁶ and to the fairy tales in particular, it is clear that there is a strong feminist perspective in her stories, one that, as this paper aims to argue, is based on the author's very personal need to reconfigure her acquired assumptions of what it means to be a woman. This is something that is displayed in several Byatt short stories, as this paper intends to demonstrate through a reading of some of them, namely, the stories "The Glass Coffin", "Cold" and "A Stone Woman".

2. Ice, Snow and Glass in A. S. Byatt's Work and in Fairy Tales

A. S. Byatt opens the essay "Ice, Snow, Glass", an essay dedicated to the uses she made of traditional fairy tales, with a brief narrative of her readings, as a child, of fairy tales such as Andersen's *The Snow Queen* or the Grimm's *Snow White* or *Glass Coffin*. In this respect she states: "The fairy stories which I now see provided much of my secret imagery as a child are northern tales about ice, glass and mirrors. It is surprising how often they go together" (Byatt, "Ice, Snow, Glass" 151). The author opens this essay by focusing on the similarity of such diverse elements, as glass and ice, stating: "One of the surprising things about glass, to northerners, must have been its resemblance to ice, and its difference from ice. Glass is made from sand, heated and melted; ice is a form of water, which shifts from solid to liquid with the seasons" (*ibid.*). And were we to search Byatt's own extensive fictional work having in mind this "secret imagery", as is mentioned in the above quotation, we would easily encounter

⁶ For example, in an interview to Juliet Dusinberre, given a long time ago, she has stated: "What frightens me about a critic like Moers is that I'm going to have my interest in literature taken away by women who see literature as a source of interest in women. I don't need that. I'm interested in women anyway. Literature has always been my way out, my escape from the limits of being female. I don't want to have to get back in" (Dusinberre 186).

this intertwining of ice, or water, glass and mirrors recurrently. It is perhaps one of the most pervasive symbols to be found in her work.

It can be found in the very first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), a novel where Anna, the protagonist, is striving to discover her artistic voice and finds herself under the spell of the moon always reflected through the glass, which gives her a sense of being drowned in another world, as in the following quotation from the novel:

But tonight, with the soft light from the summer moon leaning gently on the corner of the bath, propped triangularly like another pane of paler glass between the window and the floor, there was nothing garish about the bathroom at all; it was a drowned world, a sunken secret world, with pillars and planes of light shining gently in its corners and the odd brightness of a tap, or the sliver of light along the edge of a basin, winking like living creatures, strange fish suspended and swaying in the darkness (133).

Anna, an aspiring writer, feels suffocated by the brilliance of the sun of her father, an established writer, in whose light she lingers. Her own visionary experiences, unlike those of her father, are always mediated by mirrors and glasses, under the more shadowy light of the moon. In this, as has been pointed out by Christian Franken,⁷ she can be compared to “The Lady of Shalott” in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem, whose vision of the outer world is mediated by a mirror – “And moving thro’ a mirror clear/That hangs before her all the year,/Shadows of the world appear.” (Tennyson 22)

Another example of an intertwined image of ice and snow can be found in *Possession: A Romance* (1990), associated to the character of Maud Bailey, who, it must be added, takes her name from another Tennyson’s famous poem, “Maud”. In Tennyson’s poem, the heroine is described as being “Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null,/Dead perfection, no more [...]” (Tennyson 307). The heroine of *Possession*, like her namesake in Tennyson’s poem, is also described as “faultily faultless, icily regular”, and is recurrently associated to images of ice and snow, as in the following example:

Maud crouched on the rim of the pool, her briefcase standing in snow beside her, and scraped with an elegant gloved hand at the snow on the ice. The ice was ridged and bubbly and impure. [...] She moved her hand in little circles,

⁷ In her reading of the novel, Christian Franken makes the link between Anna Severell and Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” as a symbol of failed female artistry. As is mentioned by Franken: “When one reads this poem as a portrait of failed female artistry, of the Lady’s inability to experience direct unmediated visions and recreate them into art, the comparison to Anna Severell is striking. Many times she has indirect visions through glass and often the effect is a negative one, related to her writer’s block for instance” (Franken 51).

polishing, and saw, ghostly and pale in the metal-dark surface a woman's face, her own, barred like the moon under mackerel clouds, wavering up at her (Byatt, *Possession* 142).

Examples like these, which we could find in much of Byatt's fictional work, show that most of Byatt's heroines seem to be enveloped by this "icily regular" principle, to borrow from Tennyson's poem.

This principle is also underlying most of Byatt's reworking of the fairy-tale genre. In stories such as "Cold", "A Stone Woman" or "The Glass Coffin" we will find these motifs, which, as is explained by the author herself, in the already mentioned essay "Ice, Snow, Glass", are in opposition to the cycle of life, the kiss and marriage and child bearing which await the heroines at the end of traditional fairy tales (cf. 156-7), as in the Grimm's "Snow White" or in Andersen's "Snow Queen". In "Snow White", from the beginning, we are presented with the opposition between snow/death and blood/life, just as the Queen mother (Snow White's real mother) is wishing her to life:

Once upon a time in the middle of the winter, when snowflakes the size of feathers were falling from the sky, a queen was sitting and sewing by a window with an ebony frame. While she was sewing, she looked out at the snow and pricked her finger with a needle. Three drops of blood fell into the snow. The red looked so beautiful against the white snow that she thought: "If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame." (Grimm, *Annotated Brothers Grimm* 243).

Here the snow stands for the traditional purity at heart, which accompanies the central character of the story. In Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen", however, the snow and ice are the symbol of a cold heart. Kay, the young boy who is abducted by the Snow Queen, is stuck in the heart by a fragment of the troll mirror, which makes people see everything distorted. The Snow Queen, on the other hand, stands for all that is cold and cruel, but also for rationality, as opposed to emotion and warmth. When she is in her castle of ice, she sits in the middle of a frozen sea that "had cracked into a thousand fragments" and "said that she was sitting on the Mirror of Reason and that it was the best and the only one in this world" (Andersen 180). Contrarily to what happens in the Grimms' "Snow White", in "The Snow Queen" the snow and ice are related to evil and rationality, a sense of the inhuman, and are associated to the negative pole of the dichotomy reason/emotion. Contrarily to the Snow Queen, Gerda, the little innocent girl that sets herself the task of going on a Quest to save her friend Kay, is warm-hearted and innocent, associated to the sunshine and the flowers. In all her innocence, she is the only one who has the power to destroy the Queen's rationality and save Kay.

But it is precisely against this dichotomous polarisation of reason as a negative element and emotion as a positive one that we can perceive Byatt's rewritings of the fair-tale genre. As the author mentions in the essay "Ice, Snow, Glass", it was Andersen's insistence on the idea that "[s]cience and reason are bad, kindness is good" that began to bother her:

And I found in [this opposition], and in the dangerous isolation of the girl on her slippery shiny height a figure of what was beginning to bother me, 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 (Byatt, "Glass, Snow, Ice" 156).

In contrast, in A. S. Byatt's fairy tales not only is the dichotomy between the cold elements (ice, snow, glass and stone) and the warm elements (heat, sunshine and sand) completely subverted as there is no such negative bias associated to the cold elements, which are, nevertheless, linked to reason, science, but also to creativity, that is, to what A. S. Byatt (or one of her characters) likes to call "the life of the mind"⁸. But before we go into the tales, let us first try to understand the use A. S. Byatt makes of the fairy tale in her work.

3. Women of Stone, Ice and Glass: Metamorphosis and Reconfigured Identities

Thus, in stories like "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", "The Story of the Eldest Princess", "The Glass Coffin", "Cold" or "A Stone Woman", among others, we will find women that are fighting against a pervasive idea of femaleness that they do not think fits their own expectations and feelings. However, what these stories show us is that these women can only come to life when they forsake their bodies, becoming disembodied statues, spiritual and rational beings, no longer afflicted, as it seems, by their bodily and sexual existence. These stories clearly stress the predominance of mind over body in Byatt's conceptualization of the feminine or, for that matter, of the human being.

For example, "Cold", which is part of the collection *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, tells the story of Princess Fiammarosa, who had been longed for by her parents, for although she was their thirtieth child, she was the first and

⁸ It is mainly through Frederica Potter, the central character in the so-called "Frederica Quartet" – a group of four novels (*The Virgin in the Garden* [1978], *Still Life* [1985], *Babel Tower* [1996] and *A Whistling Woman* [2002]), that this idea is best presented. Throughout the four novels, comprising a historical time that begins in the 1950s and goes up to the end of the 1960s, the reader can follow Frederica's search of a way of life that allows her to have both "a life of the mind" and full "normal" sexual and emotional life. As we can read in the first novel, in an interior monologue of the character: "This was a useful thing to know. It removed the awful either/or from the condition of women as she had seen it. Either love, passion, sex and those things, or the life of the mind, ambition, solitude, the others. There was a third way: you could be alone and not alone in a bed, if you made no fuss." (Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden* 421).

only girl. Being a girl, she was raised with the utmost care and grew up to become a very frail and delicate child and a somnolent and lifeless adolescent. She is described as “a picture of lassitude and boredom, or, just possibly, of despair” (Byatt, “Cold” 120-1). Until one day, she discovers the wonderfully revivifying effects of snow and cold upon her body. In contact with the snow and ice, she discovers her innermost identity, as is described in the following words:

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

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

The story plays with the dichotomous idea of heat and cold and maintains, up to a certain point, the rational/emotional polarity that is present, as we have seen, in Hans Christian Andersen’s story of “The Snow Queen”, for the Prince that comes from the desert is clearly associated to the passion and the carnal and the Princess is cold and rational and likes to preserve her own individuality. Interestingly enough, the Princess is attracted to Prince Sasan, the Desert Prince, by her skill as a glassmaker, confusing the extreme clarity of glass with that of ice; only later does she understand that glass is the opposite of ice, for it is made of fire. However, it is in the meeting of their bodies that the confrontation of ice with heat is made, and in this confrontation we can see that the Princess, who is made of ice and snow, can be as passionate and electrifying as the Prince that comes from the desert and the heat, for as is stated in the story: “Ice burns, and it is hard to the warm-skinned to distinguish one sensation, fire, from the other, frost” (Byatt “Cold”, 156). Indeed, the metaphor of the cold princess is used to subvert the whole idea of coldness as a psychological attribute which is usually applied to rationality, for through this Princess we are given a story that allies the dichotomous polarities so as to shuffle old stereotypes of female and male identities.

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

She might take her place near them, she thought, but was dissuaded by the aspect of their neighbours, a group of the theological virtues, Faith, Hope and Charity, simpering lifeless women clutching a stone cross, a stone anchor, and a fat stone helpless child. They had nothing to do with a woman who was made of volcanic glass and semi-precious stones, who needed a refuge for her end. [...] They were nothing to do with her, for they frightened her (150).

Again, as with the story of Princess Fiammarosa in “Cold”, the dichotomy stone/flesh, as a metaphor for death as opposed to life is disrupted and subverted by the presentation of a woman that is simultaneously made of stone and full of life, as we are made aware when she cuts herself and pours out lava instead of blood. The question, then, arises in relation to the true meaning of being made of stone: “To become stone is a figure, however fantastic, for death. But to become molten lava and to contain a furnace?” (Byatt “A Stone Woman”, 156).

In the end, with the help of a stone carver she meets at the cemetery, the Icelander Thorsteinn Hallmundursson, the stone woman finds a place for her new stone self, together with the Trolls in the cold mountains of Iceland. The metamorphosis of the stone woman is clearly the metaphor for a new female identity, one that liberates her from the constraints ascribed to her female body; she becomes something other.

Byatt’s latest fictional project – *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (2011) – sheds a new light in relation to other influences we can detect in the tale of the stone woman, which is perhaps more influenced by Norse mythology and folklore than by the more widespread fairy tales of central European origin. Like *Ragnarok*, “A Stone Woman” also contains a veiled warning in relation to the eminent destruction of the world provoked by the pollution of our

industrialized society, and in both of these stories Byatt uses myths taken from Norse mythology to convey her message. It is in the light of this mythology that we may best appreciate the existence of this petrified ice world where Ines ultimately finds herself a home.

In the story "The Glass Coffin", which was first published in *Possession* as one of the fairy tales written by Christabel LaMotte, there is also a reference to female confinement and enclosure, in the figure of the Princess who is found in a glass coffin by, in this case, the male protagonist of the story, the little tailor. "The Glass Coffin" is another of Byatt's rewritings of a fairy tale compiled by the brothers Grimm in *Household Tales (Kinder- und Hausmärchen)*. In the original Grimm's compilation this is tale no. 163 and not one of the best-known. In the Grimm's version, the protagonist of the story is also a little tailor who loses himself in the forest and, after spending the night in the shack of an old man, sees a fight between a bore and a stag (who, in the end, we find out to be the princess' brother); this one wins the fight and directs the tailor towards a mountain cave, where he finds two glass coffins. In one of the coffins he finds a beautiful young woman, who, after being rescued by the tailor, explains her story and marries him.

Byatt's version of this tale takes some of the elements of the story, but changes others, contaminating it with other quest motifs that can be found in folktales (like the magical gifts the tailor is given by the old man, which is absent from the Grimm's version, or the substitution of the stag by a dog as the princess' brother). On the whole, the story is very similar to the Grimm's story, with the princess being found in a glass coffin, together with the castle, and marrying the little tailor. Yet, if only lightly, the story raises some of the concerns about the opposition mind/body A. S. Byatt discusses in the essay "Ice, Snow, Glass". First, although the princess understands that her release from the coffin must signal her giving herself to her rescuer, the little tailor does not accept the hand of the princess as a given, questioning her about her own motifs and desires:

'Of course I will have you,' said the tailor, 'for you are my promised marvel, released with my vanished glass key, and I love you dearly already. Though why you should have, simply because I opened the glass case, is less clear to me altogether, and when, and if, you are restored to your rightful place, and your home and lands and people are again your own, I trust you will feel free to reconsider the matter, and remain, if you will, alone and unwed. (Byatt "The Glass Coffin", 20-1)

As in the other stories of the collection *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, the story of "The Glass Coffin" presents a mild feminist version of a fairy tale, in this case, by enhancing a certain autonomous stance of the female protagonist, slightly distancing it from the Grimm's fairy tale on which it is inspired. If

it is true that in both stories the female protagonist is, up to a certain point, handled as a commodity figure who is given away in marriage, thus, entering the “imposed biological cycle”, as Byatt mentions in “Ice, Snow, Glass”; it is also important to notice that, in both cases, the princess is not silenced into her stance, but she is the one who tells her story to her rescuer, allowing him to take her, “if he will”. In that respect, the choice of an unlikely Grimm’s tale, one that does not often find its way into many anthologies of the Grimm’s fairy tales, is telling as to the message both the author/character Christabel LaMotte (in *Possession*) and the author Byatt want to send in relation to women’s empowerment and freewill. The protagonist of Byatt’s tale is made to enter the usual “biological cycle”, but in this case, it is the tailor who is given a choice of behaviour outside the pattern of the male hero. Although this story does not fully rewrite the female pattern as the two other tales discussed here do, it nevertheless draws on a tradition of the fairy tale that brings forth the power of these narratives to disrupt acquired notions of behaviour and the stereotypes that are inherent to those notions.

4. Conclusion

We can find in Byatt’s work other references to women whose lives are determined by immobility and passivity, women who are constrained by social forces to annihilate themselves from a subject position. This is the case of the heroines of other narratives referred to in some of Byatt’s fictions, like Gwendolen Harleth (from George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*), or Queen Hermione (from *The Winter’s Tale*), among many others. A. S. Byatt views these women’s lives, constrained as they are to inactivity, as creating a pattern of what is destined to women, who are unable to transcend their bodily condition as mothers and wives, a condition that was for so long seen as incompatible with that of “the life of the mind”. In “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”, for example, the protagonist of the story, the narratologist Gillian Perholt (whose name is an obvious allusion to that of Charles Perrault) finds a link between Chaucer’s story of “Patient Griselda”, “The Clerk’s Story”, and all the stories of women in fiction, and states: “For the stories of women’s lives in fiction are the stories of stopped energies – the stories of Fanny Price, Lucy Snowe, even Gwendolen Harleth, are the stories of Griselda, and all come to that moment of strangling, willed oblivion” (Byatt, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” 121).⁹ In the cases of the princess, in “Cold”, Ines in “A Stone Woman” and, up to a certain point, the princess in “The Glass Coffin”, however, the metamorphosis does not, as we have seen, involve this state of “willed oblivion”, but a way out of the constrictions of a fixed and stereotypical female identity.

⁹ Or, as Susan Sellers states in relation to this story: “[Byatt’s] tale is part of a complex embroidery in which men have power and women do not” (Sellers 36).

There are many more instances of metamorphosed women in Byatt's work. We could mention, for example, the transformation of the narratologist Gillian Perholt at the end of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" into a younger woman, or the transformation of the serpent in "The Lamia in the Cèvennes" into a wonderful young woman, or the Melusina myth in *Possession*, and the list could continue. One of the metamorphoses that are particularly interesting is that of the "bird-women" in the fourth novel of the Frederica Quartet, *A Whistling Woman*. The bird-women are a good metaphor for a non-essentialist configuration of the female gender, out of the constricting social roles that the female body would force them to take. The whistling women had been cast out from the city of men and punished with eternal silence, for, although they could communicate among themselves by means of a whistle, this sound was both unintelligible and fatal to those who heard it. They represent, then, a re-enactment of the myth of the sirens, for, like them, are given destructive powers but are simultaneously imprisoned in a world of their own, from where they cannot escape, being unable to communicate. These metamorphosed women, who had wanted to transcend the limits of their female bodies in order to be able to become shape-shifters like men, are, in a way, allowed their freedom, but that also makes of them outcasts without a place in the social structure of their country, as they explain:

In Veralden, only men were shape-shifters. Women stayed in the valley, spinning and teaching, tending fruit-trees and flowers. They never left the valley. We wanted to go out, we wanted the speed and the danger of the wind and the snow and the dark" (Byatt *A Whistling Woman*, 6).

If we link the image of the outcast bird-women to some of the women that populate Byatt's fiction, we may come to the conclusion that they are a powerful image of Byatt's representation of women's need to transcend their bodies or, to put it another way, to transcend fixed gender notions. Thus, when asked if they desired to be women again, the leader of the bird-women answers: "[...] no, she could never forgo the wind in the wings, and the free racing through the stormskies. But she would like to be welcome in Veralden, to drink wine again, with her kinsfolk" (6-7).

In "Ice, Snow, Glass", A. S. Byatt writes, as was already mentioned here, about the way she felt in relation to the role ascribed to women in some of the fairy tales she read when a child. As she explains, what seemed to frighten her was the enclosing female condition of marriage and child-bearing and the idea that she had to choose between this and "the life of the mind", that is, the idea conveyed by these stories that this was an either/or situation, as she explains in another passage of the same essay:

The frozen, stony women became my images of choosing the perfection of the work, rejecting (so it seemed to me then, though I have done my best

to keep my apple and swallow it) the imposed biological cycle, blood, kiss, roses, birth, death, and the hungry generations (Byatt "Ice, Snow, Glass", 164).

In A. S. Byatt's rewriting of the fairy tale we can see a way out of the contained and constricted lives of women who are pigeon-holed by society into essentialist and stereotypical gender dichotomies. The metamorphoses some of Byatt's heroines undergo may demonstrate the need for new and multiple possible identities that would allow for a reconfiguration of female identities. Ultimately, these new fairy tales envisage, not only a reconfigured idea of womanhood, one that can liberate them from the bodily functions that for some many centuries confined their lives, exclusively, to the performance of those roles that were associated to the female body. In many senses, Byatt's heroines are good examples of the need to find a way out of the female body, which is felt as a prison, and into the pleasures of "the life of the mind".

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