

Multi-dimensional Gender Perspective in Historical Narrative Structure of A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores gender issues in the historical narrative structure of A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990) by critically examining women's exclusion from society, men's identity crisis in gender environments, and the separation and union between two sexes in the novel. To reveal these complicated gender issues, Byatt combines history with narrative, which accords well with Hayden White's historical narrative that fictive history can unveil historical truth. Additionally, Byatt's three levels of historical narratives echo Giambattista Vico's cycle of history to reveal the recurring gender issues in human history. In this respect, this study investigates how Byatt uses historical narratives to examine gender dilemmas of men and women to explore how characters free themselves from their gendered travails. In conclusion, Byatt employs historical narratives to reveal the recurring gender dilemmas and gender opposition in the history of human development. Meanwhile, Byatt is seeking a new type of gender relations in the cycle of human history as well—it is androgyny that liberates men and women from the limitation of defined gender roles and dissolves gendered conflicts to realize the union between body and soul in men and women.

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INTRODUCTION

For feminists, gender is not an essential quality for a person but “performed” (Butler, 1999, p. 175), and gender studies, thus, mainly explore gender constructs defined by

social norms and expectations. It discloses that the real purpose of such constructs is to maintain the patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that “the masculine principle is always the favored ‘norm’ and women the outsiders” (De Beauvoir, 1984, p. 295). However, the gender perspective cannot be narrowed down to the feminist perspective, for the study of gender should not merely encompass women’s experiences and perspectives but also require a complete understanding of men and the relationship between men and women (Sedgwick, 2007). Byatt is one such novelist, dedicating herself to exploring the relationship between women and men and reconstructing their identities throughout her literary career. By depicting women’s social status, thoughts, and their relationships with others, Byatt (1993) attempts to show her liberal and humanistic concern for women when she confesses to her readers “how she wishes women to be normal...” (p. vii), for them to be treated equally to men.

Furthermore, Byatt’s male characters, who occupy a significant position in her exploration of gender issues, are largely intellectuals shaped by specific social and historical conditions. Her special concern about gender issues is woven throughout every aspect of her first Booker-Prize-winning *Possession: A Romance* (1990), which has also earned plaudits from the public and critics for its original narrative structure. However, previous studies in the existing criticism of Byatt’s *Possession* from a combined perspective of gender relations and historical narratives are relatively

rare (Farahmandfar, 2017; Wells, 2002). Against this backdrop, we argue that the novel *Possession* provides profound insights into the endeavors of men and women who seek a new type of gender relations amidst the recurring gender dilemmas in human history. In pursuit of this argument, this study investigates how Byatt uses historical narratives to examine gender dilemmas of men and women to explore how characters free themselves from their gendered travails.

The present study draws upon Hayden White’s historical narrative and Giambattista Vico’s cycle of history to achieve this goal. The theories examine male and female characters’ difficulties when associating with the opposite sex and their efforts to improve their gender relations in the novel. For Hayden White, historical narrative unveils truth obscured by history in fictive stories. By recording “the histories of the marginalized, the forgotten, the unrecorded” (Byatt, 2001, p. 11), historical narratives make it possible to explore such gaps and create plausibility, attaining or approximating submerged historical truths. In like manner, Giambattista Vico’s cycle of history helps to exhibit the recurring gender issues in the course of human history. With each generation mirroring those that have come before, the cycle of history is a kind of cultural reflection that makes it possible to examine the gender problems depicted in the novel. The law of “history is progress” (Vico, 1744/1984, p. 22) also shows that solutions to gender issues always exist in the cyclical nature of human history.

Literature Review

Literary scholars have employed many theoretical frameworks to analyze Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Farahmandfar (2017) in his research examined the use of historical narratives to reveal the truth of the past in *Possession*, which "reclaim the 'ex-centric' voice of women...that has, for a long time, been silenced or at least driven to the margins by patriarchal practices of history" (p. 479). Ioannidou (2020) further illustrated restrictions that gender imposed on women writers in the Victorian era. Ioannidou observed that poetic creation helped LaMotte develop her identity as a poet, which empowered her against Victorian norms that enslaved and degraded women and provided her with a means of expressing her emotions and the challenges she faced. However, she was only "a sort of poet", as opposed to a "real" one like her counterpart, the male poet Ash, since it was not easy for women to develop a career as a writer in the Victorian age (p. 417). The current study further supports the work of Farahmandfar and Ioannidou by showing how historical narratives record the unrecorded in the past and expose the confinements imposed on women in the patriarchal Victorian era. However, our study explores women constrained by gendered distinctions in patriarchal systems and examines men's predicament within the defined culture.

Pereira (2019) discussed women's autonomy in two fairy tales of Byatt's *Possession*— "The Glass Coffin" and "Gode's Story"—and concluded that Byatt's

use of fairy tales communicates women's confined living conditions and establishes expectations that women will live lives of an "autonomous and self-sufficient being that strives" (p. 320). Zhang (2021) went considerably further in their exploration of the factors that contribute to women achieving autonomy, and he claimed that "solitary and isolation become the norms of literary creation, especially for women artists" (p. 43). Additionally, Zhang (2020), in another article, "The Cauda Pavonis and Byatt's Female Visionary in the Tetralogy", associated female creativity with the notion of androgyny. Zhang (2020) argues that autonomous female artists are androgynous—"the union of opposites", representing "fertility" as well as "creativity." Furthermore, the interaction between androgyny and femininity supports Byatt's creation of characters such as Melusine and LaMotte in *Possession*, who echo the "essential androgyny of the creative mind..." (p. 412), in which gender expression transcends the confines of the masculine-feminine binary.

In the above studies, Pereira (2019) perceives that gender confinements can be destabilized when women learn to be "autonomous and self-sufficient"; Zhang indicates that solitariness and isolation are *sine qua non* for women artists' literary creation that enables them to gain autonomy. In addition, Zhang argues that female artists are androgynous, the union of fertility and creativity, a union that transcends the restriction of "inherent" gender duality. In particular, these studies attempt to separate

women from gender relations by cutting the connection between men and women, while the current study examines the experiences of men and women within such defined gender relations and explores how they may be freed from their gendered difficulties. Additionally, the notion of androgyny in this study represents the union between two sexes in body and soul rather than the understanding that it can exist beyond gender relations.

Wells (2002) discussed the trajectories of history when examining Giambattista Vico's conceptualization that "history is progressive". Wells refuted the view of Byatt's *Possession* that contemporary culture regressed into "a state of paralyzing skepticism" in contrast with Victorian culture (p. 669). Instead, Wells argued that the value of self-conscious cultural reflection made the salvation of the deteriorating postmodern culture possible. Wells and we employ Vico's cycle of history to explore Byatt's *Possession*. Wells focuses on an investigation of the progressiveness of history from a cultural perspective, while the current study examines the recurring gender issues revealed by the juxtaposition of historical periods. According to Vico, "history is progressive"; thus, the solutions for gender inequality can also be revealed by the cyclical nature of human history. Byatt (1990) states in the novel that "body and soul are not separable" (p. 373), and the concept of androgyny precisely signifies such expectations for gender relations. Through uniting masculinity and femininity, androgyny creates a sense of wholeness

for individuals and establishes harmonious gender relations.

Therefore, this study explores gender issues of A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990) in the framework of Hayden White's historical narrative and Giambattista Vico's cycle of history, by critically examining women's exclusion from society and men's identity crisis in gendered environments, as well as the separation and union between two sexes in the novel. It concludes that Byatt's construction of androgynous gender relations liberates men and women from the limitations of defined gender roles and dissolves gendered conflicts to realize the union between body and soul in men and women.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Byatt and Hayden White's Historical Narrative

Traditionally, historians contend that history can represent reality faithfully and objectively. However, postmodern historians challenge the idea of history as a science and consider history textual, open, plural, and uncertain. The postmodern historian, White (1990), defines history as a "verbal structure" (p. 9) or a tool that employs the linguistic and rhetorical structures of a narrative. Rather than a reality simply waiting to be transparently communicated in language, the construction of history has led to a greater focus on the role of narrativization (White, 1990). Accordingly, White (1975) outlines three models that can be applied to historical

discourse: (i) “explanation by emplotment,” (ii) “explanation by argument,” and (iii) “explanation by ideological implication” (p. 7). These three models suggest that historical texts are poetic, imaginative, and fictive. To White, emplotment is assembling a series of historical events into a narrative with a plot. Considering this, White (1975) identifies four modes of emplotment: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire, and argues that all histories are narrative discourses about the past, shaped, crafted, and formed by emplotment. History, therefore, has been transformed into a narrative model for fiction. Historians not only “find” stories but also “invent” as a fiction writer does (White, 1975, p. 8). The significance of White’s theory lies in his destabilization of the scientific foundation of history, narrowing the distance between historical discourse and literary narratives.

Byatt acknowledges her debt to Hayden White, whose historical views greatly influenced her creation of historical fiction. In Byatt’s book *On Histories and Stories* (2001), she discusses Hayden White’s view of history and narrative: “Narrative is simply there, like life itself . . . international, transhistorical, transcultural” (Byatt, 2001, p. 10). She further examines White’s investigation of narratives in fiction and thoroughly explores the relationship between fiction and history, insisting on the position of “fiction expressing history” (p. 9) and how history aims to unpack the actual events of the past and their narrative. Among Byatt’s historiographic metafiction, she has rewritten historical events or personages,

myths, legends, and folklores interwoven with plots to construct whole stories. In contrast to other historical novelists who repudiate any access to the past, Byatt believed in the power of narrative to reveal the truth about the past. History employs narrative structures with color and metaphor “to keep past literature alive and singing, connecting the pleasure of writing to the pleasure of reading” (p. 11). Accordingly, history became a form of “textuality”, a way to reconstruct the past through imaginative fiction “that makes fact alive as a kind of truth” (p. 42). Enlightened with “one very powerful impulse”, Byatt dedicated herself to writing “the histories of the marginalized, the forgotten, the unrecorded” (p. 11). She writes about women excluded from official versions of the past and men who suffer from identity anxiety in gendered environments. Byatt has faith in the power of historical narratives that can reflect history and bring what has been marginalized to the fore.

Byatt and Giambattista Vico’s Cycle of History

Instead of traditional historical narratives employing a single form of discourse, Byatt’s novel *Possession* employs multiple forms to present a rich tapestry of history. Plots and discourses are organically integrated on the historical level to form a unique narrative style of her own, which refreshes traditional historical narratives as Byatt (2001) stated, “old tales, new forms” (p. 5). The use of the creative structure of historical narratives in Byatt’s novels is significantly influenced by Giambattista

Vico's cycle of history. Vico proposed a recurring cycle of history in his *New Science* (1984). He argued that human history proceeded in a recurring cycle (ricorso) of three ages: the divine, the heroic, and the human. Frye (1981) then developed into the mythical age, or the age of gods; a heroic age, or the age of an aristocracy; and the age of the people. Each age exhibited distinct political and social features and can be characterized by language. In addition, these three ages constitute the history of human development. Vico (1744/1984) envisioned history as progressive, as "Each generation or 'time-form' occupies a space on an overall continuum, or 'corso', which follows a trajectory over which a society develops from a primitive to a more advanced state" (p. 22). With each generation mirroring those that have come before, the cycle of history is a kind of cultural reflection that makes it possible to examine the gender problems depicted in the novel.

In *Possession*, Byatt takes various historical stages of human experience as the novel's narrative content: the ancient mythological era, the Victorian era of a century ago, and the contemporary era at the end of the 20th century. These three historical times roughly correspond with the eras of gods, heroes, and people, as described by Vico. The first narrative level is the narrator's description of the Western academic community in the 20th century, which reflects the contemporary social landscape. Scholars Roland and Maud found many historical texts when they uncovered a secret history of 19th-century literature. The

letters and diaries from the two Victorian poets, LaMotte and Ash, constitute the second narrative layer. In the letters, many myths, epics, and folklore rewritten by the two poets tell the stories of others that have persisted from the mythical age, implying a third narrative level. The three-level, interwoven historical narrative clearly and naturally forms a retrospective tracing from the contemporary to the Victorian period and then to the ancient humans, thus presenting the stories and historical landscapes of three different historical periods. *Possession* reveals Byatt's concern for gender issues from different perspectives through these three historical narratives. The narratives of each age interact with each other to draw a rich picture of human history. Hayden White and Vico influence Byatt's view of history, and her multi-layered narrative in *Possession* enriches the ancient historical context and vividly presents the historical development of gender issues.

METHODOLOGY

The present study examines gender issues in A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990) in historical narratives. More specifically, *Possession*'s narrative techniques are based on Byatt's historical views, theoretically structured by Hayden White's historical narrative and Giambattista Vico's cycle of history. The main data collection method from this theoretical framework would be a textual analysis of the novel. Specifically, the study follows the narrative structure from the ancient times through the Victorian age until the

contemporary period to explore gender issues that have existed since ancient times. By examining marginalized women whose talents are buried, as well as men who suffer from gendered identity crises in different eras, the study aims to achieve the first objective. According to Byatt (2001), historical narratives disclose “the histories of the marginalized, the forgotten, the unrecorded” (p. 9). She constructs three historical times in which she writes about multiple female characters who are neglected and suppressed because of their sexual identity and men who are frustrated and fearful of love and intimacy with women. Byatt records the recurring gender struggles of men and women throughout human history while seeking ways out. Therefore, the present study investigates the separation and union of the two sexes to achieve the second objective. Female utopia and asexuality are expected to expel the opposite sex in terms of body or emotion to maintain autonomy, which worsens gender relations and imprisons the self. A new type of gender relations based on unity and coexistence, which precisely aligns with Byatt’s expectation that “body and soul are not separable”, can be considered through the lens of androgyny (Byatt, 1990, p. 373).

Text

Byatt’s Booker-Prize-winning *Possession: A Romance* (1990) is the present study’s primary data collection and analysis source. It details two interrelated stories of contemporary critics, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, who investigate the

lives of two Victorian poets, Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash, through the unexpected discovery of a secret correspondence between them. Through its complex narrative structure, the novel explores a variety of gender-related mechanics and presents the living conditions of both genders through the interaction of the contemporary world and the Victorian past, which is directly related to the central argument of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Dilemmas of Two Sexes in Historical Narratives

Confined Women in Gender Identity.

It is notable that female predicaments are viewed diachronically and investigated both in the two main plots and the novel’s many embedded subplots and poems. When narrating the Victorian past, Byatt intentionally employs “emplotment” (White, 1975, p. 8) and creates new narrative lines to give voice to “the marginalized, the forgotten, the unrecorded” women whose intelligence has been neglected by male authoritative discourse (Byatt, 2001, p. 11). Ellen Best, the wife of the famous Victorian poet Randolph Ash in *Possession*, is a neglected intellectual woman. She ruefully notes in her journal:

I hit on something I believe when I wrote that I meant to be a Poet and a Poem. It may be that this is the desire of all reading women, as opposed to the reading men, who wish to be poets and heroes but might see the inditing

of poetry in our peaceful age as a sufficiently heroic act (Byatt, 1990, p. 122).

Ellen voices the distress of intelligent Victorian wives of male geniuses, normally restricted by their “housewife” identity. They live in the shadow of their husbands’ glory and become “outcasts” in a male-dominated world (Wallhead, 1999, p. 237). As a “woman in the shadow,” Ellen once dreamed of becoming a poet, but this ambition faded after marriage. Upset by what her life has become, she then secretly starts writing journals to record her thoughts. While most contemporary scholars believe Ellen’s life and journals are dull, feminist critics rediscover her talents and argue that her husband restrained her literary brilliance and imagination. Like Ellen, Proserpina is a goddess abducted by Pluto and imprisoned in the Underworld in Ash’s poem. Her husband also dominates her.

By contrast, female characters in the contemporary world of Byatt’s novel are ambitious and devote themselves to academic careers. However, in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society, literary women: “are enclosed, inevitably, trapped in the specifically literary constructs which male writers controlled” (Gilbert & Gubar, 1980, p. vii). Beatrice Nest is a documentary expert who leads a simple life as a single woman, and she dedicated twenty-five years to studying the great Victorian poet Ash’s wife, Ellen. In this way, two women from different times are connected by the enduring unfair treatment because of their gender. Initially, Nest was

obsessed with Ash’s poetry, yet her tutor’s words, “What contribution to knowledge did she hope to make, could she be sure of making?” (Byatt, 1990, p. 127) discouraged her and persuaded her to take up document editing as it was more suitable for her gender and ability. She is thus forced to bury her love for Ash’s poetry and turn her interest to the “cute boring woman” Ellen instead but finds nothing valuable in her research. Even though Nest ranks among contemporary scholars, she is a marginalized scholar whose ability has been questioned because of her gender, like her counterparts Ellen and Proserpina. Although from three different eras, the tradition of women’s subordination since ancient times echoes throughout the novel.

Frustrated Men in Gender Relations.

Vico (1744/1984) argues that “the present [is] only intelligible if one [knows] how its traditions, beliefs, and way of thinking [have] evolved from the past” (p. 16). Along similar lines, Byatt (1990) writes, “those past voices and lives whose resuscitation in our own lives as warnings... is the business of every thinking man and woman” (p. 104). Apart from being concerned about the problems women faced throughout human history, Byatt also examines the predicaments and difficulties that men encounter.

At the story’s opening, Roland Michell, a contemporary scholar, accidentally finds some letters in Giambattista Vico’s book *The New Science* and later learns that the letters were from Victorian poet Randolph

Henry Ash to one Christabel LaMotte. Thus, a secret romance was revealed. In a sense, Vico and his *The New Science* generate the plot, connect the past with the present and fiction with fact, and reveal the “textuality” of history, a way to reconstruct the past (Byatt, 2001, p. 42). Roland obtains new knowledge about the Victorian poet Ash in reconstructing the past. Ash is commonly recognized as a successful man in his career and marriage. He fell in love with Ellen at an early age and waited for fifteen years before she decided to marry him. Due to Ellen’s fear of men and sex, their marriage was never consummated, and they maintained their asexual marriage for forty-one years. Later, Ash meets and experiences an immediate attraction to his contemporary poetess, Christabel LaMotte, and they develop a secret romance through correspondence. The unexpected love inspires Ash to write many love poems different from his previous ones on the subject—“Ash’s great love poetry was inspired not by his wife, but by a mistress” (Wallhead, 1999, p. 180). Their combination of body and soul evokes in Ash a profound and long-lasting love, even enduring until the final moments of his life. Although Ash implicitly accuses LaMotte of coldness and mercilessness in his last letter to her, the reader can feel his love for LaMotte between the lines. Ash later died of illness and passed away in a pitiful state.

The contemporary scholar Roland Michell also suffers anxiety regarding gender relations and his academic career. Unable to shoulder the responsibility as a breadwinner, Roland’s dignity is challenged

in his relationship with her girlfriend Val, as he “saw himself as a failure and didn’t want to do anything so decisive, in terms of himself and Val” (Byatt, 1990, p. 16). Instead of following contemporary, popular literary trends in his academic career, Roland studied the Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash, who was considered outdated. His neglected academic career results in his economic inferiority: Val assumes the role of a breadwinner, and Maud patronizes him during their research. Emotionally, Roland is attracted to Maud, who has already acquired fame and authority in the academic world at that time, but his awareness of the disparity in their social status prevents him from admitting his true feelings to Maud: “Maud was a beautiful woman such as he had no claim to possess. She had a secure job and an international reputation...but in almost all incompatible” (Byatt, 1990, p. 459). Therefore, he withholds his feelings, hesitating to express his love. Only when Roland finally gets offers from multiple universities does he dare to suggest they could love each other “in a modern way” (p. 530). This success inspires Roland to confess his love. Therefore, Byatt (1990) ironically comments, “How true it was that one needed to be seen by others to be sure of one’s existence. Nothing in what he had written had changed, and everything had changed” (p. 508).

Historical narrative, as a “verbal structure” of history, is poetic, imaginative, and fictive (White, 1975, p. 9). Byatt’s three levels of historical narrative vividly display human groups of women and men

from the mythical times, the Victorian age, and the contemporary age, forming a landscape of human history. There are mythological figures Proserpina, Victorian wife Ellen, and Contemporary scholar Nest, who have been dominated, forgotten, and questioned because of their female identity. Among male characters, Ash is a literary giant of the Victorian era, renowned for his intelligence and talent, but he is impotent in handling relationships with women. At the same time, contemporary scholar Roland's inability to fulfill the supposed masculine responsibilities of being a successful man and breadwinner is defined as a "failure" (Byatt, 1990, p. 16). Three levels of historical narrative, echoing Vico's cycle of history of the human, the heroic, and the divine, depict the recurring gender dilemmas of men and women. It implies the "truth" behind the historical "textuality" that it is precisely the gender construction of patriarchy that has led to the predicament of both sexes (Byatt, 2001).

From Separation of Body and Soul to Union

In addition to revealing the recurring gender dilemmas confronted by men and women in historical narratives, A.S. Byatt seeks ways out of the depressing gender travails in the cycle of history. She investigates the "separate autonomy" that emphasizes isolation from the opposite sex to gain self-autonomy (Steveker, 2009; Zhang, 2021) as well as the "inseparable body and soul" that advocates the union of both sexes (Byatt,

1990). The following discussion will unfold from the two points.

Female Utopias and Sexual Fear—Separation of Body and Soul. In *Possession*, Byatt includes a female utopia to indicate that women could live independently without being subordinate to men. This conception is mirrored by Elaine's description of the Amazon utopia "as a country entirely populated by women and completely isolated from the male world" (Showalter, 1977, p. 4). The LaMotte-Glover Bethany house can be regarded as a women's utopian world. Both passionate about artistic creation, LaMotte and Miss Glover live peacefully together, exchanging their thoughts through art. The "LaMotte—Glover" style utopia in *Possession* reflects the self-awakening of female consciousness, showing that women can live the life of the mind and make a difference through art. However, this utopia ends in tragedy because of the intrusion of the male poet Ash. Byatt indicates that women's utopia is fragile when intruded upon by men.

Byatt's female characters like Ellen and Maud, who are from different historical backgrounds, suffer from the fear of sexual intimacy, which mirrors D. H. Lawrence's assertion that "the mind has an old groveling fear of the body and the body's potencies" (Lawrence, 1930, p. 5). Ellen and Ash's marriage remains an asexual marriage due to Ellen's fear of sex. Since Ellen fails to complete what she views to be her wifely responsibilities, she does her best to please her husband as a slave, even

though she is aware of Ash's betrayal in marriage. Rather than fighting for rights in their marriage, Ellen chooses to be a good Victorian wife who bears the betrayal. If Ellen and Ash's marriage is asexual, then the modern relationship between Fergus and Maud is completely physical. Their fragile relationship is comprised of a sexuality that is fully erotic rather than love. This carnal relationship casts a deep shadow on Maud's psychology. She refuses any possibility of emotional intimacy with a man, and the idea of marriage never occurs to her. Indeed, many women are afraid of married life with men and subconsciously refuse to enter the male territory of the family. In *The Second Sex* (1984), De Beauvoir discusses marriage anxiety in women and lists extreme behaviors they might adopt, such as pretending to be sick or suicidal, to escape marriage. In *Possession's* mystical stories, the "Crystal Coffin" princess would rather be cursed to sleep in a crystal hall for a hundred years than marry.

Female utopia and asexuality, though different in form, are essentially expected to be free from gender constraints and live "autonomous and self-sufficient" lives by separating themselves spiritually or physically from men (Pereira, 2019). Victorian wife Ellen detaches from her husband sexually, leading to her emotional enslavement. Maud conceals her femininity by hiding her beautiful long hair to keep an emotional distance from men. However, such self-autonomy based on cutting off the connection between men and women is unreliable, as "fully self-sufficient and

isolated consciousness cannot possibly exist...Separation from the other can only result in the loss of self" (Bakhtin, 2010, p. 287). Byatt's plot of male intrusion to disintegrate female utopia in the novel illustrates that separated gender relations violate her expectations that "body and soul are not separable" in the relationship between men and women (Byatt, 1990, p. 373).

Androgyny: The Union of Body and Mind in Two Sexes. In *The New Science*, Vico explains that history is recurrent, cyclical, and progressive. At the crucial point at the end of the "corso" (cycle)—there would come a moment of retrospection, or "ricorso", during which a society can save itself by repeating more primitive time-forms in their most valuable aspects (Wells, 2002, p. 674). In *Possession*, Byatt indicates that there is a "ricorso" that relieves the gender travails that existed throughout human history. She creates many major characters—such as Ellen, Maud, and Val—who constantly complain that "love is terrible" but still eulogize the love between Ash and LaMotte, while it is love that acts as a cure for Maud's fear of sex. In this way, Byatt seeks to establish a union between body and soul between the two sexes, and this kind of union can be considered through the lens of androgyny.

In the novel's Victorian narratives, Byatt takes LaMotte and Ash's love story to reveal the androgyny they embodied. Ash, as portrayed by Byatt, is very different from the other characters in her work. Apart from

his artistic talent, Ash also shows his respect and understanding for Victorian women, “Through Ash, Byatt explores the possibility of being a male sympathetic to feminism in the nineteenth century” (Campbell, 2004, p. 132). Ash addresses LaMotte as his equal and shows her his respect and admiration. Additionally, his writings are greatly influenced by the brilliant poetess. Compared with his previous poems, which are full of masculinity, Ash writes poems with feminine tenderness when in a loving relationship with LaMotte. The transformation of his writing style from masculine to a combination of masculine and feminine indicates Ash’s androgynous mind. According to Woolf (1929), androgyny unites masculinity with femininity in individuals to challenge gendered conceptions of consciousness. It allows men to attain selfhood by recognizing the “courage to be tender”, while women attain selfhood by having a sense of their destiny, and the androgynous individual is characterized by a “completing” of their psyche (Kenyon, 1988, p. 51). As an intelligent poetess, LaMotte is a woman with independent thoughts. She establishes a lesbian utopia with Miss Glover to protect women from men’s oppression. In this sense, LaMotte is a fighter with a strong will and courage, which indicates masculinity in mind. When LaMotte meets Ash, she is attracted by his brilliance and melts into Ash’s fiery and sincere love, Ash’s encouragement, understanding, and love to open her previously sealed heart and awaken her desire for true love.

Inspired by love, appreciation, and respect, she completes two impressive epics—*The Fairy Melusina* and *The City of Is*. The Ash-LaMotte romantic relationship is initially based on “art, the intellectual life, and an interest in Melusine” (Franken, 2001, p. 99). The mutual influence of the ideal Victorian poet and poetess on one another exemplifies Byatt’s androgynous conception of the fusion of male and female forces in artistic creation. It is androgyny that makes them transcend the barriers of gender to a spirit of reconciliation (Heilbrun, 1973, p. 10). Spiritual unity, in turn, promotes the union in the body, which makes possible the realization of androgyny mentally and physically. However, it is regretful that Ash—LaMotte’s androgynous zeal is not sustained as Ash cuts himself off from LaMotte in the latter part of his life.

In contrast, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell from the contemporary narratives appear as figures that can succeed in their respective interpretive projects, creating the circumstances in which postmodernity can experience the benefits of the “ricorso”. Maud is a LaMotte scholar in the Women’s Resource Center, and Roland holds a Ph.D. in the Ash Factory. Maud’s connection with LaMotte reflects their kinship and shared thoughts and qualities: they share intelligence in creation and solitude in life. To live according to her feminist beliefs, Maud appears inaccessible to men and attempts to separate herself from her femininity. She hides her beautiful long hair, “always inside some sort of covering, hidden away” (Byatt, 1990, p. 65). In addition, she

projects traits associated with masculinity to be taken seriously in the academic world. Compared with Maud, Roland is a loser in life and his career. He dedicated himself to unpopular research fields and was ridiculed by his colleagues. His girlfriend has assumed the breadwinner's role, seriously damaging his masculinity. He experiences feelings of inferiority in his career and relationships. While delving into the past, both Maud and Roland change. Maud reassumes her sense of personal and societal identity. She frees her hair and femininity, showing a more integrated sense of self about others that "concedes sexual difference but allows for both desire and equitable treatment" (Wells, 2002, p. 687). Her relationship with Roland symbolically unites the past with the present and her masculinity with femininity. Maud's androgynous traits enable her to reexamine her relationship with men. Roland develops a more clearly defined identity as a social being and an academic. He no longer feels inferior to Maud, who eventually becomes his lover and attains a new level of professional respect. As the two scholars investigate the past, they gradually gain a balanced understanding of one another and even spend time reading about the other's preferred writers and discussing their thoughts. Meanwhile, Roland is inspired by Maud's academic confidence, and Maud's respect and support also encourage Roland to approach her during their research. Maud and Roland develop a bond based on mutual respect, challenging, stimulating, and fostering each other's growth, which exactly confirms the androgynous state as

Cixous (1988) describes: "the one enhances and brightens the other. The two of them equal in stature, in power, in the richness of soul, in the mobility of spirit, equal in virtue..." (p. 47). This personal growth brings them together and, therefore, initiates the spontaneous, revitalizing repetition of the "ricorso", which has lasting positive effects on themselves and broader gender relations. They arrive at "a modern way" of managing their romance, which enables them to realize the unity of body and mind.

A new type of gender relationship, not based on separation and opposition but on union and coexistence, corresponds to the male-female relations described by androgyny. It is worth noting that androgyny here represents the union between two sexes in body and soul rather than the understanding that it can exist beyond gender relations. Through uniting masculinity and femininity, androgyny creates a sense of wholeness for individuals and establishes harmonious gender relations. In the two couples Ash-LaMotte and Roland-Maud, their spiritual understanding promotes their union in the body, which makes possible the realization of androgyny mentally and physically, and this union also has significant effects on themselves and gender relations.

CONCLUSION

As a historiographic metafiction, *Possession* highlights the continuity between history and reality when comparing fictional history with fictional reality, which also connects the past with the present. Different historical

periods intermix to form a unique narrative structure. Through a dialogic relationship with the past, it lays bare the recurring gender issues throughout the history of human development. Byatt shows women's living conditions in the ancient mythological era, Victorian England, and contemporary society. She expresses her sympathy for female dilemmas and fairly examines men who encounter predicaments and anxiety in gender relations as well as their careers and highlights how their difficult situations are significantly influenced by their social and cultural environment. Byatt is concerned about the relationship between men and women, and she investigates the separation and the union of genders. Although Byatt adopts a negative attitude towards love and marriage, she still wishes to rebuild relationships between men and women and indicates that androgynous gender relations may be the ideal way to realize the harmonious coexistence of men and women and to fulfill the union of body and soul. Although from different eras, the couples Ash and LaMotte and Maud and Roland echo each other to form a grand historical development of gender relations. The model of sexes' coexistence essentially expresses Byatt's faith in gender relations that men and women can transcend gender limitations and enjoy harmony in body and soul. However, such a model of androgyny still invites us to ponder, and some questions need to be answered. Since androgyny represents the ideal relationship between the two sexes, why can't it be sustained? Ultimately, romantic love between Lamott and Ash ends

tragically with decades of separation and Ash's death, while Roland and Maud will eventually face separation as Roland accepts a new job overseas. Such outcomes deserve to be explored in future studies.

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