

# Historical Romance, Gender, and Heterosexuality: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession*

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This essay is a comparative analysis of two historical romance novels: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. While I acknowledge that some of the key storytelling priorities in *Possession* oppose those of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, I emphasise structural similarities in the treatments of the heroines in these two novels. My analysis of the characterisation and narrative function of Sarah Woodruff and Christabel LaMotte illustrates the novels' common paradigmatic structure and reveals a deeper shared allegiance to heterosexual hegemony. I argue that these characters are crucial to the complex negotiation of the past which both novels offer. They enable, in Diane Elam's words, "a re-engendering of the historical past as romance." Sarah and Christabel's representation as both historical and outside of history provides the conduit for the elaborate to-ing and fro-ing between the Victorian age and the late twentieth century which is central to both novels. The double aspect of these characters depends on allegorical stereotyping of women as "mystery" and "truth."

## INTRODUCTION

A.S. Byatt has said that she was "partly provoked" by John Fowles's Victorian romance to write her own (Kellaway 1990, 45). It is no surprise then that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1987) is frequently cited by reviewers of Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* (1991b) as one of its most important antecedents.<sup>1</sup> Anita Brookner begins her review of *Possession* by noting that Byatt's publishers compare it with Fowles's novel "on the not unreasonable grounds that both are Victorian dramas secured to the present day:" "(t)he comparison" she says, "is inevitable" (1990). Nevertheless, for Richard Todd, the most prolific commentator on Byatt's work, this is merely a "commonplace comparison" between these two novels, "bred of a superficial similarity in iconoclastic treatments of Victorian sexuality" (1996, 31). He

contends that frequent comparisons between *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession* follow from not reading either novel closely enough and from a consequent failure to appreciate their very different representations of the Victorian past. Not only are the connections that many writers have drawn between these two novels important, but the similarity runs much deeper than Todd—and even those he criticises—allow.

This essay discusses A.S. Byatt's response to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—both in her critical work and in *Possession* itself—in order to interrogate the apparent differences between the two novels. I then turn my attention to the similarities between them in a comparison of the characterisation and narrative function of Fowles's heroine, Sarah Woodruff, and Byatt's, Christabel LaMotte.<sup>2</sup>

## TWO VICTORIAN ROMANCES

Byatt's essay, "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Post-War Fiction," includes a critique of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Byatt dismisses Fowles's treatment of Victorianism as "crude" (1991a, 174). She is fascinated, however, by the way in which his "Victorian novel within a novel" brings "realism" and "experiment" "curiously close together" (173). She likes that his novel offers a "realist" reading experience at the same time as it invites reflection on the fictionality of that experience. This dual pleasure is spoiled for Byatt by the inclusion of two endings for the novel. She argues that they do not suggest "a plurality of possible stories," but "are a programmatic denial of the reality of any" (174). For Byatt, Fowles's alternative endings "painfully destroy the narrative 'reality' of the central events, which have happily withstood authorial shifts in style, interjections, and essays on Victorian reality" (174). She argues that Fowles's experiment does not work because *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is set in the past. Without any recourse to the "future tense," readers cannot imagine the two endings as "real" alternatives: "They therefore cancel each other out, and cancel their participants" (174). Byatt's argument is that the two endings upset verisimilitude to such an extent that the reading experience becomes a less enjoyable one; readers' faith in the "reality," or "truth," of the characters and their story is destroyed. In her terms, the alternative endings to Fowles's historical romance privilege "experiment" over "realism," and, as a consequence, deny its readers the pleasures of narrative coherence and closure.

Byatt's novel tells a twentieth-century love story alongside (and through) a Victorian one. In short, *Possession* tells the story of two contemporary literary scholars, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, who discover that their respective objects of study, Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, had a brief but passionate love affair. In their efforts to learn what happened between the Victorian poets, Roland and Maud—and we

along with them—become engrossed in a paper trail of letters, short stories, poems, essays and diaries. The cumulative effect of these carefully crafted “Victorian” manuscripts is to build exactly the kind of engrossing fictional history or narrative reality that Byatt enjoyed and then lamented the loss of when reading *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. While we are invited to reflect on the relationship between narrative and history, Byatt’s ventriloquism is not just a postmodern device designed to draw our attention to the fictiveness of her historical tale, or, indeed, of history more generally. If the effect of Fowles’s alternative endings on the narrative reality is, for Byatt, to “reduce it to paperiness again” (174), the sheer volume of material (or evidence) she presents us with in *Possession* contributes to the sense that the past her Victorian lovers inhabit is much more than a papery postmodern conceit. One of the aims of the novel is to strike a more satisfying balance between “realism” and “experiment” than she felt Fowles did in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*; to answer the challenge, as she sees it, of writing a novel in which literary self-consciousness, crucially important for Byatt, does not spoil the pleasures of a “good read.”

Byatt’s disappointment with Fowles follows from her preference for what she calls “self-conscious moral realism.” She defines this term in “People in Paper Houses,” when she praises three novels (Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* (1973), Angus Wilson’s *As If by Magic* (1973) and Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962)) for fulfilling the dual aims she hopes to promote through her use of this term:

an awareness of the difficulty of “realism” combined with a strong moral attachment to its values, a formal need to comment on their fictiveness combined with a strong sense of the value of a habitable imagined world, a sense that models, literature and “the tradition” are ambiguous and problematic goods combined with a profound nostalgia for, rather than rejection of, the great works of the past. (181)

In contrast, she sees *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as a poor example of self-conscious moral realism to the extent that it fails to sustain a happy balance between these seemingly contradictory impulses. In praise of Fowles’s novel, she writes, “the reader is allowed, invited, both to experience imaginatively the sexual urgency and tension it evokes, and to place such imagining as a function of that kind of story, that kind of style, and, Fowles suggests, that period of history” (173). Her problem with it is that intellectual and literary self-consciousness ultimately undermine the novel’s realist aspects; they do not work well together. Her emphasis is emphatically not on the contradictions between self-consciousness and the realist mode, but on their potential to act as counterweights to one another and to thus produce a more roundly satisfying novel.

It is no surprise that the usual approach to Byatt’s Victorian romance is to point out that its apparent postmodernism is belied by her commitment to a coherent narrative structure. Commentators variously oppose the novel’s

postmodernist gestures and strategies to its “modernism” or its “Victorianism” (Bronfen 1996; Buxton 1996; Holmes 1994; Hullbert 1993; Kaiser 1991; Kelly 1996; Shiller 1997; Shinn 1995; Yelin 1992). This has been a fruitful approach and has produced a number of engaging analyses, most particularly those by Jackie Buxton, Elisabeth Bronfen, and Frederick Holmes. Indeed, *Possession* seems to present somewhat of a challenge for reviewers and scholars keen to classify it. Danny Karlin remarks that “[t]he book’s genre is hard to pin down” (1990, 17) and a number of critics have identified it as an example of a new type or genre of novel. In her essay about *Possession* Thelma Shinn coins the term “meronymic novel” to “describe novels which seek to balance and encompass seeming contradictions in style and in content” (1995, 164). Dana Shiller makes similar claims with her term, “neo-Victorian novel,” which she defines as a subset of the historical novel “at once characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel” (1997, 1). Del Ivan Janik’s classification of *Possession* shifts the emphasis somewhat and is certainly more interesting for it. He singles out *Possession* as the clearest example of a new type of English historical novel which he argues emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Janik cites *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as a key precursor of the new historical novel and discusses novels by Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro and Peter Ackroyd as examples of the trend. Like Shinn and Shiller, Janik notes that *Possession* and other books like it are only inadequately described by monikers like “modernist” and “postmodernist” because of the extent to which they employ devices and strategies proper to both literary approaches. He remarks further that *Possession* has “all the earmarks of a Victorian ‘good read’” (1995, 162). Rather than dwell on the questions of contradiction and balance which such an observation usually raises Janik expressly dismisses the usefulness of classifying these novels according to their predominant literary devices and strategies. More importantly for Janik, what they share is “an affirmation of the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary existence” (162). He writes that this new type of historical novel is “characterized by a foregrounding of the historical consciousness, most often through a dual or even multiple focus on the fictional present and one or more crucial ‘pasts’” (161). Like Shinn and Shiller, Janik is keen to distinguish *Possession*, to make claims about the ways in which this book does something different or new in its treatment of the past and, indeed, of the present. In contrast, my focus is on the ways in which *Possession* is anything but remarkable in this regard. I argue that both Byatt’s use of certain literary strategies and devices to propel a fairly straightforward heterosexual romance plot and her treatment of history are entirely conventional. My objective is to emphasise the similarities, rather than the differences, between *Possession* and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.

Jackie Buxton goes considerably further than most critics in her comparison of Byatt’s historical romance with Fowles’s when she cites a number

of scenes in *Possession* as direct evidence of “postmodernist hat-tipping” to Fowles. She identifies “a young man with a hammer and sack ... busy chipping away at the rock-face” (1996, 269), when Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey visit the Yorkshire coast, as an “intertextual transposition of Charles Smithson” (218). Most interestingly, however, she points out a parallel between the narrator’s famous intrusion into Charles’s train compartment towards the end of the *French Lieutenant’s Woman* and Byatt’s chapter in which an omniscient narrator tells the story of Roland Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte’s journey to Yorkshire. As Buxton notes, this episode represents an important break from the twentieth-century perspective which has been maintained to this point. She writes:

The poets are introduced through the speculations of a “hypothetical observer” who studiously documents their appearance and demeanour in an attempt to discern their relationship. Implicitly the reader (and the writer) is that observer, projected into the novel as a fellow traveller. Although certainly not as emphatically authorial as John Fowles’s intrusion, the situation, description and tone of this episode echoes Fowles’s embodied entrance into his own fiction. (208)

While I am persuaded that there is a correspondence between these two episodes, I am not convinced by the key claim of Buxton’s comparative analysis. Byatt does not so much repeat Fowles’s approach as take issue with it.

In *On Histories and Stories* Byatt makes explicit the opposition between her version of a nineteenth-century narrator and Fowles’s:

Fowles has said that the nineteenth-century narrator was assuming the omniscience of a god. I think rather the opposite is the case—this kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and inner life of characters—as well as providing a Greek chorus—than any first-person mimicry. In *Possession* I used this kind of narrator deliberately three times in the historical narrative—always to tell what the historians and biographers of my fiction never discovered, always to heighten the reader’s imaginative entry into the world of the text. (2001, 56)

Byatt’s switch to omniscient “Victorian” storytelling promises the very coherence Fowles rejects. Fowles uses his narrator to unsettle readers’ expectations of narrative closure. His intrusion on the scene expressly reminds readers that the narrative reality is an artfully contrived fiction. The aim of the episode on the train is to distance readers from the text. In contrast, Byatt works to bring us closer. Her “observer” operates as a vehicle for the readers to institute themselves in the romance, to experience imaginatively the drama of the fictional past. The story of Ash and LaMotte’s trip to Yorkshire is strewn with references to their pasts and their futures; it issues a promise to readers that there will be an ending to their romance.

Certain key storytelling aims and priorities evident in *Possession* are clearly opposed to those of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. There are, however, significant structural similarities between them. My comparison of the characterisation and narrative function of Sarah Woodruff and Christabel

LaMotte both draws attention to their common paradigmatic structure and reveals a deeper shared allegiance to the tenets and motives of heterosexual hegemony.

“RE-ENGENDERING . . . THE HISTORICAL PAST AS  
ROMANCE”: A COMPARISON OF SARAH WOODRUFF  
AND CHRISTABEL LAMOTTE

The first epigraph to *Possession* is a passage from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*. It concludes: “The point of view within which this tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us.” It goes without saying that *Possession* is also a romance because it tells a love story. One of my aims is to tease out the connections between these two senses of *Possession*’s subtitle: “A Romance.” My hypothesis is that there exists a mutual dependency between these two aspects of the book—its impulse to connect the present and the past and its telling of a love story—which is crucial to Byatt’s project (just as it is to Fowles’s). The question of gender is central to my analysis of both texts.

Characters like Sarah Woodruff and Christabel LaMotte enable the kind of negotiation of the past and the present which Fowles and Byatt offer. Through their representation as both historical and outside of history these characters provide the conduit, so to speak, for the elaborate to-ing and fro-ing between the Victorian age and the latter half of the twentieth century which is central to both novels. The double aspect of these characters depends on allegorical stereotyping of women as both “mystery” and “truth.” They enable, in Diane Elam’s words, “a re-engendering of the historical past as romance” (1992, 16). Both *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and *Possession* use the character of a woman from the past to tell a certain type of historical fiction—one which can only imagine history through the framework of a heterosexual love story.

Sarah Woodruff is an historical character, and yet history is irrelevant to her characterisation: “Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them” (1987, 85). In the introduction to “Notes on an Unfinished Novel,” John Fowles tells of the “pregnant female image” (1977, 137) which inspired him to write *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*:

The woman had no face, no particular degree of sexuality. But she was Victorian; and since I always saw her in the same static long shot, with her back turned, she represented a reproach on the Victorian age. An out-cast. I didn’t know her crime, but I wished to protect her. That is, I began to fall in love with her. Or with her stance. I don’t know which. (136)

There is a telling slippage between the first two sentences of this passage: the woman has “no particular degree of sexuality,” *but* she is Victorian, a description which cannot help but invoke the question of sexuality. The force

of that “but” is precisely qualificatory: it brings into play a discourse of “negative” sexuality; “Victorianness” in what Fowles’s narrator calls its “derogatory sense.” (1987, 234) Post-Foucault, we are in familiar territory here. Fowles’s rhetorical manoeuvre is enabled by the “repressive hypothesis,” first defined by Foucault in Part One of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: “We ‘Other Victorians’”* (1990, 1–13). Fowles characterises the woman on the quay as an “outcast,” rebuked by but also rebuking Victorian society. The rhetoric of repression which produces and sustains this description of a cast-out Victorian woman is, despite Fowles’s statement to the contrary (“I didn’t know her crime, but I wished to protect her”), circumscribed by the sexual. To this extent, the nature of her crime is an open secret. This scene is a snapshot of what Fowles would call the “hypocrisy” of Victorian sexuality.

The “Victorian age” in this novel describes, quite simply, the “age of repression” (Foucault 1990, 5); in a sense, the ontological link between sex and repression “belongs” to the Victorian age. Foucault prefaces his introduction of the term “repressive hypothesis” with a recitation of the discourse which his term describes. He begins: “For a long time, *the story goes*, we supported a Victorian regime and we continue to be dominated by it even today” (3). In simple terms *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* can be read as one such story. Fowles’s tale of Victorian sexuality, of the relationship between Victorian and contemporary sexuality depends upon the repressive hypothesis in order to make sense. Foucault suggests that we must “ask why we burden ourselves today with so much guilt for having once made sex a sin. What paths have brought us to the point where we are ‘at fault’ with respect to our own sex? And how have we come to be a civilization so peculiar as to tell itself that, through an abuse of power which has not ended, it has long ‘sinned’ against sex?” (9) Barry Olshen writes that “heterosexual love and the nature of freedom are the thematic centers of all [Fowles’s] work” (1978, 14). It is here that the link between these two themes comes into focus. Foucault writes: “And the sexual cause—the demand for sexual freedom, but also for the knowledge to be gained from sex, and the right to speak about it—becomes legitimately associated with the honor of a political cause: sex too is placed on the agenda for the future” (1990, 6). To a certain extent, it is Sarah’s sexuality which acts as a catalyst for Charles’s liberation from the bounds of Victorian propriety by the end of the novel. When they first kiss, the narrator remarks that “[w]hat lay behind them did not matter. The moment overcame the age” (217). The repressive hypothesis produces the very rhetoric which enables and sustains this narrative trajectory. The novel’s preoccupation with the question of individual freedom depends upon an assumption that sex and freedom are ontologically linked. (This is, of course the flip-side to the sex/repression conjunction.)

By implication then, the sexuality of the woman in Fowles’s vision is not so much of no particular consequence, as it is at once “illegitimate” and

somehow “progressive.” In “We ‘Other Victorians,’” Foucault writes:

If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and the hysteric—those “other Victorians,” as Steven Marcus would say—seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of the things that are counted. (1990, 4)

It is precisely Sarah’s improper “sexuality” which disturbs and challenges Victorian propriety. Further, the brothel and the asylum are the very sites which both organise and threaten to contain Sarah’s scandalous behaviour—her “shame.” From the perspective of the “respectable” residents of Lyme Regis, Mrs Poulteney and Dr Grogan for example, her insistence on displaying rather than hiding her shame means that she must be either mad or a whore. Sarah is characterised as an “other Victorian” in two senses. First, she is an “improper” Victorian. She frequents precisely those places where a “proper” woman would not be seen: most notably Ware Commons, that “running sore” (81) on the outskirts of Lyme Regis of which it “is sufficient to say that among the more respectable townfolk one only had to speak of a boy or girl as ‘one of the Ware Commons kind’ to tar them for life. The boy must henceforth be a satyr; and the girl, a hedge-prostitute” (81); and Exeter, “notoriously a place to hide, . . . [a] safe sanctuar[y] from the stern moral tide that swept elsewhere through the life of the country” (238). In this sense, Sarah belongs to the Victorian age as a necessary foil to propriety. She is the improper figure without whom the notion of a proper Victorian would not make sense. She occupies the constitutive outside of normative society; throughout the novel, her movements map the relationship between the inside and the outside, the centre and the margins. Both literally and symbolically, Sarah frequents those places which lie outside the bounds of proper society. She must, however, be seen to occupy these sites in order for the narrative to proceed in the way that it does. That Sarah quite deliberately displays her preference for the margins of society is central to my reading of this novel. In a second sense, Sarah does not “belong” to the Victorian age but rather exceeds it; she is beyond her time and hence an other Victorian in the sense that she is *not* Victorian. It is precisely the dispersal of the figure of woman across time that makes this second sense possible. In terms of the novel’s own rhetoric, history cannot contain Sarah; she stands outside of her age as a critical observer.

Sarah’s appearance on the quay at the conclusion of Chapter One initiates the heterosexual romance narrative; she is the “figure from myth” who calls forth the romantic speech act:

But where the telescopist would have been at sea himself was with the other figure on that sombre curving mole. It stood right at the seaward-

most end, apparently leaning against an old cannon—barrel up—ended as a bollard. Its clothes were black. The wind moved them, but the figure stood motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day. (9)

What one cannot help but notice about this figure is the extent to which it does not quite belong in its historical setting; it is not a “proper” provincial Victorian. Unlike the other two figures on the Cobb, a pair about whom “a person of curiosity could have at once deduced strong probabilities” (7), this character is marked by its improbability, its strangeness. She is something out of order on the landscape. Despite the lack of a gendered pronoun, I would argue that this figure is absolutely gendered. The passage above follows detailed descriptions of a young lady and gentleman walking down the quay, or at least detailed descriptions of their clothing and its suitability according to the fashions of the age. In contrast, however, this other figure is unclothed and apparently unable to be “read” according to the customs of the day. The “static long shot” (Fowles 1977, 136) of Sarah standing at the end of the quay which introduces this novel only has such semantic and narrative force because we know that this well-dressed couple are walking along the Cobb towards her.

Having anticipated the novel’s opening scenes in “Notes,” Fowles jumps immediately to the question of how to represent two Victorians in bed. The picture of a man who “walks down the quay and sees that mysterious back, feminine, silent . . . turned to the horizon,” leads to the question of “how they made love, what they said to each other in their most intimate moments, what they felt then” (141). Fowles confides that trying to write the sex scene between these two characters was like trying to write science fiction. In order for Fowles to eventually bring this scene off Sarah must be something other than Victorian (or an “other” Victorian) from the very outset. Ernestina, however, the properly dressed (and hence “proper”) Victorian woman cannot phrase romance for Charles. Instead, these early chapters seal her fate. Rather than inspiring love in her fiancé, she will present an obstacle to his desire for Sarah. Ernestina represents a threat to romance. She is the mundane and hence absolutely knowable woman (the truly repressed Victorian woman) who will stand as a foil for the mysterious and unknowable Sarah. Unlike Sarah, Ernestina has “exactly the right face for her age” (1987, 27). She is, in the terms of the novel, absolutely representable as a “Victorian.” In his book, *The Romances of John Fowles*, Simon Loveday writes: “A male writer creating female characters is faced with a logical problem . . . , since his characters will have depths he himself cannot plumb.” He goes on to applaud Fowles’s characterisation of Sarah as inscrutable and thus unrepresentable as an “ingenious solution to this problem” (1985, 60). What Loveday simply fails to acknowledge is that other female characters, most particularly Ernestina, are absolutely knowable: they are mundane (Ernestina, Mrs Tranter) or con-

temptible (Mrs Poulteney) precisely in their opposition to Sarah.

Importantly, Ernestina is literally too “short-sighted” to see anything but a “dark shape” at the end of the quay, so can only guess who the figure might be from her knowledge of Lyme Regis gossip. Sarah’s gaze, however, is “aimed like a rifle at the farthest horizon” (13). Whereas Ernestina is characterised by a failure to see things accurately, Sarah is credited with a special type and potency of vision. When she turns towards Charles, she looks “through” rather than at him. She is, by implication, not quite there. Sarah’s preoccupation with the horizon in this scene brings about the spatial and temporal collapse according to which she belongs to both another place and another time, a collapse which is also enacted by a “true” Victorian’s inability to see her as anything but an indistinct figure on the horizon. The heavily symbolic exchange between Charles and Sarah which begins with her distracted look is wordless; they stare at one another. A look which lasts “two or three seconds at the most” (13) establishes an intensely affective relationship between Charles and Sarah which excludes Ernestina. The description of Charles and Sarah’s exchange of looks maps the affective and narratological relationships between the three central characters. Further, this episode highlights the extent to which these three characters have significantly different relationships from those expected by what the narrator refers to again and again as “their age.”

In her book, *Romancing the Postmodern*, Diane Elam insists on the centrality of the “figure of woman; for within the postmodern romance the figure of woman is what allows the work of re-membering to be performed” (1992, 16). Elam’s argument is a fascinating one to bring to bear on Fowles’s novel and the representation of its title character. She writes:

Post-modernity’s remembering of the past is performed through a re-engendering of the historical past as romance. That is to say, the figure of woman is what allows the past to be represented (via the engendering of romance), but she is also the figure whose very inscription reveals, through the play of gender, the impossibility of accurate and complete representation. (16)

For Elam, postmodern fiction’s negotiation with the past is enabled by inhabiting the tropes and adopting the terms of romance. That is to say, romance—whose metonymic figure is (a mysterious) “woman”—provides the means by which postmodernity can re-present the past. Sarah Woodruff is precisely the “figure of woman” who enables Fowles’s negotiation of the past and the present, his ironic intertexts, and unreliable narration—those features of the novel most often cited as evidence of his literary accomplishment and his postmodernism. Elam’s claim that the “figure of woman,” enables postmodern negotiations of literature and history allows us to contextualise both Fowles’s and Byatt’s novels in more productive ways than an emphasis on the specialness or uniqueness of their projects does: “Woman, in a sense, phrases history and its uncertainty in her simultaneous status as excluded

from history and yet most fiercely historical” (17).

Anita Brookner writes “Christabel is an altogether grittier Victorian subject [than Randolph Henry Ash], and here the comparison with *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is valid, for Christabel is passionate, secretive, virtuous, pure and slightly mad” (1990). Like Sarah Woodruff, Christabel is less properly “Victorian” than her lover however the similarities between them run somewhat deeper than shared personality traits. An extract from fictional poet Randolph Henry Ash’s poem, *The Garden of Proserpina*, provides the epigraph for *Possession’s* first chapter. It begins:

These things are there. The garden and the tree  
The serpent at its root, the fruit of gold  
The woman in the shadow of the boughs  
The running water and the grassy space.  
They are and were there.

In fact, both novels begin with a poetic image of an ever-present and “shadowy” woman. Fowles uses an extract from Thomas Hardy’s “The Riddle” as the epigraph for its first chapter. The invocation of the continuous present in this context begins the very process of “en-gendering” which Elam describes—the woman is and was there. Both the Hardy verse and this one from Ash are suggestive of Sarah and Christabel’s place and function in these historical fictions. Like Sarah before her, Christabel is “[t]he woman in the shadow” who stands at the centre of Byatt’s tale of the impact of the past on the present. The role of a central female character such as Sarah or Christabel is to facilitate the temporal and spatial bridgework which supports the historical novel’s engagement with the past.

Reviewer Elaine Feinstein is certainly right when she writes that “it is the characterisation of Christabel Lamotte that is central” (sic). She elaborates on this point:

Lamotte’s passion for the making of poems gives her the ability to live a withdrawn life which rewards her with a freedom women in the 20th century hardly recognise. She and her companion would inevitably these days have been mistaken for Lesbian. Indeed we never do discover the full nature of her relationship with poor Blanche Glover, who is driven to suicide when Lamotte departs with Ash (sic). (1990)

In his review, Richard Jenkyn’s describes Byatt’s portrayal of Christabel as a “triumph”:

We feel her both as a child of her time and as an individual: in her letters we meet a keen intelligence wrestling with some awkwardness and angularity, in her verse a passionate reticence, a quirky lyricism, nervous but refined. But Byatt is wise enough not to tell us everything; Christabel keeps some of her secrets, including the nature of her feelings for Blanche Glover, and that is as it should be. (1990)

Feinstein and Jenkyns highlight two of the most important aspects of Christabel’s character: she is and is not of her time, just as she is and is not a lesbian. Both reviewers read with the text in their appraisal of Christabel’s impressive literary sensibility and in their awkward dismissal of lesbianism.

Feinstein and Jenkyn's indication that Christabel (like Sarah) stands out in her time is easily supported with evidence from the text. Instead, I want to focus on the second aspect of Christabel's character which Feinstein and Jenkyn's highlight and, in so doing, to suggest a link between her purported lesbianism and her capacity to hold time. Feinstein's certainty that, if they were alive today, Christabel and Blanche would be "mistaken" for lesbians is based on prevailing myths about the difference between Victorian and twentieth-century sexuality which also inform Fowles's novel. We would misrecognise them as lovers, Feinstein assumes, because we belong to an age which is distinguished from theirs precisely by our attitudes to sex and sexuality; twentieth-century prurience is contrasted to nineteenth-century innocence. Fowles's narrator warns us against making a similar mistake about Sarah when she is described sleeping with her arms around Mrs Poulteney's maid, Millie: "A thought has swept into your mind; but you forget we are in the year 1867 . . . some vices were then so unnatural that they did not exist" (137). Nevertheless, when Charles finds Sarah living in Christina Rossetti's house at the end of the novel, he imagines the very possibility which the narrator has so emphatically denied: "What new enormity was threatened now! Another woman, who knew and understood her better than . . . this house inhabited by . . . he dared not say to himself" (389). The narrator's earlier insistence that his nineteenth-century characters are incapable of such thoughts is belied by Charles's fears. There is a similar contradiction or slippage in Feinstein's commentary on *Possession* and indeed in the novel itself: we would be wrong to think of Blanche and Christabel as lesbians, and yet she says that we cannot be certain otherwise. Just as readers of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are chastised for inappropriate and anachronistic suspicions about Sarah only to be reminded of them later on, so too Byatt allows but refuses to dwell on the possibility that Christabel and Blanche's relationship is sexual. Jenkyns judgement "that is as it should be" is true to *Possession's* prevailing temper and tone. As Judith Buxton points out, "*Possession* is hardly a subversive text; indeed its ideology is a heterosexual, humanist one" (1996, 216). It is important not to underestimate or downplay the significance of a politics of heterosexuality to the storytelling and proselytizing priorities of this novel, and to its underlying and related narrative structure.

Buxton writes that Byatt is "(coily?) silent on the exact details of the purportedly lesbian nature of Blanche Glover's relationship with Christabel LaMotte" (216). I do not believe that there is anything coy in Byatt's treatment of lesbianism in this book, neither in the representation of Blanche Glover nor, amongst the contemporary characters, in the portrayal of Leonora Stern. In the ideological terms of this novel, lesbianism is an aberration; it is an interruption or an obstacle to the proper course of narrative and of history which must be removed. Buxton points out that whereas the message of this book seems to be that "[w]e *can* know everything," (216) the only Victorian character about whom we are not told all is Blanche Glover. She is, I think,

written in simply to be written out; lesbianism is not simply left out of this text, but is raised as a possibility to be explicitly rejected.

The morning after they first have sex, Ash washes blood from his thighs. Like Charles Smithson, although for different reasons and less violently, Ash is unsettled by the physical evidence of his lover's virginity:

He had thought, the ultimate things, she did *not* know, and here was ancient proof. He stood, sponge in hand, and puzzled over her. Such delicate skills, such informed desire, and yet a virgin. There were possibilities, of which the most obvious to him was slightly repugnant, and then, when he thought about it with determination, interesting, too. He could never ask. To show speculation, or even curiosity, would be to lose her. Then and there. He knew that, without thinking. It was like Melusina's prohibition, and no narrative bound him, unlike the unfortunate Raimondin, to exhibit indiscreet curiosity. He liked to know everything he could—even this—but he knew better than to be curious, he told himself, about things he could not hope to know. (285)

Ash's "love for this woman, known intimately and not at all was voracious for information" (277), but he must not seek an explanation for the incongruity of Christabel's virginity and her apparent sexual experience. He knows without thinking that to do so would be to end their romance. He compares himself to Raimondin, the ill-fated hero of the legend of Melusina about which Christabel writes an epic poem. The most important point of this intra-textual allusion is not that Ash is different to Raimondin, but that he is like him. Ash is similarly forbidden from pursuing his lover's secrets: the difference is his obedience to the perceived authority. Ash also refers to this aspect of the legend in a letter to Christabel in which he confesses that he has broken an "unspoken spell of prohibition" by riding near her cottage in Richmond Park: "Now on the level of tales, you know, all prohibitions are made only to be broken, must be broken—as is indeed instanced in your own Melusina with striking ill-luck to the disobedient knight" (181). Why cannot he use the same logic to justify breaking the prohibition against homosexuality, or rather against knowing about it? Why does the suggestion of lesbianism particularly compel him to forget rather than follow his desire to know everything about Christabel? These are important questions which cannot be answered simply by echoing Fowles's insistence on the impossibility of Victorian lesbianism. Ash cannot pursue the truth about Christabel's relationship with Blanche Glover because to do so would be to risk disrupting, if not destroying, the proper narrative progression of heterosexual romance by looking too deeply into what is, by definition, improper to it.

Just before the Victorian lovers spend their first night together, Ash remembers the moment which had been his "touchstone" (282). As a young boy he read *Roderick Random*, an English book in which "[t]here had been a happy ending. At the end, the hero had been left at the bedroom door by the writer, and then let in, as a kind of *post scriptum*. And She—he forgot her

name, some Celia or Sophia, some characterless embodiment of physical and spiritual perfection, or more accurately of the male imagination—She had appeared in a silk sack with her limbs glimmering through it and had then lifted this over her head and had turned to hero and reader, and had left the rest, the promise to them” (282). Judith Buxton notes that the “erotics of reading” which *Possession* presents is a “heterosexually-inflected one” (1996, 217). She does not elaborate on this point, but it is certainly worth dwelling on. This passage takes for granted the formative impact of fictions. It represents a neat model of the kind of deeply involved reading experience which Byatt cherishes by a straightforward identification of the male reader with the hero and his desire for the heroine. The object of reading (romance) is thus aligned with the object of love; *Roderick Random*'s ideal heroine, Christabel LaMotte and the abstract promise of romance are mapped one over the other. *Roderick Random* helps to give Ash's life meaning and purpose. He uses his memory of it to reflect on and explain his desire for Christabel, by an imaginative pairing of the two of them with the hero and heroine of *Roderick Random*. Further, we read this passage in the context of a richly intertextual and self-reflective novel and as just one of its copious references to the patterns and repetitions of mythical, popular and literary romances. It points, therefore, not just to the citationality of love and desire, but to the performative force of romance fictions and of texts more generally. *Possession* illustrates Byatt's claim that “the stories we tell about ourselves take form from the larger paradigmatic narratives we inhabit” (2001, 65).

Aware that the woman waiting for him upstairs is also a “reader” (282), and must, he assumes, interpret the world—as he does—through a complicated mesh of literary references, Ash wonders how she sees him. She rebuts his assertion that her decision to live as his wife when in Yorkshire is generous with the statement, “This is necessity” (276). The meaning of this claim is not explained simply by the intensity of her passion for him—although that is of course important—but by the idea that they are caught up in a *narrative*, “gripped by necessity” (279). In one sense, she is talking about fate, but I want to suggest that something more complicated and altogether more interesting is also going on here. Christabel says, “This is where I have always been coming to. Since my time began. And when I go away from here, this will be the midpoint, to which everything ran, before, and *from* which everything will run” (284). Ash sees her, or the experience of her, in equivalent terms. Focusing on Christabel's waist, he imagines her as the embodiment of time: “She held his time, she contained his past and his future, both now cramped together, with such ferocity and such gentleness, into this small circumference” (287). By figuring Christabel's body as a kind of hour-glass, alluding to her pregnancy and forecasting her ancestral relationship to Maud, this episode mobilises a metaphoric of reproduction which is crucial to the novel's underlying fantasy of heterosexual continuity, coherence and *truth*.

Sarah's body is also used to "hold" time in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—both for Charles Smithson and in a deeper, symbolic sense. For Charles, she becomes "the symbol around which had accreted all his lost possibilities" (288); she represents his imagined future. When they have sex, he "strained that body into his . . . with all the hunger of a long frustration—not merely sexual, for a whole ungovernable torrent of things banned, romance, adventure, sin, madness, animality" (304). The narrator explains the distinction between Charles and Sarah in terms of their Victorianism. Whereas Charles, characterised by his "admixture of irony and convention" "stands truly for his age," Sarah's qualities of "passion and imagination" are "banned by the epoch" (165). The narrator asks us to: "See him for what he was: a man struggling to overcome history. And even though he does not realize it" (257). Sarah embodies Charles's potential; she represents the possibility of escape not just from marriage to Ernestina Freeman, but from the "vast pressures of his age" (258). The novel's alternative endings are not genuine alternatives as such in this regard. In the first (or "happy ending"), Charles finds Sarah living in the Rossetti's house with their daughter, Lalage. He stares at them: "at hazard, that element the human mentality so habitually disregards, dismisses to the lumber-room of myth, made flesh in this figure, this double figure before him" (392). In the second ending, it is not clear whether the little girl is Sarah's, but there is a birth: "He left the house. And at the gate, the future made present, found he did not know where to go. It was as if he found himself reborn, though with all his adult faculties and memories. But with the baby's helplessness—all to be recommenced, all to be learnt again!" (398). Both novels use a Victorian (or "other Victorian") heroine to romance history, or, more accurately, to heterosexualise the passage of (and our relationship to) history.

## NOTES

1. See Brookner 1990; Buxton 1996, 208; Giobbi 1994, 47–48; Holmes 1994, 319–320; Hulbert 1993, 56; Janik 1995, 181, 187; Kelly 1996, xii; Lehmann-Haupt 1990; Shiller 1997; Stout 1991, 13; Thurman 1990, 151; Todd 1994, 104.
2. This comparative analysis is part of a much longer study in which I analyse both novels in considerable depth. The purpose of this article is to focus on the links between the books and the depiction of their nineteenth-century heroines (Fletcher 2002).

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