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# Dispossessing Femininity in Byatt's *Possession*

Jenna Miller

A.S. Byatt's best-selling 1990 novel *Possession* follows the character of Roland Michell, an intelligent but struggling academic who has devoted his life and studies to the brilliant Victorian author, Randolph Ash. Roland joins forces with Maud Bailey, an expert on a similarly talented but under-recognized Victorian author Christabel LaMotte,<sup>1</sup> in order to better study the relationships between LaMotte, Ash, and Ash's wife, Ellen. Roland's and Maud's literary studies develop along with their relationship, but the more the two of them learn about the relationship between Ash and Christabel, the more they discover that the truth about their Victorian counterparts is both more complex and immediate than they had expected.

Because of its complicated structure and multi-layered themes, *Possession* has been read by critics as a feminist text in a number of ways. Jane Campbell points out that *Possession* invites a feminist reading because "Byatt both uses and subverts romance; she uses the genre to suggest ways of transcending the assumptions of patriarchy....The novel looks at right and wrong ways to possess in personal relationships" (108). As Roland and Maud increase their collaboration to discover the truth about their Victorian counterparts, authors Ash and Christabel, they become romantically involved, each ultimately retaining both independence and creative autonomy. Some critics have highlighted Byatt's simultaneous twisting and questioning preconceptions about femininity in the Victorian period and modern times by juxtaposing the sexual frankness of Victorian writer Christabel with the "beauty and...unapproachable frigidity" of Maud, the primary modern female character (Hart 207). Many have also focused on how *Possession* validates female homosexuality by "resuscitating lesbian visibility," contending that *Possession* authenticates homosexuality as a viable way of life for both modern and Victorian

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: The reader may note that some characters in this paper are referenced by first names and others by last names. The author has used the names as they appear in *Possession*.

women (Carroll 362). Other critics, however, argue that Byatt “paints a credible satire of the academic world, as well as overzealous feminists” and criticizes lesbianism through her portrayal of Leonora, a modern, competitive expert on LaMotte, who “wears too much jewelry, over-interprets LaMotte’s works to suit her own political dogma, and tries to seduce anything in her path” (Cheng 18).

As noted by critics, Byatt uses many of her female characters to raise pressing questions about femininity. For example, “Byatt has Christabel address both the issue of male construction of femaleness and the question of woman-in-herself,” as Christabel challenges both the patriarchal structure of her society and notions about femininity itself (Campbell 118). And throughout the book, Byatt “shows women’s longing to live an autonomous, self-sufficient life without dependence on men” and “explores the ambiguities of freedom for creative women,” addressing the difficulties faced by women in the academic and artistic spheres during the Victorian period as well as today (121). Christabel is often recognized “as a victim of Victorian repression and stereotyping” as well as a character who affirms “qualities of strength, insight, and versatility that persist throughout the generations” (121).

One lens more or less neglected by critics, however, is the personal rejection, embracement, or augmentation of typical ideas about femininity by the primary female characters in the book. Byatt utilizes Christabel as well as nearly every female character in *Possession* to critique the widespread conception that, in order to be successful, a woman must separate herself from the rest of her gender

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by shedding her femininity. Through her female characters, Byatt demonstrates why the apparent necessity of discarding femininity to achieve success exists, evidences the ways in which this is a pernicious perception, and shows that this belief continues to the present day. Specifically, Byatt uses strong, independent female characters,

chiefly Christabel and Maud, to point out how competent, successful women often reject femininity and the reasons they feel the need to do so. Inversely, she also focuses on other female characters who embrace femininity to varying degrees, namely Val and Ellen, to reveal the negative effects that emerge when women do accept a feminine extreme.

Throughout her letters to Ash, Christabel appears dismissive, even disgusted, in her attitudes towards her own sex. “She liked things women like—pretty things—she was no reader,” assigning other women traits she cannot sympathize with herself (Byatt 191). Christabel simultaneously casts a typical woman as a frivolous being and separates herself from the label; she obviously self-identifies as a reader, or a scholar, rather than a typical woman. Later, her attitudes toward

women surface again in the note that her own “journal must be free from the repetitious vapours and ecstatic sighing of commonplace girls with commonplace feelings” (369). Clearly, Christabel distinguishes herself as a different variety than these “commonplace girls,” who are overly emotional and silly.

In her self-classification as a thinker and a writer, Christabel also takes means to separate herself from femininity. “I speak to you as I speak to all those who most possess my thoughts—to Shakespeare, to Thomas Browne, to John Donne, to John Keats,” she tells Ash. These sentiments remove her from her gender by suggesting that she holds a place in a member of an elite male class of thinkers and writers (195). She also implies that something about her language and mode of thought is inherently masculine; those she understands best, those whose thought patterns are most similar to hers, and who would understand her best, are men.

Considering the lack of gender equality in the nineteenth century, perhaps it is no wonder that successful women took pains to separate themselves from the general female population. Ash writes, “I know to my own cost the unhappiness that lack of freedom can bring to women—the undesirability, the painfulness, the waste, of the common restrictions placed upon them” (Byatt 203). He refers to the perceptions of “feminine weakness” and “the vulnerability of women” that were commonly accepted facts in the Victorian era; females were widely considered weaker than men not only physically, but socially and mentally (Calder 17). Perhaps as a response to these misogynist beliefs and common restrictions on women and the resulting waste that they produced, even successful women in the Victorian period often subscribed to the “system of sexual privilege based upon women controlling negative qualities conventionally associated with their sex” (David 48). In this light, Christabel’s anti-feminine comments may express her need for artistic self-preservation rather than a deliberate, malicious degradation of her sex.

This strategy of sacrificing femininity for success, though, “seems to leave us with one authentic sex and the other performing as emotional and intellectual transvestite.” The insecurity and cognitive dissonance that remains also seep through Christabel’s writing (David 48). She agonizes, “And shall I give up—so? I who have fought for my autonomy against family and society? No, I will not. In the known purpose of appearing—inconsequential, tergiversatory, infirm of purpose, and feminine—I ask you—is it possible for you to walk in Richmond Park?” (Byatt 208). These lines, fraught with emotion, carry implications about Christabel’s beliefs and anxieties about femininity. Her list-style presentation of derogatory adjectives indicates that she equates a feminine being with one who is also “inconsequential,” “tergiversatory,” (a person who is circumlocutory or evasive), and weak, or “infirm of purpose” (208). It also reveals Christabel’s deep insecurity about appearing as a stereotypically feminine figure, which she apparently desires to avoid at almost all costs. Judging from her distressed, halting, doubtful language, her anxiousness to avoid appearing “feminine” nearly prevents

her from suggesting a meeting with Ash, who she connects with both intellectually and romantically.

Christabel's anxiety about her femininity also affects her writing. "The Muse has forsaken me—as she may mockingly forsake all Women, who dally with her [*vid*]," Christabel writes, expressing her deep-seated fear that, as a woman, she is somehow less capable of artistic expression (216). Perhaps she has absorbed to some extent the Victorian societal belief that, for women, "the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men—inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength" (Ellis 99). It is also possible that her insecurities stem from "the damaging effects of male literary history on women writers" (Rosenman 70-71). Regardless of the root cause, Christabel feels the need to escape from the restrictions on Victorian women by distinguishing herself as entirely separate from her gender. Despite her efforts in this direction, however, she is still unable to escape her insecurities of being intellectually and socially inferior and thus less capable of producing real and valuable artistic works.

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Anxieties about femininity and the perceived need to cast it off in order to achieve success also persist in the attitudes and behaviors of the modern women in *Possession*. Maud, for example, who most

readers would agree is generally a successful person in her career and (at least by the end of the book) successful in love, also takes measures to avoid appearing feminine. She is typically described with adjectives such as "pointed and sharp" and "severe and preoccupied," descriptive words that contradict a feminine stereotype (238, 519).

Also notable for this discussion, Maud tucks her long, blonde hair, a primal symbol of femininity, "always inside some sort of covering, hidden away" (65). She views her "yellow hair" and "perfectly regular features," or "doll-mask," as an occasional annoyance and even a hindrance to her career (64). She acknowledges that "the doll-mask she saw had nothing to do with her, nothing" and then launches into a short narrative, explaining that "the feminists ...had hissed and cat-called, assuming her crowning glory to be the seductive and marketable product of an inhumanly tested bottle" (64). These experiences cause Maud to wear her hair "almost shaved in her early teaching days, a vulnerable stubble on a white and shivering scalp" (64).

In order to be taken seriously in the literary, academic world, Maud must, or feels that she must, project traits normally associated with masculinity; or, at the very least, Maud feels that she must not come across as overtly feminine. And although her friend Fergus employs a tirade of poetic manipulation to successfully persuade Maud to grow out her hair, her compulsion to keep it covered after it grows

continues. Essentially, Maud stifles and denies her femininity in the modern age in similar ways as Christabel denies it in Victorian times. Both women separate themselves from the rest of their sex for similar reasons; both yearn to be taken seriously in the literary, academic world, unhampered by stereotypes associated with their gender, and both seem to feel it is impossible to do so while being identified as a typically feminine figure.

The inverse relationship between observable feminine characteristics and the capacity for success is further illustrated in the increasing femininity of Byatt's character, Val. Initially, although Val does not necessarily come across as masculine, she also doesn't seem to be associated with femininity in any particular way. "In the early days she had lots of quiet opinions," a "rough voice gentled, between London and Liverpool," "expected no one to approach and invited no one," and "projected a sort of calm, a lack of strife" (15). Beyond noting that Val had "a soft, brown uncertain look," her physical appearance at this stage lacks commentary; rather, her strength, work ethic, and intelligence is emphasized; "she made [Roland] always say what he thought, she argued points, she worried constantly about whether she was, whether they both were, working hard enough" (15).

In these early days, Roland and Val work within an unequivocally equal partnership. "They signed up for the same courses and joined the same society; they sat together in seminars and went together to the Nation Film Theatre; they had sex together and moved together into a one-roomed flat in their second year." In short, they seem to do and share everything together, and financial and domestic responsibilities are no exception to their exhaustive equality; "they lived frugally off a diet of porridge and lentils and beans and yogurt...they shared book-buying; they were both entirely confined to their grants" (15).

The dynamics of Roland's and Val's relationship shift, however, and their equality comes to an end. "Roland noticed, as he himself, had his success, Val said less and less, and when she argued, offered him increasingly his own ideas" (16). Apparently discouraged by failures in the academic world, Val abandons her literary career in order to "acquire an IBM golfball typewriter and do academic typing at home in the evenings and various well-paid temping jobs during the day" (17). Interestingly, at the same time that she resigns herself to a life "to which she almost never referred without the adjective 'menial,'" Val also acquires a more stereotypically but unarguably feminine personae (17). Almost immediately following her abandonment of her career in the academic world, she starts wearing "long crepey shirts" or "a tight black skirt and a black jacket with padded shoulders over a pink silk shirt," crimson nails, and high heels (18). Val becomes "carefully made up with pink and brown eyeshadow, brushed blusher along the cheekbone and plummy lips" (18). Perhaps most notable is the comparison between Roland and Val after she begins her "menial" life; while Roland heads off to pursue his literary passions, Val is "still applying her [new] workday face" (27).

Val's decline in both successfulness and attractiveness to Roland coincide almost perfectly with her acquisition of characteristics and behavior traditionally identified as feminine. Not only does she begin putting more effort into dressing herself, but also she begins filling a role closer to that of a domestic housewife than an equal partner. Instead of Roland and Val living frugally off simple foods together, Val assumes the cooking responsibilities and starts making "complicated" meals, like "grilled marinated lamb, ratatouille, and hot Greek bread" (22). And as she becomes more domestic and feminine, she moves away from tenaciously arguing her quiet opinions toward discarding opinions altogether. "I don't think anything. It's not my place to think anything," she says to Roland (238). Roland himself notes the change, lamenting that the "real Val" was "lost, transmuted, in abeyance" (238). It is no coincidence to Byatt that Val loses her opinionated voice at the same time she begins embracing high heels, heavy makeup, and other physical, shallow, but highly recognizable symbols of femininity.

The only female character who appears to embrace typical femininity wholeheartedly is Ellen, Randolph Ash's wife, who, despite her lack of children, seems more wrapped up in domestic details than any other female character. Much of her journal consists of reporting the details of her home life: "I have had a sore throat and violent attacks of sneezing—maybe from all the dust aroused by the cleaning efforts," she records (244). She also reports that "we talked quite girlishly" and worries in writing, "I am unimaginative or too instinctive or intuitive in my trust," almost all qualities which would have been strongly associated with women in Victorian times (245, 243). Further, Ellen does not seem disappointed to be looked at as less intelligent because she is a woman. After playing chess with Herbert, she writes that "he was pleased to tell me that I played very well for a Lady—I was content to accept this, since I won handsomely" (247).

On the other hand, although Ellen accepts her own femininity and place within the domestic sphere, she communicates misgivings that womanhood might be limiting. She reports, "I slept badly and as a result had a strange fragmented dream in which I was playing chess with Herbert Baulk, who had decreed that my Queen could move only one square, as his King did" (248). This is when Ellen's frustration with the patriarchal system seems to emerge, even if only subconsciously; she explains, "I knew there was injustice here but could not in my dreaming folly realize that this was to do with the existence of my King who sat rather large and red on the back line and seemed to be incapacitated" (248). Through the metaphor of the chess game, Ellen notes female oppression, saying, "I could see the moves She should have made, like errors in a complicated pattern of knitting or lace—but she must only lumpishly shuffle back and forth, one square at a time" (248). In fact, Ellen openly indicates the perpetrator, recalling that "Mr. Baulk (always in my dream) said calmly, 'You see I told you could not win,' and I saw it was so, but was unreasonably agitated and desirous above all of my moving my Queen freely across the diagonals" (248). The most convincing piece of evidence that Ellen recognizes the limits placed on her by femininity comes in her commentary at the end of the dream when she notes, "it is odd,

when I think of it, that in chess the female may make the large runs and cross freely in all ways—in life it is much otherwise” (248).

This particular dream of Ellen’s reveals more than anything else in her journals. She resents the injustice of a patriarchal society that dooms her to “lumpishly shuffle back and forth” rather than reaching her true potential. Ellen recognizes, at least subconsciously, that in the patriarchal structure of her society, she simply cannot ultimately win as a woman.

Despite her awareness of the limits placed on her because of her femininity, Ellen does not attempt to separate herself from her gender. She stays immersed in the domestic sphere and seems to identify herself, first and foremost, as a famous poet’s wife, an idea touched on by Maud, who points out, “Look at Dorothy Wordsworth’s marvelous prose—if she had supposed she could be a writer—instead of a sister—what might she not have done? What I want to ask is—why did Ellen write her journal?” (239). Maud makes a cogent point. Ellen writes well and deeply—of humanity, femininity, and religion. She is never recognized for her written work because she does not take the pains to separate herself from her sex and reject femininity. Because Ellen is categorized and perceives herself not as a philosopher, poet, or writer, but as a woman, recognition for her works becomes impossible.

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Through the portrayals of Christabel, Maud, and Val, Byatt points to the irony of feminists who, in their quest for equality, cast off the rest of their gender in an effort to identify themselves as masculine and achieve success. As Lynne Agress notes, they are participating in a society where “women writers and intellectuals use their influence to perpetuate society’s biases against women” (9). However, in the characters of Ellen and Val, Byatt reveals the social risks for those who refused to separate themselves from femininity. Ultimately, *Possession* makes it clear that femininity has not made the progress that most would hope. With complex, realistically conflicted female characters, Byatt asserts that many women still feel stuck in an impossible choice between femininity and success.



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