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Introduction

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Armelle Parey is a senior lecturer at the Université de Caen-Normandie in France. Her interests include narrative endings, memory and rewritings of the past in contemporary English-speaking fiction and in adaptation. She has written numerous articles and co-directed several collections of essays or special issues on the question of endings. She recently edited *Prequels, Coquels and Sequels in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction* (Routledge, 2019) and co-edited *A. S. Byatt, Before and*

After Possession: Recent Critical Approaches (PU de Nancy – Éditions Universitaires de Lorraine, 2018), as well as *Adapting Endings from Book to Screen* (Routledge, 2020). Her monograph on Kate Atkinson's fiction is to be published with Manchester University Press.

Isabelle Roblin is an associate professor emerita at the Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale, specialising in contemporary British literature, and has published many articles on Graham Swift, Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, A. S. Byatt and Ian McEwan among others. She has been working at the same time on the literary and filmic adaptations of novels, writing for example articles on Robert Zemeckis's adaptation of Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump* and Harold Pinter's screenplays of McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* and L. H. Hartley's *The Go-Between*. In 2011, she published a critical study of all of Harold Pinter's screenplays entitled *Harold Pinter: la liberté artistique et ses limites*.

Emilie Walezak is a professor of contemporary British literature at Nantes Université. A specialist of contemporary British women's writing, she has devoted articles to the works of Angela Carter, A. S. Byatt, Sarah Hall, Rose Tremain and Jeanette Winterson. She is the author of *Rose Tremain: A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), and *Rethinking Contemporary British Women's Writing: Realism, Feminism, Materialism* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

A. S. Byatt is an internationally acclaimed English author, mostly known as a novelist, particularly with the Booker Prize winner *Possession* in 1990. However, she is also a prolific short fiction writer even though, contrary to many others (like Kate Atkinson and Ian McEwan for instance), she did not start her literary career with short stories but came to the genre later. In addition to her critical work on the early novels of Iris Murdoch,¹ she had indeed published four novels² and established her reputation by the time she published *Sugar and Other Stories* in

¹ *Degrees of Freedom, the Early Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1969).

² *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), *The Game* (1967), *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (1985).

1987. She then went on to write another four collections of short stories—*The Matisse Stories* (1993), *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003)—as well as novellas, novels and essays over the following thirty years. In 2021, a selection of these stories was re-published in an anthology entitled *Medusa's Ankles*, along with the more recent “Sea Story” initially printed in *The Guardian* in 2013. She has frequently been solicited to appear on the judging panels of short story prizes like the *Sunday Times* short story award or the BBC national short story award. Her interest in the genre is also visible in her editing of *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* in 1998. However, apart from Celia M. Wallhead's 2007 *A. S. Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction*, Byatt's short stories have not been the subject of any book-length study as a coherent whole. A special issue devoted entirely to her work with the short form was thus called for.

Interestingly enough, after the publication of her first collection, Byatt started weaving shorter pieces into her novels. About the fairy tales embedded in *Possession*, she has explained that they “turn the writer into a reader and the reader into a reader of a reading” (“Entretien” 20). Such a *mise en abyme* corresponds to what Byatt has described, in the same interview, as “non-mimetic writing, writing thinking” (13), which contrasts with the realist form of her novels. The purpose of this special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* is precisely to try and establish the distinctiveness of Byatt's short fiction, both in relation to her own production and to the genre.

In her introduction to her selection of stories for *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories*, Byatt states her “dislike” for the usual definitions or traits ascribed to the writing of a short story: “Manuals on how to write short stories, and much criticism, stress unity of form, stress that only one thing should happen, that an episode or incident should be developed or an emotion caught, with no space for digression or change of direction or tone” (xvi). This view originates from Edgar Allan Poe's seminal precepts³ and became the blueprint for short stories with modernists (James Joyce's *Dubliners* being a case in point) but is in fact quite reductive. Furthermore, in a conversation with Cees Nooteboom from 2011, Byatt said that she hated the word “epiphany” which points to the modernist legacy in the apprehension of the short form as a psychological sketch.

Byatt's selection of stories for Oxford University Press deliberately departs from this tradition: “They appear to be one kind of story and mutate into another. They make unexpected twists and twist again. They pack together comedy and tragedy, farce and delicacy, elegance and the grotesque” (xvi). In her own short stories, Byatt also likes to multiply twists and pursue various lines of ideas in one and the same story. Thus, “The Chinese Lobster” is about a discussion of Matisse's use of colour but this evocation of the artist's work also deals with the “dark river of unconnected thought of secret fear, or violence, or bliss, hoped-for or lost, which keeps pace with a flow of talk and is neither seen nor heard” (126).

The issue of length or brevity is often considered as key element in defining a short story (David Malcolm 33). Byatt herself left out a story by Arnold Bennett, “The Death of Simon Fuge” from

³ “We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. . . . having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, [the artist] then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. . . . In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. . . . Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided” (Poe 522).

her anthology, while considering it as a “masterpiece,” on the grounds of its length (55 pages) (“Introduction” xvii). While professing her admiration for Alice Munro’s short stories,⁴ which are often thirty pages long if not fifty (“Too Much Happiness”), Byatt makes a clear distinction within her own short fiction, referring to “Morpho Eugenia” and “The Conjugal Angel” published in *Angels and Insects* (1992) and both well over 100 pages long as “novellas” (*On Histories* 92) and to her other short texts as “stories.”

Byatt is often considered as a high-brow writer partly because her characters are always depicted as reflecting, or she uses an omniscient narrator who discusses philosophical, aesthetic or historical issues, something that is allowed by the space/length of a novel but is not necessarily expected nor easily achieved in a short story. Byatt however considers “short stories as a thinking form” (“Entretien” 13) and transfers this intellectual dimension from the characters in her novels to the very form of her stories. If Byatt made this remark in 1993 while discussing “The Chinese Lobster,” this trait was already featured in the introductory story to her first collection, “Racine and the Tablecloth,” where the main protagonist Emily Bray’s highly literary reflections on the “elaborately manufactured plots of Racine’s plays” are interlaced with considerations on “the intricate skills of embroidering a tablecloth” (Mathews 221). Examples abound throughout her five collections so that this element can be considered as idiosyncratic and contributes to making Byatt’s a distinctive voice in short storytelling.

In her conversation with Cees Nooteboom, Byatt said that “writing a short story is closer to writing a poem than to writing a novel” because “if you get a word or a sentence wrong in a short story, you somehow destroy the whole fabric.” Finding the right word is consistent with her overall preoccupation with precision, especially in her descriptions. Stories give her the opportunity to engage with her favourite ekphrastic and taxonomic activities.

Thus, the length of the short story has contributed to the refinement of Byatt’s art as a wordsmith. Her stories often convey a sense of the ordinary as carefully transformed by craft. Indeed, whether her stories are set in a Chinese restaurant, a hairdresser’s salon or a private home, her descriptions are very attentive and even, some might say, writerly, relying on an abundant but meticulous use of adjectives and nouns, drawing attention to the accuracy of technical words. While her novels correspond to Byatt taking a stand about the representation of reality with “self-conscious realism” as a form of meta-mimesis about the novel form, her stories often provide a “non-mimetic” access point to the artist’s deliberation of writing as artisanship. The first part of this special issue considers more particularly the stories as a place from where to think out the female identity of the artist, which Byatt investigates in relation to craft, folklore and myth. Celia Wallhead opens this section with “Material Things in the Struggle of the Female Writer/Artist in the Stories of A. S. Byatt,” an overview of Byatt’s five collections of short fiction. Looking at a couple of stories in each collection, Wallhead considers Byatt’s short fiction in chronological order to point to the *topos* of the female protagonist struggling to overcome gender-orientated obstacles. A feminist who refuses to be pigeon-holed, Byatt centres her stories around key-moments at different stages in the lives of her protagonists. While showing this, Wallhead calls attention to the emphasis on materiality, the idiosyncratic verbal accumulation and the importance of artistic creation.

⁴ Byatt states she started writing stories after reading Munro (“Entretien” 12-13) and refers to the Canadian writer as “the great Alice Munro” (“Introduction” xv).

Emilie Walezak seeks, in “Women and Myths in A. S. Byatt’s Anthology *Medusa’s Ankles*,” to explore the different meanings of myth in three stories from Byatt’s most recent (2021) selection of eighteen short-stories, all of them previously published in newspapers, magazines, or in her edited collections. The evolution in Byatt’s writing is made apparent through the chronology of the stories, as she moved on from the mock Freudian mythology of “Medusa’s Ankles” (1993) to the debunking of modern myths in “Heavenly Bodies” (1998), and to the creation of new ones in “A Stone Woman” (2003), in order to come to terms with the changes in our relationship to nature brought about by climate change.

In “‘A Jinx is Feared . . . Knowledge Must Be Paid For’: The Configuration of the Ageing Woman as Crone and Witch in A. S. Byatt’s ‘The Dried Witch,’” Alexandra Cheira compares the historical situation of female healers excluded from medical practice by witch branding with Byatt’s fictional exploration of the social ostracism of an ageing woman healer in “The Dried Witch.” Investing the folkloric figure of the crone with a variety of contradictory positive and negative connotations, Byatt’s story, Cheira demonstrates, is complex in its portrayal of female empowerment and the price to be paid for it.

The second section of this volume focuses more specifically on the genre of the fairy tale revised by Byatt to display her metafictional approach to storytelling. In “Fairy-Tale Strategies Revisited: Constraints as Sources of Creativity and Ethical Reflection in A. S. Byatt’s Fairy Stories,” Marzia Beltrami examines the role of the fairy tale genre in Byatt’s reflection on the moral function of imagination and on her engagement with the relationship between truth and realism. Focusing on the collection *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye: Five Fairy Stories*, Beltrami distances herself from the simplification of Byatt’s tales to subversive feminist revisions. She argues instead that Byatt deliberately works within the constraints of the genre that afford her new ways to deal with old problems, bringing together realism and fairy tale as two complementary forms.

In “‘The Silver Glaze of the Mirror’: Fire and Ice in Byatt’s Fairy Tales,” Francesca Arnavas explores the multi-dimensional motif of the mirror as alternatively a structural narrative device, a material object and a metaphor for female identity. Arnavas examines Byatt’s working with the classic fairy-tale motif not only in the fairy tale stories collected in *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye* but also in Byatt’s two novellas in *Angels and Insects*, as well as in other stories such as “The Thing in the Forest,” “The Pink Ribbon,” and “Dolls’ Eyes.”

The third part of this issue examines Byatt’s specific art of attention that she brings to bear on space and time, which ultimately delineates her ethical stance with regards to art’s due diligence. In “Material and Geographical Intertextualities in *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*,” Barbara Franchi notes how dualities, which are exemplified in the very title of the collection, provide the narrative drive of the six stories in the collection, each one concentrating on the relationship between one element and a colour. Focusing on the first three stories, Franchi analyses characters who choose to leave their northern places of origin to move south, and how their journeys south lead them to question their allegiances to nations and gender, and experience a cultural estrangement perceived through forms of intertextualities which are not limited to written texts but also encompass paintings and “human-material interactions.”

In “Traces and Polytemporality in A. S. Byatt’s Short Stories,” Carmen Lara Rallo explores the complexities of time in Byatt’s short stories by calling on Paul Ricoeur’s typology of traces. She thus exposes the variety of cortical, psychical and documentary traces that get variously tangled

in the stories. With the help of Victoria Browne's concept of polytemporality, Lara Rallo demonstrates the complexity of Byatt's fictional apprehension of time, history and memory in a kaleidoscopic palimpsest that takes into account all of Byatt's collections.

Jennifer Preston Wilson examines the final part of five stories from different collections that explore the problems of the isolated self. In "Seeing Together: Shared Attention in A. S. Byatt's Short Stories," Preston argues that A. S. Byatt draws on Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch in her dual/double recognition scenes, two associated moments of recognition experienced by several characters at once, in a moment of "joint attention" which may leave the story unresolved and create new space for knowledge or awareness, or attention to others.

The final section of the volume examines the media crossover of Byatt's work through film adaptation and an exploration of the relationship between her long and short fiction. In "Revisiting 'Medusa's Ankles' in the Light of the 2018 Film Adaptation," directed by Bonnie Wright, Helen E. Mundler, using theories of film adaptation to examine the complex relationship between Byatt's narrative and its cinematic version, analyses how the short film (21 minutes) accounts for and questions the short story, what it leaves out or glosses over and, on the other hand, what it brings out and adds, and to what ends. Because of the story's close attention to the visual (in particular Matisse's *Rosy Nude*), its adaptation into another medium is particularly relevant. Moreover, this "medium shifting" experiment can itself be seen as part of Byatt's long-standing preoccupation with metamorphosis, as Susannah, a middle-aged classics professor, turns into a salon-smashing fury.

In "A. S. Byatt's 'On the Day That E. M. Forster Died' and the Ambivalence of Connection," Peter Mathews analyses through the narrator, Mrs Smith, "a thinly-veiled stand-in for Byatt herself," the reservations often voiced by Byatt in her essays and novels (especially the *Frederica Quartet*) about E. M. Forster's famous epigraph in *Howards End* "only connect," as well as her critical examination of modernism and, conversely, her defence of George Eliot and Iris Murdoch. Mathews sees in the narrative a kind of "anti-story," "a literary text that pointedly refuses to provide a skillfully drawn plot or well-rounded characters," in keeping with Byatt's unorthodox conception of the conventions of narrative fiction.

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