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## Women and Myths in A. S. Byatt's Anthology, *Medusa's Ankles*

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This article investigates Byatt's use of myths in her short fiction. It explores the various interpretations of myths through the reading of three stories. "Medusa's Ankles" exemplifies Byatt's feminist demystification of the Freudian castration complex. "Heavenly Bodies" contrasts the ancient myth of the Virgin and the modern myths of female pop stars, thus mobilising Barthes's definition of myths as cultural phenomena. Finally, "A Stone Woman" constitutes Byatt's own creation of a female myth that also talks to current environmental concerns. Short fiction allows Byatt to tackle the female body-mind dilemma characteristic of her work in uncompromising ways that focus on the language of the stories rather than the psychology of characters.

Cet article explore l'usage que fait Byatt du mythe dans ses nouvelles. À travers la lecture de trois nouvelles, il s'agit de parcourir les différentes interprétations de la notion de mythe. La nouvelle "Medusa's Ankles" permet ainsi à Byatt de démystifier le complexe de castration freudien sur un mode comique. "Heavenly Bodies" met en contraste le mythe ancien de la Vierge et les mythes modernes au sens de Barthes comme phénomènes culturels. Enfin, la nouvelle "A Stone Woman" permet à Byatt de créer sa propre mythologie du féminin en racontant une histoire qui s'empare également des enjeux actuels concernant l'environnement. Alors que le dilemme corps-esprit parcourt l'œuvre de Byatt, la forme spécifique de la nouvelle lui permet de le mettre en fiction de manière audacieuse, en se focalisant sur les jeux de la langue plutôt que sur la psychologie des personnages.

In May 2021, Chatto & Windus published a selection of A. S. Byatt's short stories named after "Medusa's Ankles," the introductory story in the 1993 collection *The Matisse Stories*. The new volume gathers together, in chronological order of publication, a selection of thirteen stories from Byatt's five previous collections—*Sugar and Other Stories*, *The Matisse Stories*, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories*, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, *Little Black Book of Stories*—as well as one story, "Dolls' Eyes," originally published in Sarah Eyre and Ra Page's 2009 *The New Uncanny: Tales of Unease* and four uncollected stories published in the press: "Heavenly Bodies," published in *The Sunday Times* in December 1998, "The Narrow Jet," published in the *Paris Review* in spring 2005, "The Lucid Dreamer," published in the *New Statesman* in June 2011, and "Sea Story," published in *The Guardian* in March 2013. As David Mitchell notes in his introduction to *Medusa's Ankles*, the selection demonstrates the great variety of Byatt's short fiction: it features ghost stories—"The July Ghost"—realist stories—"Racine and the Tablecloth"—fantastic stories—"The Djinn in

the Nightingale's Eye"—ekphrastic stories—"Christ in the House of Mary and Martha"—fairy stories—"Cold"—and metafictional stories—"Raw Material."

In accordance with the multiplicity of genres displayed in these texts, Byatt has always included side narratives in her novels to offer insights into other worlds than the realist one: ekphrases in the Quartet, gothic stories and fairy tales in *Possession*, metafictional fairy stories in *The Children's Book*. She has explained that "the story within the story always represents a different kind of grip on the world, a different kind of reality, and also it's always of course about a reading experience" ("Entretien" 20). Interestingly enough, her short stories themselves usually embed other stories as she is not a follower of the modernist creed and has stated that she "hate[s] the word epiphany" ("World Literature" 18:16), considering instead that "short stories can go round corners and sideways" ("World Literature" 19:02). However, whereas the embedded stories in her novels are designed to shed light on the characters' world views and to augment the world of the book itself, the short stories proper do not care about people: "I don't write my short stories for the people, I write them for the language" ("World Literature" 17:10). Thus Byatt sees short fiction as a thinking form quite distinct from her novels: "And so I started seeing things in this very condensed clear way, as images, not necessarily to be strung together in a long narrative, but to be thought out from" ("Entretien" 26). The indifference to characters along with Byatt's use of short fiction "to accommodate the strange" (13) can be paralleled with her recourse to myth. In the final metafictional chapter of her latest novel, *Ragnarok*, Byatt exposes her "Thoughts on Myth." She distinguishes between mythological figures characterised by their attributes and novelistic figures characterised by their personality. Myths do not deal with psychology, Byatt writes, they are strange, "more and less real" (159), they "haunt the mind" (161) with their strangeness.

In addition to the Norse gods, the other mythological figure that impacted Byatt in her childhood was Cassandra.<sup>1</sup> She has said in an interview that Cassandra stood in between the mythical world and the fictional world. Her prophetic features make her mythical while her refusal to have sex with Apollo makes her human. This relates to Byatt's own exploration of femininity as a conflict between body and mind:

There was the idea of knowing everything and refusing to be a sexual being and therefore nobody believing everything she said, so she was mad. . . . I felt this was an image of me, this person who knew what was going on and nobody believed a word of it. You have to compromise yourself with the world if you want people to believe you. (Byatt, "Ragnarok")

While Byatt's novels—whose "threads of myth . . . are an essential part of the thought and the form of the books, and of the way the characters take in the world" (Byatt, *Ragnarok* 160)—might be her compromise with the world, her short stories, this contribution means to suggest, may read as Cassandra-like attempts not to compromise.

This article aims to investigate myth by focusing on the choice of title for the selection, *Medusa's Ankles*, as the mythological echoes of Medusa's name recall Byatt's latest venture in rewriting the Norse myth of the end of the world. Taking the example of three of the collected stories, it seeks to explore the different meanings of myth and Byatt's own thinking out of the body/mind conundrum with the short form. The title story, "Medusa's Ankles," corresponds to Byatt's comic take on the psychoanalytical use of myth and fits with a feminist agenda of demystification. "Heavenly Bodies" also reads as a feminist endeavor to debunk modern myths, as Roland Barthes defined them, by

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<sup>1</sup> "Cassandra . . . was my other favourite figure beside the Norse Gods when I was a girl" (Byatt, "Ragnarok").

calling on older mythological forms. Finally, with “A Stone Woman,” Byatt creates a new female myth.

## Demystifying Psychoanalysis

Upon reading the title, *Medusa’s Ankles*, one cannot but think of Hélène Cixous’s “Laugh of the Medusa” and of the 1970s feminist contestation of the Freudian myth of Oedipus. Instead of desecrating universal structuring taboos and fears in myths, feminists meant to unveil the latent phallogocentric content in psychoanalytical readings of them. Before “Medusa’s Ankles” was first published in 1993, Byatt had already attacked the Oedipus complex in the 1992 novella “Morpho Eugenia,” which upended the taboo of incest with its focus on insects, the sphinx being turned into a moth. The novella is built up to disclose not so much incest itself as William Adamson’s entrapment in a nineteenth-century patriarchal worldview or, as Margaret Pearce has demonstrated, to upset his male gaze. Standing half-way between short and long fiction, the novella, that pivots around such games as scrambled words and riddles, is indeed an exercise in reading that focuses on language and embeds the allegorical fairy story by Matty Compton, “Things Are Not What They Seem.” Writing on analogies in “Morpho Eugenia,” Sue Sorensen has reproached Byatt with “smother[ing]” her characters in ideas (186). However, if one considers the novella to be more on the side of short fiction, it then corresponds to Byatt’s avowed intent of thinking things out from the language itself, aside from the psychology of characters.

The originality of “Medusa’s Ankles” lies with its comic aspect, which precisely stems from the characters’ psychology while the language itself turns them into signs designed to mock Freudian mythology. Susannah is a middle-aged woman who has reached a peak in her career and is scheduled to appear on TV. She goes to her hairdresser only to find out that the comforting pink boudoir displaying Matisse’s *Rosy Nude* has been refitted into a cold and unforgiving environment, and the hairdresser Lucian has left his wife—whose ankles had grown too fat—for a younger model. Upon seeing her middle-aged hairstyle, Susannah flies into a rage and breaks everything in the salon. When she goes back home, her husband looks at her in an unusual way and compliments her hairdo.

The story, told in free indirect speech from the point of view of Susannah, is one of humiliation. The cruel comic arises from Susannah’s willful submission to the hairdresser’s mistreatment. Her passive attitude is heralded from the beginning of the story, when she remarks: “A woman’s relation with her hairdresser is anatomically odd. Her head meets his belt . . .” (*Medusa* 115). The implicit sexual content of bowing to a fellatio was already suggested a few sentences earlier when Susannah recalled her first time at Lucian’s: “He had done her himself, the owner” (115). Throughout the text, he keeps bending her head authoritatively while criticising her: “He pressed close, he pushed at the nape of her neck, her nose was near his discreet zip. ‘You’ve been washing it without conditioner,’ he said” (118); “She bent her head submissively, and he scraped the base of her skull. ‘You could have highlights,’ he said in a tone of no enthusiasm” (119); “She kept still as a mouse, her head bowed under his repressing palm” (123); “He had her by the short hairs at the nape of her neck” (125). Even though Susannah is smart enough to recognise his negligence and self-centeredness—he arrives late, ignores her requests—her insecurity in the face of ageing makes her tolerate his abuse and trust his professional competence. She goes mad when he leaves her in the hands of a female assistant. While “Morpho Eugenia” detracts the male gaze, “Medusa’s Ankles” comically summons the female gaze as internalised self-deprecation and sexual objectification: at the hands of her hairdresser, Susannah is only able to see herself as a fat middle-aged woman instead of a professional achiever.

However, if the diegesis itself focuses on the characters’ relations, the language of the story calls for an iconographic and mythographic reading, such as pursued by Laurence Petit when she analyses the

multiplication of frames in the story. Matisse's *Pink Nude*, which was complemented by a reproduction of *La Chevelure* as the story's frontispiece in the original collection, signals the story's connection to art history. As a consequence, Susannah's very name cannot but call to mind the iconography of Susannah and the Elders, whose story of the libidinous male gaze invading the privacy of a young girl is ironically twisted around by Byatt. Susannah has grown old and is no longer the object of male desire. It is no longer simply the character that matters but the idea of the female beauty canon in painting which is called into question. Medusa herself is the subject of a long iconographic tradition to which Byatt's insistent depictions of the "rolls of hair" (116), "curls and waves," "bubbles and wisps" (117), "[s]ausages and snail-shells, grape-clusters and twining coils" (125-26) or "fatal coils" (128) pay homage. Thus Susannah the character migrates from a fictional signifier to an ekphrastic signified of youth preyed upon by old age while her inter-relation to the nude tradition emblematic of Matisse turns her into a sign mediating between pictorial representations and canonical concepts. This migration process characterizes the whole story: the pink colour, about which Byatt said she liked "la couleur comique de la rose" ("Rose"), migrates from the adjectival rosy, which first comforts Susannah, to a destructive verb when she vents her fury in the salon: "Rage rose in her" (125). The very title of the story points to a transference process from the traditional canonical metonymic sign characterising Medusa—the snake-like hair—to the character's ankles, which symbolise the redundancy of her middle-aged identity. The mundane tale of an old woman petrifying the customers of a hairdresser's with her frenzy mocks the Freudian mythologizing of the fear of castration.

The character of Lucian is also a displaced figure of the psychoanalyst, his first name bringing to mind the painter and grandson of Sigmund, Lucian Freud, also famous for his fleshy, unforgiving nudes. Lucian's deafness to Susannah's words along with his self-centered chattering away reads as a dig at Freud's talking cure: "He created his own psychiatrist and guru from his captive hearer" (117). Furthermore, Lucian is the one repeatedly threatening Susannah, brandishing his scissors, "wav[ing] the scissors dangerously near her temples" (120), scraping the nape of her neck, which reads as an inverted version of Dalila's story.

Through metonymic displacements then, Byatt upends at one and the same time the iconographic myth of Susannah and the Elders and the psychoanalytical myth of Medusa by portraying an ageing woman enraged by her thinning hair because it makes her feel she has become invisible in the eyes of a male-dominated society that values youthful attractive women. Byatt's insistence on bringing down to earth the mythic, her use of metonymies that never reach towards the metaphoric, aim at demystifying the canon of art history and psychoanalysis. Like Cassandra, Susannah stands halfway between the fictional and the mythical, she is a middle-aged woman in crisis while her first name fractures into a variety of connotations: it references her biblical namesake, contains the end letters of Medusa; the ending of her name may read as a reference to Anna Freud, while the repetition of the letter S can be interpreted in relation to Samson. Byatt invites her readers to a game of anagrams, the same way she did in "Morpho Eugenia" in which the signifier Eugenia reads as the first name of the fictional character, a reference to the butterfly named after the French empress Eugénie, as well as an allusion to Francis Galton's eugenics. The use of metonymic displacements can furthermore be interpreted, in relation to Freudian dream theory, as a detraction of the psychoanalytical myth of the paternal metaphor as governing the symbolic order of language. In her own way, Byatt follows Cixous' agenda of writing a sext<sup>2</sup> by jointly fictionalizing a female gaze struggling with internalised oppression and by altering the myth of Medusa. The comic impulse of

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<sup>2</sup> "They [the psychoanalysts] riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on. For the phallogocentric sublation is with us, and it's militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts" (Cixous 885).

the story contributes to its process of demystification by showing a quotidian version of petrifying fear: the mirror does not defeat Susannah, she smashes it to pieces. The comic, however, does not break the rules, but rather makes apparent the limits of transgression. Therefore, the diegesis itself remains on the side of compromise and the story's ending portrays the character as reintegrating the patriarchal order. The language, though, allows for endless recombinations, replacing the comic with the ludic. Byatt is playful in her short stories, much more so than in her novels. By making the reader a partner of her language games, she invites a shared thinking through of myths and their potential revisions.

### Modern Myths and Old Myths

"Heavenly Bodies" precisely revises old myths by contrasting them with modern ones, in the sense of Barthes, as cultural phenomena. It tells the story of a publicity stunt in the form of a glittering skywoman, sent sailing around the earth, whom incarnations of the zodiac come to dismantle. The skywoman can be interpreted as a modern myth as she is the representation of a pop star, Lucy Furnix, with the text referencing the Beatles' song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" (324). She is the lover of a media tycoon who indulges his fancy while making money out of it, selling "patented . . . Lucy tubes" (324) to viewers around the world. By adopting Brad's point of view in free indirect speech, the beginning of the text reproduces the arguments of the marketer invoking ethical branding when advertising Lucy's social usefulness in lighting dark street corners, and her environmental-friendly usage in helping crops with her light. Just like "Sea Story" tackles the question of ocean pollution, "Heavenly Bodies" deals with light pollution and space junk as Brad Macmamman is "one of the few people powerful and rich enough to assemble a skywoman without fear of international complaints about light pollution, or advertising controls" (323). Soon enough, after the first amazement at the technical feat, people start to loathe Lucy, going from Lucy craze to "Lucy craziness" (325), making her responsible for all sorts of ills "from milk-souring to muggings" (325).

The commodification of the sky parallels that of Lucy herself portrayed as a caricature of desirable female traits: "full-breasted, narrow-waisted, with a cloud of shimmering hair and shapely legs" (323), with "a pouting mouth, partly open to show sparkling teeth, with a plump upper lip" (324); "her eyes were huge. . . . Her nose was pert and her cheekbones pronounced" (324). She displays all the standards of the modern beauty myth as outlined by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*. While Wolf does not call on Barthes, she nevertheless chooses the word "myth" to highlight the latent political content of beauty as a new social fiction designed to oppress women liberated from the feminine mystique of domesticity. According to Barthes, modern myths naturalise such concepts as beauty so that they are never questioned. In this story, Byatt parallels the unquestioned appropriation of celestial bodies through space conquest with that of female bodies through marketing. Lucy Furnix is a signifier sailing in the sky displaying a variety of advertising signifieds: she holds a mirror that "streamed with white rays like the Columbia Motion Pictures totem" (323)—the word "totem" referencing once again the Freudian theory on myth—she wears a beauty pageant sash "like the guerdon of Miss World" displaying the tycoon's logo (324), and despite her blue eyes and blond lashes she also displays orientalist elements with her "harem pants" (324), further typifying her as a sign emblematic of the many while hinting at cultural appropriation. She is commonly known as "the Usherette," that quaint figure of the cinema industry kin to the stereotyped airplanes' stewardess. Brad calls her "The Lady with the Lamp" (324), degrading the myth of female professional competency represented by Florence Nightingale. Meanwhile, the sky is crowded with "tiny satellites, carrying light-emitting polymers and mirrors" (323). In "Sea Story" also, Byatt parallels the commodification of the sea and of women with the free indirect speech of the character-narrator, Harold, fantasising Laura, a student in oceanography, as a sea creature, while extolling his romantic

views of the masterless ocean. The underlying irony of the narrative is designed to uncover his misguided perspective as Laura proves to be uninterested in a relationship with him, giving him a fake email address, and the Perrier bottle he sends sailing with a love letter in it contributes to augment the Pacific trash vortex.

Both “Sea Story” and “Heavenly Bodies” abruptly switch their focus from the human perspective to the non-human. However, while the former adopts a harshly realist view on the destruction wrought by the bottle at sea, in “Heavenly Bodies,” old myths take over to dismantle the marketed skywoman. The zodiac signs fantastically materialise in the sky to destroy her piece by piece. The modern myth’s objectification is highlighted by its metonymic dismemberment with the Scorpion “shear[ing] away her painted toes” (326), the Archer using her logos as a “target practice” (327), the Goat “carry[ing] away her legs on its horntips” (327), the Water-carrier “carry[ing] away the harem pants, the exiguous brassiere, and her well-coiffeured waves” (327), the Fish “eating away her buttocks and sex” (328), the Ram “transfix[ing] the mirror of her now dull lamp between its horns” (328), the Twins “slic[ing] off her arms” (329), the Crab “surgically remov[ing] her jutting breasts” (329), and the Lion decapitating her. All the while, the lifeless man-made skywoman sails on “with no diminution of her anodyne smile” (329). The violence of her rending as she is stripped, shaved and amputated by virile mythical figures sporting “rearing tail[s],” “muscular arms” (326), “wicked curved slender horns,” “a silver beard” (327), “a magnificent pendulous sex” (328), “sword belts and plumed helmets” (328), reads as a deconstructive *exposé* of her female attributes marketed as desirable by men. It mirrors the public’s switch from Lucy craze to Lucy craziness as her segmentation evokes a castration-based punishment. She is kin to the *femme fatale*, the object of the male gaze whose threat of castration is turned against her as it reduces her to fetishes (see Mulvey).

Byatt, however, exposes the process brutally, thus not endorsing the male gaze itself, but rather offering an alternative narrative that closes with the ascendancy of the Virgin. By contrast with Lucy Furnix’s dismemberment, the non-human agents that “sip” and “nip” and “claw” at her undergo the reverse process: they first appear as myriads of small shapeshifting elements pertaining to all kinds—birds, insects, fish, plants, reptiles—that gradually coalesce into larger zodiac figures. Byatt constructs her own myth by contrast with the deconstruction of the publicity stunt. The figure of the Virgin that finally appears echoes Byatt’s earlier recourse to Astraea in *The Virgin in the Garden* in which she builds on Elizabeth I’s appropriation of the myth of the Golden Age. Elizabeth is like Cassandra who refuses to be a sexual being. The queen’s motto, *semper eadem*, is interpreted by Byatt to refer not only to her constancy but to the suspension of her sexual condition: “Tudor rose, blood, flesh, marble, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed, ego flos campi, not to be cut off by the butcher. . . . Elizabeth would not bleed. She would neither be butchered nor marry. She would be a stone that did not bleed, a Princess, semper eadem and single” (*Virgin* 130). She becomes a myth by setting aside her humanity. While Lucy Furnix “sailed into the sky without annunciation” (*Medusa* 323), the Virgin, whose ascendancy is heralded for months by the zodiac, encompasses a variety of old myths. She is the Christian virgin, recalling Da Vinci’s Renaissance painting *The Virgin of the Rocks*, “a figure who sat veiled on a starry rock, with a dark blue robe” (331), heralded by the Angel. Her flower cloak “a great field of flowers . . . which had its own valleys,” “lily-white” (331), recalls the lover in the Song of Songs, “ego flos campi et liliū convalium” (“I am the flower of the field and the lily between the valleys”). She is also reminiscent of Demeter with her “sheaf of lovely grasses and ears of corn, oats and barley” (331), a figure which Byatt referenced in *Possession* by ekphrasing Lord Leighton’s pre-Raphaelite painting, “The Return of Persephone.” Finally she is Astraea who, according to Ovid, fled the earth during the Iron Age and ascended to heaven to become the Virgo constellation. She stands next to Libra and is also a figure of justice, thus “she held also a pair of scales” (331). Byatt is probably gesturing towards Milton’s *Paradise Lost* when Satan is expelled from Eden by the angel Gabriel:

Th'Eternal to prevent such horrid fray  
Hung forth in Heav'n his golden Scales, yet seen  
Betwixt Astraea and the Scorpion sign,  
Wherein all things created first he weigh'd,  
The pendulous round Earth with balanc't Air  
In counterpoise, now ponders all events (Book I, lines 996-1001, 106)

Byatt's own description of the celestial bodies is reminiscent of Milton's depiction of the heavenly struggle taking place amidst the zodiac signs, especially as she uses the same adjective "pendulous" when evoking the Ram's sex. In her version however, it is the Virgin who weighs all things. She brings back wonder on earth, for when Lucy's diamond is finally lost in the flower garment and everything turns back to night, the humans marvel at "the lovely lights visible from our small planet, the Milky Way, the galaxies, the constellations, the travelling planets and moons" (332). The supernatural mediates with the ordinariness of the night sky by reminding the inhabitants of the earth of how what they take for granted has been a source of fascination for thousands of years.

Byatt's reinterpretation of old myths in the light of current concerns about air rights, space law and the objectification of women in advertising talks to their malleability, as opposed to modern myths that masquerade as perpetual. The Virgin as "the stone that would not bleed" furthermore illustrates Byatt's career-long effort to devise a female myth that would escape the constraints of masculinist biology: "The frozen, stony women became my images of choosing the perfection of the work, rejecting . . . the imposed biological cycle, blood, kiss, roses, birth, death, and the hungry generations" (*On Histories and Stories* 164).

### Creating New Myths: "A Stone Woman"

"A Stone Woman," originally published in the 2003 collection *Little Black Book of Stories*, presents a revision of Ovid's myth of Pygmalion (see Lara Rallo, "Myth") by telling the reverse story of a woman turning to stones. The plural is important as instead of her expected death by petrification, Ines will become a new lively being. The short story is Byatt's uncompromising implementation of Maud's suggestion in *Possession* of replacing sexuality with geology: "The whole of our scholarship—the whole of our thought—we question everything except the centrality of sexuality—Unfortunately feminism can hardly avoid privileging such matters. I sometimes wish I had embarked on geology myself" (222). The tale of this new geological being (see Lara Rallo, "Geology") contrasts the expectations of a patriarchal world view with an unexpected fantastic transfiguration (see Coelsh-Foisner). Its fantastic logic is very similar to the strategy employed in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," that displays the fantastic makeover of Gillian who is granted wishes by the djinn. Like the narratologist Gillian, the lexicographer Ines feels redundant in her late middle age and the story partly reads as a menopausal tale. Both characters at first conform to phallogocentric views of women's bodies. In "A Stone Woman," more particularly, the perspective is that of the scientific split between subject and object that Ines first adopts to observe her transformation, as if from a detached vantage point, researching the names of stones in the dictionary. Yet, the more the metamorphosis defies her expectations, the more she becomes involved once again in her own bodily experience. Her changing body, which at first terrifies and disgusts her, becomes something she marvels at. With the help of



the Icelandic sculptor, Thorsteinn, Ines eventually accepts her metamorphosis and ultimately joins the dancing trolls in Iceland.

This fantastic switch of perspective echoes the revision of Ovid's myth. While the myth tells of the power of the creator over his sculpture, whose fidelity to nature is so powerful that the statue comes to life, the short story emphasises the creative abundance of nature itself as the long lists of geological words illustrate, testifying to the plethora of stones sprouting on Ines's body. The story mirrors the shift from the disembodied gaze of the scientific recorder to Ines's embodied empirical experience (see Beltrami). It compares to Spinoza's distinction between "*natura naturata*" and "*natura naturans*" that Jane Bennett uses to differentiate "brute matter" from "generativity" (117), promoting a new perspective on matter not as inert but as an agent equal to humans. From that angle, the choice of stones is all the more significant as they are not living organisms. Still, Byatt gives them life through her walking metamorphosis, just as she elaborated on Michelet's conceit of the cathedral builders as "the masters of live stones" in *Possession*. That she provides a veritable taxonomy of stones with the lists of stone words displayed in the story, in addition to the growing stones on Ines's body, also contributes to include them in biological diversity. Byatt thus writes a feminist posthuman tale that seeks to overcome the body/mind divide by emphasising the agency of inert matter. Subverting the dormancy of stones parallels Ines's emancipation from passivity. Just as the stones become live stones, bursting forth, swelling and breeding over her body, Ines becomes not a petrified statue but a living volcano.

Byatt thereby signals that the current period needs to imagine new myths to come to terms with the changes in our relationship to nature wrought by climate change. Indeed, in addition to its treatment of ageing (see Matthews, and Lara-Rallo, "Time"), the geological short story may also read as an Anthropocene tale on the geological force that human beings have become akin to, a comparison popularised along with the word "Anthropocene" itself by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen. The story answers the current need "to scale up our imagination of the human—we are actually changing the face of the planet. . . . We can no longer separate the biological agency of humans from their geological agency" (Chakrabarty). Byatt's portrayal of a non-human character in "A Stone Woman" echoes both her depiction of the celestial bodies in "Heavenly Bodies" and her even more radical narrative of the journey of a plastic bottle in "Sea Story." In all three stories, environmental concerns about human impacts loom large and reiterate the worry expressed in *Ragnarok* about the extinction of species. The short form allows Byatt more leeway to reinterpret myths uncompromisingly by allowing for sudden shifts to the uncanny—"A Stone Woman"—or the marvelous—"Heavenly Bodies," with the fantastic<sup>3</sup> helping break ontological boundaries between humans and things. Her more recent stories could thus be described as the "onto-stories" that Jane Bennett wishes to see emerge in order to address the current change of paradigm in our understanding of the agency of matter, whether animate or inanimate: "an . . . onto-tale enhances one's awareness of the vitality of the world with which one is enmeshed" (361). Even though Bennett is referring to thought-experiment in philosophical fiction, it is my contention that literary speculations are suited to the "scal[ing] up" of our imagination. The recourse to myths furthermore underlines not only the plasticity of myths but also their eschatological function: the world that Byatt knew as a child is coming to an end and her stories are tales of rebirth after cataclysmic endings. They literally embody a radical change of perspective on the world: Ines's gaze becomes non-human, "her new eyes could not quite bring the dancing black letters to have any more meaning than the spiders and ants which scurried round her feet" (*Medusa* 383). The readers are meant to experience this radical upset

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<sup>3</sup> I am referring here to Tzvetan Todorov's theory. Incidentally, Todorov makes an appearance as a character in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye."

themselves when describing the geological words whose signifieds come undone with the accumulation of strange signifiers: “reniform, mammilated, botryoidal, dendrite, haematite” (367).

A. S. Byatt’s tales of metamorphosis are designed to revise “myths [that] provide an alphabet and a grammar that both link us to a living past and help us see the present more clearly” (Wanning Harries 90). The chronology of the stories analysed in the present contribution testifies to the evolution of Byatt’s writing, from the struggles with gender and the predominance of psychoanalytical thinking to new feminist materialisms that seek to overcome the body/mind, nature/culture splits. Her uncompromising use of the riches of language in the short story has allowed her to gradually shake off the gendered yoke of social constructionism in favour of an embodied mind that carries out thought experiments by adopting the “borrowed skin[s]” (*Medusa* 379) of stones.

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