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## Melusina and A. S. Byatt's Alchemical Imagination in *Possession: A Romance*

Xiuchun Zhang 

School of Languages, Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

### ABSTRACT

*The Fairy Melusine* is a fictional literary text incorporated in A. S. Byatt's Booker-Prize winning novel *Possession: A Romance*, which is a retelling by the fictional poet LaMotte of Jean d'Arras's tale of the fairy, Melusina. This paper examines four of LaMotte's short poems, both texts and subtexts of the Melusina story, and explores how Paracelsus's definition of the snake-woman determines the alchemical imagery in LaMotte's literary texts. LaMotte artfully weaves narratives around both the snake-woman and alchemy out of recurrent images in Byatt's canon and uses them ingeniously to indicate the alchemical nature of Melusina as well as the nature and conditions of LaMotte's own long period of isolation and motherhood. Melusina becomes an alchemical symbol of the philosopher's stone, a symbol of LaMotte's long seclusion and an enactment of a recurrent motif in Byatt's works that isolation is a *sine qua non* of literary creation.


### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Booker-Prize winning novel *Possession: A Romance* is a neo-Victorian novel that incorporates a medieval myth story *The Fairy Melusine*, a tour de force by Victorian poet Christabel LaMotte, written in the form of an epic and composed of twelve books. The reader is told that this epic poem initiates the correspondence between two fictional Victorian poets, Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash, that gradually metamorphoses into a romance. In the novel, the reader is also told that Jean d'Arras's prose story of the fairy becomes the source material for Christabel LaMotte's epic,<sup>1</sup> and that LaMotte's re-working is considerably shaped by Paracelsus's definition of the snake-woman.<sup>2</sup> The novel does not present the epic in its entirety, however; only the Proem and Book One are quoted. Together with *The Fairy Melusine*, the novel also presents a series of LaMotte's short poems about the watery underworld that can be read as important subtexts of the Melusina story. This article aims to explore how Paracelsus's influence brings LaMotte's literary texts into a repeated rehearsal of some basic alchemical motifs such as spirituality and procreation, and how these in turn reflect the nature and conditions of LaMotte's long self-imposed retreat from society, and makes her the exemplar of all Byatt's female artistic creations.

**CONTACT** Xiuchun Zhang  zhangqhzc@163.com

<sup>1</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 290.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 291.

Critics have noted the importance of the Melusina story, presented as a story-within-a-story in the novel. However, so far, most of the articles that analyze the metaphorical significance of the embedded story lack any analysis of the literary texts themselves, and instead make comparisons between Melusina, Christabel LaMotte and Maud on the basis of Jean d'Arras's original story. These articles argue that there is considerable similarity between Melusina, LaMotte and Maud, and that the snake-woman represents female artistic creativity. A case in point is Christien Franken's book *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship and Creativity* in which the author dedicates a whole chapter to a discussion of the similarities between Melusina, LaMotte and Maud. She finds that the child-parent relationship in Christabel LaMotte's story mirrors that in Melusina's life. She concludes that Melusina is a symbol of female artistic creativity and autonomy exemplified by both Christabel and Maud. Nancy Chinn's article "I Am My Own Riddle – A. S. Byatt's Christabel LaMotte: Emily Dickinson and Melusina" reaches a similar conclusion. Chinn contends that while American poetess Emily Dickinson is the prototype of LaMotte the hermit-poet, Melusina becomes the prototype of LaMotte the loving mother. Marcin Cieniuch's article "Layers of Fictionality. Reading Victorian Medievalism in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*" also emphasize the similarities between Melusina, LaMotte and Maud, and after borrowing a number of details from the original story of Melusina, quotes and analyzes only a few lines from the Proem of LaMotte's *The Fairy Melusine*, afterwards concluding: "Here, LaMotte's Victorian belief in the connection between the fictional and the actual worlds is at its most conspicuous. LaMotte the author becomes Melusine herself"<sup>3</sup>.

Gillian M. E. Alban's seminal book *Melusine the Serpent Goddess in A. S. Byatt's Possession and in Mythology* compares Melusina with other serpent goddesses in mythologies across the world, such as Atargatis, Ishtar, Isis, Asherah, Sophia, Ua Zit, Artemis and Cybele. In her book, the Paracelsan influence on LaMotte's rewriting of Melusina is also discussed alongside her analysis of the Proem of LaMotte's *The Fairy Melusine*. Alban notes that LaMotte, like Paracelsus, fully believes in the existence of such a snake-woman as Melusina in our natural world, who "share(s) our world liminally"<sup>4</sup>. She also argues that Christabel LaMotte's definition of Melusina as a creature who has a longing for a human soul is typically Paracelsan.<sup>5</sup> This paper borrows from Alban's critical views of the Paracelsan influence, but extends its reach into the rest of LaMotte's poems about the aquatic where there is no direct reference to Paracelsus' work. Alchemical metamorphoses are pervasive in LaMotte's poetry and are informed by Byatt's use of alchemical colour-symbolism and geometric patterns. This paper will bring to light how alchemy informs A. S. Byatt's literary imagination.

## Melusina: Jean d' Arras, Paracelsus and Jung

Jean d' Arras's *Melusine; or The Noble History of Lusignan* was completed in 1393.<sup>6</sup> In the story, Raymondin<sup>7</sup> inadvertently kills his lord Count Aimery in a boar hunt and in a state

<sup>3</sup>Cieniuch, 25.

<sup>4</sup>Alban, 47.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 47–8.

<sup>6</sup>Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, 1.

<sup>7</sup>In *Possession*, it is spelt as "Raimondin".

of great fear flees. On his journey, he meets three young and beautiful women beside the Fountain of Thirst, one of whom tells him that if he marries her she will help him out of his current plight and transform his misfortunes into great prosperity. This lady is Melusine. She also asks him never to spy on her on Saturdays. They get married and she gives birth to many sons, each of whom has some terrible physical defect but who are unusually brave and talented. The sons conquer foreign lands, thwart giants, and become kings and lords. Melusine builds many castles in Lusignan and creates great wealth for her husband. However, tempted by his brother, Raymondin peeped into Melusine's bedroom one Saturday through a hole he carved in the door with his sword, and saw her now transformed into a half-woman-half-snake creature frolicking in a bath tub. Shortly afterwards, one of their sons, Geoffrey Big-Tooth, set fire to a monastery killing all the monks within including his own brother Fromont; this news so infuriated Raymondin that he couldn't help but blame Melusine publicly: "Ah! you deceitful serpent, by God, you and your deeds are nothing but phantoms, nor will any heir you have borne ever come to a good end!"<sup>8</sup> Knowing that her husband had already broken the pact between them, Melusine turned into a huge dragon and flew out of the window. Subsequently, the wet-nurses saw her appear in the castle every evening to feed her two youngest sons, but Raymondin could never see her. Each time the castle changed hands, the huge dragon appeared to issue a warning. Jean d' Arras's story of Melusina is narrated in *Possession* by a modern literary critic Fergus Wolff.<sup>9</sup>

Philip Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, who later called himself Paracelsus, was born in the year 1493.<sup>10</sup> Both a physician and an alchemist, in his life time he wrote a commentary on Melusina the snake-woman in his famous treatise "A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, and on the Other Spirits"; here, he articulates that in each of the four elements, earth, air, fire and water, there dwell creatures that are half spirit half human. These sub-human creatures, he argues, are part of our natural world, not mere superstitious inventions. He names the water people "melusines"<sup>11</sup> or "nymphs", those in the air "sylphs", those in the earth "pygmies" and those in the fire "salamanders"<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, he defines Melusina as a woman who "was possessed by the evil spirit" and desperately needed to gain a soul through a union with a man in matrimony. He says:

This is demonstrated by them also: they have no soul, unless they enter into a union with men, and now they have the soul. They die, and nothing remains of them but the beast.<sup>13</sup>

We must pay equally great attention to Melusine, for she was not what the theologians considered her, but a nymphe. It is true, however, that she was possessed by the evil spirit, of which she would have freed herself if she had stayed with her husband to the end. For such is the devil that he transforms these beings into different shapes, as he also does with the witches, transforming them into cats and werewolves, dogs, etc.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup>D'Arras, 191.

<sup>9</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 33–4.

<sup>10</sup>Sigerist, vii.

<sup>11</sup>Paracelsus, "A Book on Nymphs", 226.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 231.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 238.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 245.

Paracelsus's commentary obviously echoes Jean d'Arras's story and is incorporated into A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession*. In the novel, the two Victorian poets in their correspondence frequently discuss LaMotte's writing project on the snake-woman, and, in order to give her fresh insight, Ash quotes liberally from Paracelsus's works, which in turn LaMotte inscribes into her poetry. What Ash quotes is a reinterpretation of Paracelsus's commentary, not a direct quote, but it incorporates the most essential features of the snake-woman and is a pithy and succinct summary of Paracelsus's views on Melusina. This is what Ash quotes from Paracelsus:

The Melusinas are daughters of kings, desperate through their sins. Satan bore them away and transformed them into spectres, into evil spirits, into horrible revenants and frightful monsters. It is thought they live without rational souls in fantastic bodies, that they are nourished by the mere elements, and at the final Judgment will pass away with these, unless they may be married to a man. In this case, by virtue of this union, they may die a natural death, as they may have lived a natural life, in their marriage. Of these spectres it is believed that they abound in deserts, in forests, in ruins and tombs, in empty vaults, and by the shores of the sea ...<sup>15</sup>

LaMotte, obviously borrowing from Ash's quotes, defines the fairy in a Paracelsan light. In the Proem of *The Fairy Melusine*, the snake-woman is defined as one of those "Whom Paracelsus said were Angels once/ Now neither damn'd nor blessed, simply tossed/ Eternally between the solid earth/ And Heav'n's closed golden gate ..."<sup>16</sup>, as a creature among "Things, Beings, Creatures, never seen by us/ But very potent in their wandering world,/ Crossing our heavy paths from time to time"<sup>17</sup>, and as a being "Doomed by their own desire for human souls,/ For settled hearths and fixed human homes"<sup>18</sup>. In this way, LaMotte acknowledges her indebtedness to both Paracelsus and Ash.

Modern psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung in his monumental attempt to assimilate Melusina the snake-woman into the alchemical symbolic system, pronounces Melusina together with other snake-women in various mythologies across the world to be a cogent symbol of union synonymous with the philosopher's stone. Jung's works on alchemy are referenced both directly and indirectly in Byatt's canon,<sup>19</sup> and it is exactly the Jungian notion of Melusina that proves central to LaMotte's efforts to represent the beauty both of these aquatic creatures and of their aquatic realms in alchemical imagery. Jung wrote three articles in memory of the medieval alchemist: "Paracelsus", "Paracelsus the Physician" and "Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon". In the latter, Jung analyzes both Melusina the snake-woman and melusines, the tiny watery creatures that were represented in Paracelsus's treatises. Based on what Paracelsus described in such treatises as "De sanguine ultra mortem", "De pygmaeis", "Philosophia ad Athenienses", and *De vita longa*, Jung argues that Melusina is "a variant of the mercurial serpent", namely Mercurius, or the philosopher's stone.<sup>20</sup> Jung also argues that not only the Paracelsan Melusina, but also the many other snake-women in mythologies, such as sirens, lamias,<sup>21</sup> and Edem,<sup>22</sup> are all variants of Mercurius. His

<sup>15</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 171–2.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 291

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>19</sup>Zhang, 401.

<sup>20</sup>Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, 144.

<sup>21</sup>Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 52–3.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 304.

argument incorporates snake-women into the whole repertoire of snakes in alchemy that are often interpreted as the Uroboros, “the dragon devouring itself tail first”<sup>23</sup>. The coiling snake, Jung insists, is androgynous and is thus representative of the stone. Although Jung is not referenced directly in Byatt’s neo-Victorian novel, his conclusion on the Paracelsan Melusina plays a central role in Byatt’s treatment of the fairy in the novel. In *Possession*, the twentieth-century literary critics read LaMotte’s Melusina both as “an image of the essential androgyny of the creative mind”<sup>24</sup> and as “Coleridge’s Serpent who figured the Imagination, with its tail stuffed in its own mouth”<sup>25</sup>. These are critical views suggestive of Jung’s influence. Furthermore, LaMotte’s Proem does also define Melusina as a close kin of such snake-women as Medusa, Scylla, Hydra, Sphinx, and Echidna,<sup>26</sup> which also suggests Byatt’s espousal of the Jungian notion.

Jung’s definition of the Paracelsan Melusina is further enhanced by LaMotte’s remaining poems about the aquatic realm, namely in Book One of *The Fairy Melusine*, “Three elements combined to make the fourth”, “There are none blush on earth, y-wis”, and “And in the pool two fishes play”; in these the making of the philosopher’s stone is repeatedly dramatised in images which echo that of the snake-woman as the opus. These different images of the stone together with the being of Melusina herself constitute a larger picture of the art of gold-making, whose central motif, the union of opposites, becomes emblematic of Byatt’s vision of female artistic creativity.

### The Alchemical Imagery in LaMotte’s Poems

As mentioned in an earlier section, the Proem of LaMotte’s poem *The Fairy Melusine* defines the snake-woman as the Paracelsan Melusina, a variant of Mercurius who often takes the form of a coiling snake, otherwise known as the philosopher’s stone or the opus. The Proem is just the starting point for an alchemical narrative that spans LaMotte’s literary works on the aquatic underworld, and runs through the remaining poems, though it lacks any specific allusion to the snake image and makes no mention of the mythical and occult usually associated with alchemy. The narrative is nevertheless constantly alluding to the creation of the philosopher’s stone. These poems feature a lyricism that is rarely present in most alchemical narratives, and reinterpret the alchemical notion of the opus in terms of the female body and other natural phenomena. Two themes of alchemy, namely purification and procreation, are repeatedly expressed in the poems, a pair of opposites that sheds considerable light on the alchemical nature of both the snake-woman and LaMotte’s time spent in seclusion.

Book One of *The Fairy Melusine* recounts how Raimondin the knight, both frustrated and fatigued, roams aimlessly around a moor and happens to descend into a cavern where he sees a young lady seated upon a rock singing to herself. He approaches her, talks to her, and asks her for a cup of water. Finally, he becomes captivated by her beauty. The imagery of gold and silver predominates in the portraiture of Melusina and steers the poem into the realms of alchemy, an art that aimed to find and reveal the ultimate secret of these two metals. In medieval Europe, there was a constant

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>24</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 34.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 292.

search for the philosopher's stone, a magic stone which could transmute base metals such as lead or iron into silver or gold. Important alchemical speculations pivoted upon these two metals. Paracelsus believed that gold was the spirit or tincture of the sun and silver that of the moon,<sup>27</sup> and therefore, an alchemical process was a bringing together of not only gold and silver, but also of Sol and Luna.<sup>28</sup> In Paracelsus's time, gold and silver, along with the stone itself, represented not only material wealth but also important elixirs in their potable form that could "cure all diseases and infirmities" and grant people "a sound and perfect long life", the treasure of treasures to have in the world.<sup>29</sup>

In Book One, gold and silver embody both an important source of light that illuminates the dank cavern and the virginal beauty of the fairy to whom Raimondin is involuntarily drawn. Melusina the fairy is depicted as possessed of an inner light of her own that is largely wrought of silver and gold. She is clad in "a shift of whitest silk", a glossy garment that gilds her with a white and supple brilliance.<sup>30</sup> "As milky roses at the end of day/ In some deserted bower seem still alight/ With their own luminous pallor, so she cast/ A softened brightness and a pearly light/ On that wild place, in which she sate and sang"<sup>31</sup>. The splendour of her golden hair emulates the "phosphorescent sparks off a pale sea," and it is "brighter than chill gold"<sup>32</sup>. Clear and silver-white spring-water-drops are frolicking about her ankles and add a fresh dimension to her brilliance, forming "silver anklet-chains/ Glancing with diamond-drops and lucid pearls/ Which shone as bright as those about her neck"<sup>33</sup>. Finally, even the comb itself is wrapped in the golden brilliance she now owns, a comb "Wrought curiously of gold and ebony"<sup>34</sup>. As a result, her physical desirability becomes highly visible to the travel-stained and thirsty knight, who, despite everything, can hardly resist the temptation. The reader is told that the union of the two colours is at the core of Melusina's feminine beauty that keeps the knight under its constant spell. The knitting together of both visual and aural strands of gold and silver makes the young lady so mesmerizingly beautiful that Raimondin's only longing is to reach beyond the space separating them and touch her. The reader is told that their first romantic encounter takes place amid the intertwined melodies of Melusina's song and the spring's chant which are gold-and-silver based.<sup>35</sup> "And while she sang, she combed it with a comb/ Wrought curiously of gold and ebony,/ Seeming to plait each celandine-bright tress/ With the spring's sound, the song's sound and the sound/ Of its own living whisper, warm and light/ So that he longed to touch it, longed to stretch/ If but a finger out across the space ... "<sup>36</sup>. This is the first spell. A second spell is cast upon him when the aural gives way to the visual gold and silver. The moment their eyes meet, "she ceased her song/ And made a silence, and it seemed to him/ That in this silence all the murmuring ceased ... "<sup>37</sup>. The knight is now subject to "the steady and essential gaze/ Of this pale Creature in

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<sup>27</sup>Paracelsus, "Of the Secrets of Alchemy", 3–7.

<sup>28</sup>Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 3.

<sup>29</sup>Paracelsus, "Of the Secrets of Alchemy", 26.

<sup>30</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 296.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 295–6.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 296.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 297.



this quiet space”<sup>38</sup>, a gaze, that the reader is told only at the end of Book One, is as bright as “the tumbling rays/ Of the sun’s countenance”<sup>39</sup>. Raimondin finds that the young lady’s creamy face and golden gaze “consumed his soul” and threw him “Into desire beyond the reach of hope”<sup>40</sup>. At the end of Book One, the fairy puts her final spell on the knight as he is drinking from the cup with “the brightness of her glance”<sup>41</sup>, and as a result of this golden gaze the knight would voluntarily surrender all of himself to the lady. He was hers. “Now was he hers, if she would ask of him/ Body or soul, he would have offered all”<sup>42</sup>.

The deployment of gold and silver as the sources of light and female beauty in the poem thus implies both spirituality and sublimation – a process whereby a solid turns into a gas without going through a liquid phase. Mercurius is often described as being “virginal” and frequently likened to both the “Virgin Mary” and the “virgin of light”<sup>43</sup>. The golden and silver light radiating from Melusina gives her an ethereal and less accessible quality and makes her a saintly figure untainted by earthliness. The intertwining of the two colours delineates a virginal nymph whose beauty is marked by innocence and purity.

The motif of spiritualisation is elaborated in another of LaMotte’s poems that recounts the tale of the City of Is or Ys. There are many versions of the legend of this ancient city, and one popular one tells that the king of the city Gradlon builds a protective dyke to defend his city, but his wilful and sexually-indulgent daughter, Dahud or Dahut, secretly entertains her lover, and, excited by wine, steals the key from her father and opens the dyke, only to flood the whole city. After her death, Dahud becomes a mermaid and gives warnings to passing sailors about forthcoming storms and imminent shipwrecks.<sup>44</sup> However, LaMotte’s poem adopts another storyline wherein the City of Is is ruined as a result of the overindulgence in sexual pleasures by the local women. God intends to reform them by turning their skin transparent and devises a flood to devour their homes; this version of the story is narrated in *Possession* by Maud who says: “It’s a Breton legend. It was drowned in the sea for its wickedness. It was ruled by Queen Dahud, the sorceress, daughter of King Gradlon. The women there were transparent, according to some versions. Christabel wrote a poem”<sup>45</sup>.

There are none blush on earth, y-wis  
As do dames of the Town of Is.  
The red blood runs beneath their skin  
And feels its way and flows within,  
And men can see, as through a glass  
Each twisty turn, each crossing pass  
Of threaded vein and artery  
From heart to throat, from mouth to eye.  
This spun-glass skin, like spider-thread  
Is silver water, woven with red.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 298.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 297.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 298.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 425.

<sup>44</sup>MacKillop, 431–2.

<sup>45</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 133.



For their excessive wickedness  
 In days of old, was this distress  
 Come on them, of transparency  
 And openness to every eye.  
 But still they're proud, their haughty brows  
 Cirled with gold ...<sup>46</sup>

Quoted above is the first stanza of the poem. LaMotte ingeniously appropriates red, white, and glass, imagery recurrent in Byatt's canon that she admits comes from fairy tales,<sup>47</sup> into an alchemical narrative that considers female beauty in relation to inner virtues rather than just outward fairness. It is interesting to note that the divine scheme of procreation is largely a repeat of an alchemical process whose end product, the philosopher's stone, is often visualised as the "golden glass (*vitrum aureum*)" or the "malleable glass (*vitrum malleabile*)"<sup>48</sup>. The colour-scheme of the women, red, white and gold, correlates with the colour-changes in the alchemical process. Paracelsus interprets the final stages of making the philosopher's stone as indicated by a white colour, "white and candid as Snow", and then a "perfect redness"<sup>49</sup>. When "the highest degree of the red Colour" appears, the philosopher's stone is ready and it can transmute all base metals into gold.<sup>50</sup> The poet claims that the metamorphosis is a "distress" caused by the local women's "excessive wickedness"; yet the poem intimates that their bodies are by no means transformed into objects of outrageous monstrosity that compel singular revulsions. The transparency of their skin adds a new dimension of innocence to their beauty that they eagerly embrace ("But still they're proud, their haughty brows/ Cirled with gold ..."). God's purpose is not so much to demonise as to purify them. For the alchemists, the making of the philosopher's stone is also a process of purification and sublimation and the ultimate purpose of their toil is "to produce an incorruptible 'glorified body'", or to "attain that state in the *albedo*, where the body became spotless and no longer subject to decay"<sup>51</sup>. Glass is usually interpreted as being synonymous with the ash, which "is identical with the 'pure water'"<sup>52</sup>. As a result of God's scheme of retribution, the local women now are metamorphosed into beings possessed of both beauty and chastity.

The imagery of red, white and glass (or ice) reappears in LaMotte's poem on a double fish that expresses a similar theme of abandonment of carnal desires. The poem describes two fishes, one red and the other silver, that are playing freely in a pool in summer but become trapped in ice in winter. In his book *Aion*, Jung extrapolates that the association of Jesus Christ with fish-symbolism might have a lot to do with the zodiacal sign of the Fishes – Pisces. He says: "Above all it is the connections with the age of the Fishes which are attested by the fish symbolism ... The symbolism shows Christ and those who believe in him as fishes, fish as the food eaten at the Agape, baptism as immersion in a fish-pond, etc"<sup>53</sup>. In the poem, the two fishes remain solid aquatic creatures, not zodiacal

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>47</sup>Byatt, *On Histories*, 151–2.

<sup>48</sup>Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 232.

<sup>49</sup>Paracelsus, "Of the Secrets of Alchemy", 26–7.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>51</sup>Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 238.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 238–9.

<sup>53</sup>Jung, *Aion*, 90.

signs; nevertheless, by aligning them with two typical alchemical colours and delineating them as emblematic of a union of opposites, LaMotte represents them as a materialised philosopher's stone, the alchemical counterpart of Jesus Christ, thus forging a connection between the double fish motif and divinity. The two fishes are shining and become mock heavenly bodies. In the summer pool, "they shine alway" and "flash upon a summer's day," and "in the depth of wintry night/ They slumber open-eyed and bright" and become "a shadowed light"<sup>54</sup>. The delineation brings them into an alchemical system that emphasises the correlation between colours and heavenly bodies. In alchemy, the final stages of making the philosopher's stone are indicated by white and red, representing the moon and the sun respectively.<sup>55</sup> The final stanza is the pithy part of the poem that brings to the fore the paradoxical nature of the two fishes and invites an alchemical reading of the poem. The two fishes are encased in thin veils of ice, and now become

A paradox of chilly fire  
Of life in death, of quenched desire  
That has no force, e'en to respire  
Suspended until frost retire—<sup>56</sup>

Their entrapment in ice creates the visual illusion of fire kept in ice, and that their lethargy mimics a state between life and death. By presenting a symbiotic relationship of incompatibles, the poem indicates that the double fish is the opus, the making of which is usually interpreted as a process of bringing various opposites together, such as heaven and earth, living and dead, upper and lower, etc.<sup>57</sup> Their suspension in the semi-liquid of the ice represents a stasis synonymous with a relinquishing of all desires including the sexual ("A paradox" "of quenched desire"). The metamorphosis from kinesis to stasis represents a rite of purification.

Three elements combined to make the fourth.  
The sunlight made a pattern, through the air  
(Athwart ash-saplings rooted in the sparse  
Handfuls of peat in overhanging clefts)  
Of tessellation in the water's glaze:  
And where the water moved and shook itself  
Like rippling serpent-scales, the light ran on  
Under the liquid in a molten glow  
Of seeming links of chain-mail; but above  
The water and the light together made  
On the grey walls and roof of the dank cave  
A show of leaping flames, of creeping spires  
Of tongues of light that licked the granite ledge  
Cunningly flickered up along each cleft  
Each refractory roughness, creeping up  
Making, where shadows should have been, long threads  
And tapering cones and flame-like forms of white  
A fire which heated not, nor singed, nor fed  
On things material, but self-renewed  
Burnt on the cold stones not to be consumed

<sup>54</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 141.

<sup>55</sup>Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 231–2.

<sup>56</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 142.

<sup>57</sup>Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 3.

And not consuming, made of light and stone  
 A fountain of cold fire stirred by the force  
 Of waterfall and rising spring at once  
 With borrowed liveliness ...<sup>58</sup>

This poem is a clear articulation of procreation, a theme that is antithetical to purification. Alchemy, first and foremost, is associated with metamorphosis and production, whose raw materials or *prima materia* can be varied but whose end product remains the same, the philosopher's stone. According to Maud, the literary critic in *Possession*, this short poem is "the beginning of *Melusina*"<sup>59</sup>. Roland and Maud find that the prototype of the poem's cave is a real cavern in the Thomason Foss, in north Yorkshire, and they read the poem as a coded description of the place where the two Victorian poets' romantic union took place. The poem is not so much an explanation of a natural phenomenon as of the unfolding of an alchemical process through its emphasis on change and mutability. What takes place in the poem is that sunlight travels "through the air", hits "the water's glaze", is reflected upon the rock of "the dank cave", and becomes illusory "leaping flames". In the poem, it is no longer mere reflection and refraction of sunlight; it is a transmutative process whose end product incorporates and also enlarges the raw material. It is a process of assimilation, synthesis, incorporation, and the combination of the four elements to form something new. "Three elements combined to make the fourth", the reader is told at the beginning of the poem, and that echoes the essential alchemical view that the philosopher's stone would be created from the union of air, water, fire and earth, the four elements.<sup>60</sup> The poem progresses and the poet's alchemical imagination runs on. What is reflected upon the cave wall, the poet insists, is no longer sunlight, but burning fires that are constantly "creeping up". The fires are possessed of "forms of white" and simulate "creeping spires" and "tapering cones", all of which evokes the image of the Paradise in alchemy that alchemists tend to express geometrically as a double pyramid.<sup>61</sup> The Paradise also represents the *albedo* stage in the alchemical process, a state of whiteness that is the third stage of the four on the pathway to the creation of the stone.<sup>62</sup> The poem ends in the poet ruminating on the paradoxical nature of the fires, when her alchemical mania reaches its apex. The fires are both light and stone, both cold and fire, neither consuming nor being consumed, something out of nothing and a union of all conceivable opposites – the very essence of the philosopher's stone. Two other procreation myths parallel the alchemical narrative of the making of the stone in the poem. The crux of the whole phenomenon is the mirror-glitter of the rippling water whose surface LaMotte visualises as "serpent-scales" and whose underwater shadows as "links of chain-mail". These two images evoke *Melusina* the snake-woman and *Raimondin* the medieval knight, whose encounter at *La Fontaine de la Soif*, or the *Thirsty Fountain*, initiates the procreation of a line of noble kings and lords. Finally, the "ash-saplings" that play a part in the interplay between sunlight and water become a pun on the beloved, *Randolph Henry Ash*, and an oblique reference to the conception of their daughter near the *Thomason Foss*. This procreation myth is

<sup>58</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 266.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 3.

<sup>61</sup>Jung, *Aion*, 236.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 235.

verified at the end of the novel when Ash encounters his daughter by accident, who tells him that her name is Maia Thomasine Bailey; the name evokes the place of their romance in the father's mind and he responds almost immediately with "he knew a water-fall called Thomasine"<sup>63</sup>.

Another of LaMotte's poems, namely, the second stanza of the one on the City of Is, treats on the theme of duration and infinity, and as a principal means of perpetuating both the individual and the race, can be read as a variant of the procreation theme. In this part of the poem, LaMotte represents the temporal in terms of the spatial, and delineates the stasis of an underwater world as indicative of the cessation of time. The ancient city of Is, now submerged in the deep ocean, despite the elapse of many centuries, is far from a world of great havoc, but instead, features a well-preserved orderliness. Most impressive of all, is that the static sea-water takes on such a quality that it becomes a virtual mirror and "As though the world of roofs and rocks/ Were stored inside a glassy box"<sup>64</sup>. Every object underwater meets its reflected image. The "mackerel" "sees/ His mirrored self amongst the trees", the trees "hang to meet themselves", and the "church-spire in the thickened green/ Points to the trembling surface sheen/ From which descends, a glossy cone/ A mirror-spire that mocks its own"<sup>65</sup>. LaMotte artfully combines the submarine world of extraordinary balance and singular symmetry with the concept of perpetuity and permanence and makes the imagery of the double tree and the double cone into alchemical symbols of the philosopher's stone, whose purported medicinal efficacy is associated with longevity. The trees become a stretch of LaMotte's poetic imagination; they are growing in the deep sea as if still in the terrestrial setting and they are what they were before the flooding of the city and their vigorous growth attests to the miraculous preservative action of sea-water. The concept of permanence is further expressed by the church spire and its downward reflected image which together constitute an hourglass. The hourglass, nevertheless, is defunct on account of its disintegration indicated by the fish swimming in the gap between the two spires (Between these two the mackerel sails/ As did the swallow in the vales/ Of summer air ...),<sup>66</sup> and furthermore, the lack of motion of either sand or water signifies time standing still. Time is frozen and this is a world unravished by the ruthless and inexorable devastation of time. Both these images in the poem reflect upon the nature of time in an alchemical sense. It is interesting to note that in alchemy what takes place in the water of a retort, i.e. a typical alchemical process, is usually visualised as the growth of a tree, thus forging a connection between the tree and water. Jung summarises: "Suffice to say that the adept saw branches and twigs in the retort, where his tree grew and blossomed"<sup>67</sup>. More importantly, the tree which alchemists named as "the philosophical tree", is a synonym of the philosopher's stone which for Paracelsus as well as his contemporaries could grant people a long life. The hourglass also becomes a reconfigured image of Paradise, represented graphically in alchemy as a double pyramid in the shape of a diamond, and as a synonym of the philosopher's stone that can defy the attrition of age.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 509.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 134–5.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>67</sup>Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, 286.

<sup>68</sup>Jung, *Aion*, 236.

## Conclusion

These poems and fragments of poems, both the text and subtext of the Melusina story, constitute a larger narrative on the aquatic world whose metamorphosis indicates the different facets of the making of the philosopher's stone. These images of the philosopher's stone become interpretive of the alchemical nature of the snake-woman, who in Jung's interpretations is also the stone, and thus such images recurrent in Byatt's entire oeuvre as glass, red, white, and snakes are intertwined in an alchemical narrative that interprets one in terms of another. Like elsewhere in Byatt's canon, the embedded narrative sheds light on the larger narrative of the novel, and it is exactly the alchemical nature of Melusina that brings her narrative and her creator LaMotte's narrative into focus.

Marguerite Yourcenar's *L'Oeuvre au noir* (1968), Evan S. Connell's *The Alchemist's Journal* (1991), Leslie Whitten's *The Alchemist* (1973) and Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels* (1981) are all novels that discuss Paracelsus the alchemist and are cited in a chapter of Theodore Ziolkowski's book *The Alchemist in Literature: From Dante to the Present* as examples of the modern craze for alchemy in literature.<sup>69</sup> After a trenchant analysis, the chapter concludes:

All these reasons, ultimately, can be understood within the broader context of the twentieth-century loss of faith and the search for viable substitutes to take its place.<sup>70</sup>

Ziolkowski sees alchemy as among "such surrogates as art, Eastern mysticism, political ideologies, myth, and utopia"<sup>71</sup>. The four above-mentioned novels certainly incorporate alchemy as a viable form of mysticism and use it as synonymous with myth and magic. However, although both Paracelsus the alchemist and his ideas on alchemy are referenced from time to time in *Possession*, mysticism is reduced to a minimum. Byatt utilises alchemy as an important metaphorical device whose central motif, the union of opposites, epitomises her vision of paradoxes central to both the ultimate secret of the Ash-LaMotte romance and her female artists as a whole. The philosopher's stone is a stone that has manifold synonyms.

These synonyms represent the elements to be united as a pair of opposites; for instance as man and woman, god and goddess, son and mother, red and white, active and passive, body and spirit, and so on.<sup>72</sup>

The notion of the union of opposites certainly has a strong appeal for Byatt who in the two poems quoted above, namely "Three elements combined to make the fourth" and "And in the pool two fishes play" marvels repeatedly over the wondrous natural phenomena of the symbiosis of things incompatible, and is also congruent with the paradoxical nature of LaMotte's Melusina, whom the poet visualises as both "an Unnatural Monster – and a most proud and loving and handy woman"<sup>73</sup>. Furthermore, these poems' repeated rehearsal of a pair of opposites, namely purification and procreation, makes the Melusina narrative indicative of LaMotte's motherhood and seclusion which is informed by the

<sup>69</sup>Ziolkowski, 188–228.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 227.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 227–8.

<sup>72</sup>Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 458.

<sup>73</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 174.

dynamics formed by the opposites. As analyzed above, Book One of *The Fairy Melusine*, with the image of the fairy as a gold-and-silver woman concerns innocence and purity; “Three elements combined to make the fourth” discusses procreation; “There are none blush on earth, y-wis” emphasises both purification and permanence; and finally “And in the pool two fishes play” ruminates upon life in death and the removal of carnal desires. “Life in death” is a term that applies to the predicament of being confined, spiritualisation indicates her celibacy, procreation bespeaks LaMotte’s motherhood, and permanence suggests the long span of her reclusive existence, and also, as indicated previously, re-references her procreation and motherhood. These themes so repeatedly expressed by the Melusina poems, also become themes that run throughout LaMotte’s confinement in her sister’s household which spans nearly thirty years.

LaMotte’s final letter to Ash, which never did reach him, but was discovered by the twentieth-century literary critics, brings the Melusina story and her own seclusion to a point, making the former a symbolic expression of the latter. The letter abounds in both the minute details of her life as a recluse and the snake imagery, i.e. Melusina, the dragon of *Samson Agonistes* as well as the snakes of the *Ancient Mariner*.<sup>74</sup> It is the revelation of the secret of her double identity as the nominal spinster aunt and the real biological mother that brings the thematic opposites of purification and procreation to the core of her confined life and to the fore of the Melusina-LaMotte similarities. This is a secret central to the Ash-LaMotte love affair that fuels the twentieth-century literary critics’ frenzied and fanatical search and research, and it is also a secret that gives LaMotte’s seclusion narrative an alchemical pattern and makes the snake-woman an archetype of the Victorian poet.

In the letter, LaMotte tells Ash: “I have been Melusina these thirty years. I have so to speak flown about and about the battlements of this stronghold crying on the wind of my need to see and feed and comfort my child, who knew me not”<sup>75</sup>. The separation between mother and daughter, in LaMotte’s case, is caused by exactly her double identity. She lives as the spinster aunt of the family which renders any care or love for Maia, her daughter, unnatural and unwelcome, thus obviating any need for intimacy. In the same letter, she complains to Ash:

She (Maia) sees me as a sorcière, a spinster in a fairy tale, looking at her with glittering eye and waiting for her to prick her poor little finger and stumble into the brute sleep of adult truth. And if my eye glittered with tears she saw them not. No, I will go on, I fill her with a sort of fear, a sort of revulsion—she feels, rightly, a too-much in my concern for her—but misreads that, which is most natural, as something unnatural.<sup>76</sup>

Any revelation of the truth to the daughter might ruin her happiness, and the double identity is what LaMotte has to assume at all costs no matter how tempting it might be to choose otherwise. It was “absolute and irrevocable” that neither her sister nor herself should reveal to the child her real parentage.<sup>77</sup> Her double identity becomes a necessary condition for guaranteeing her daughter’s happiness in Victorian society. Nevertheless, this secret she must keep causes her separation from the daughter that

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<sup>74</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 502–3.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 501.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

ruthlessly torments her, and it is exactly this distancing that constitutes the core of her similarity to Melusina, and marks the paradoxical nature of her long confinement. Jean d'Arras's lengthy original story presents a panoramic view of the fairy's whole life, detailing the encounter between the fairy and the knight, their procreation of offspring, the unusual exploits of their sons, and finally Raimondin's betrayal; LaMotte's literary texts on the other hand, presented in the novel as a series of short poems that despite a lack of a central and coherent storyline are unified by the central motif of alchemical metamorphosis, do not include LaMotte's whole life, but rather just that period associated with purification and procreation, namely her period of seclusion and motherhood.

The paradoxes that feature in LaMotte's reclusive existence, her celibacy and her procreation, embody her desperate remedies for a sin she committed against Victorian social morality. Her identity as the spinster aunt camouflages the illegitimacy of the child, which is viewed as a stigma by her society. Nevertheless, the concurrence of her spinsterhood and motherhood is by no means a cause for blame nor a castigation for the Victorian love affair if we place LaMotte's seclusion into the larger context of Byatt's canon. If we read LaMotte's procreation metaphorically, we may find that this pair of opposites is so central to Byatt's female artists as a whole that they are repeatedly enacted in Byatt's entire oeuvre, and become a paradigm for female artistic creativity. Byatt pronounces Elizabeth I as the model of her fictional female artists in her introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun*, where a female figure is a combination of both virginity and fertility.

But she (Elizabeth I) was mythologised by her poets and courtiers as a complex virgin moon goddess, not only, as Frances Yates pointed out in *Astraea*, the queen and huntress chaste and fair, Diana, but the Eastern goddesses of earth and harvest, turret-crowned Cybele, Astarte. Because she was born under Virgo, and because Virgo is a high summer sign, she goes with harvest and plenty, she carries sun-ripened corn, she brings in the Golden, not the Silver Age.<sup>78</sup>

The "harvest and plenty" or agricultural fertility represented by Elizabeth I is a metaphor for literary creation. In the same vein, LaMotte's biological procreation can be read as a metaphor for literary writing, and it is important to note that for the Victorian poet, the thirty years of seclusion did converge with her life as "an old witch in a turret, writing ... verses ..."<sup>79</sup>. LaMotte as a spinster mother is a variant form of Elizabeth I as a virgin fertility goddess, and both are expressive of Byatt's vision of the dialectical relationship between autonomy and creation. A motif that runs throughout Byatt's works is that isolation is a *sine qua non* for literary creation in female artists. Too much involvement in real life proves detrimental to their careers as writers, and Byatt's works are replete with solitary female writers, dedicating their lives to creative writing. Cassandra in *The Game* is an Oxford don who has a passion for medieval literature and lives a somewhat isolated life. Frederica Potter in the Tetralogy chooses a divorce and celibacy to become a woman working in academia. Mrs. Brown in "Art Work" is another woman who chooses celibacy and art. Maud, the literary critic in *Possession*, will gain her autonomy at the end of the story since her lover Roland will go to work in Amsterdam, a foreign city. To conclude, LaMotte's image as a reclusive mother becomes the paradigm for Byatt's solitary female

<sup>78</sup>Byatt, *The Shadow*, xv.

<sup>79</sup>Byatt, *Possession*, 500.



characters. In Byatt's fictional world, solitude and isolation become the norms of literary creation, especially for women.

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## ORCID

Xiuchun Zhang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9936-3263>

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