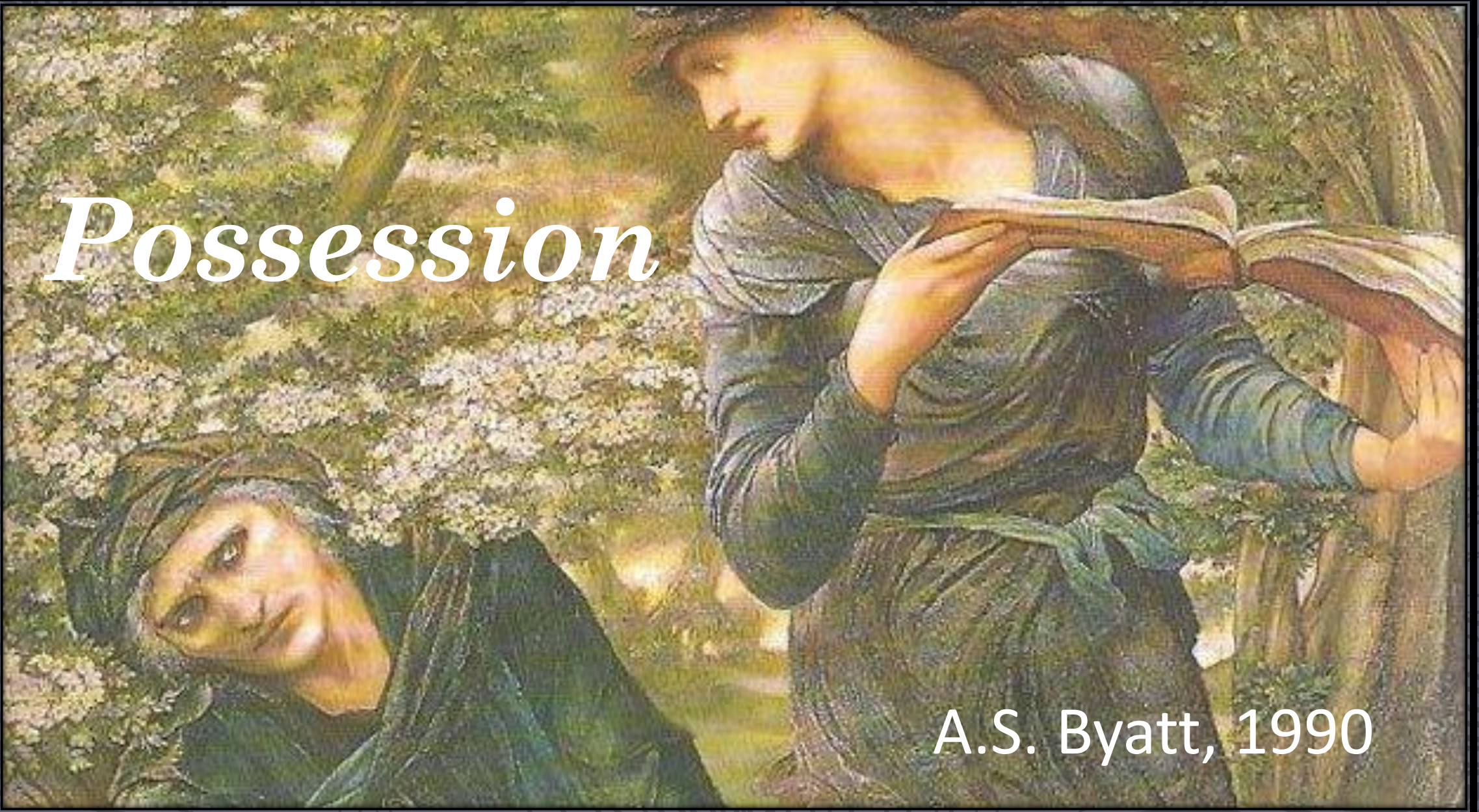


Possession

A.S. Byatt, 1990



Key Themes

- Desire and Knowledge
- History, Truth, Imagination
- National/Cultural Heritage
- Romance, Gender & Genre
- Scientific & Literary Discourses

“There are things that happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been.”

A.S. Byatt, *Possession*, p. 552



Primary Theme: Possession

- To possess the past through national artefacts, literary texts, or knowledge;
- To be possessed by the past (such as memory, ghosts, spirits, hauntings);
- To possess and be possessed by another person (in romantic terms);
- To possess understanding of a text and to be possessed by a text.

Possession as a theme and concept is central to the book and its characters, on multiple levels with multiple meanings and contexts, functioning simultaneously via active and passive verb tenses:

- **Active:** “to possess”
- **Passive:** “to be possessed”

“Literary critics make
natural detectives.”

~ *Possession*, p. 258

Desire and Knowledge



Possession calls into question how completely we can ever “know” the past from its textual traces. Byatt’s novel is full of mysteries that resist the very notion of a solution, while it illuminates (and pokes fun at) the insatiable curiosity of her scholar-detectives, who come to learn that collecting the artifacts of dead poets and scrutinizing their marginalia does not in itself produce knowledge and that attention must be paid to what has been left out of the standard biographies. The text contains a struggle between two tensions: the desire for knowledge ... and the resistance offered by ... “the mystery of privacy.”

– Dana Shiller, “The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel” (547)



History, Truth, Imagination

- We can never fully know the past because of what remains undocumented or hidden by the historical record.
- Byatt posits imagination and narrative as strategies or mediums for filling in these gaps, bringing to life what History silences.
- Desire for complete knowledge also comes up against limits of interpretation; thus, emphasis is not on recovery of historical “truths” – rather, the *attempt* and *process* of “reaching back” to gain a fuller understanding of the past (Shiller 552)



- Byatt attempts an “historically faithful” text, with a recognizable amalgamation of Victorian poets and a Victorian past presented as a recognizably *different* world (not a nostalgic simulacra of our present desires/beliefs) (Shiller 551).
- The past is offered “as a rich storehouse of knowledge about the dead” (Shiller 557) through textual survivals and artifacts; however, the past is always being revised.

The two separate plots are entangled by a web of imagery, repetitions, patterns and allusions to show how the past and present are similarly intertwined.

Possession and the Victorians

“They did go on so, don't you think, those Victorian poets, they took themselves so horribly seriously?’ he said, pushing the lift button, summoning it from the depths. As it creaked up, Blackadder said, “That's not the worst thing a human being can do, take himself seriously.” – Byatt, *Possession*, p. 431


“The Victorians continue to have an embodied afterlife today, as part of our cultural memory, mediated in part by the imaginative texts they have left behind, which continue to shape the present.”

- Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* (102)





Possession and Thatcherism

- Margaret Thatcher’s 1984 slogan of “Victorian values” was explicitly connected to preservation (and commodification) of Britain’s national heritage and legacies whereby heritage is viewed as “property” and “the past becomes a possession” (Mitchell 93-94).
 - In *Possession*, the Blackadder and Cropper rivalry is fueled by competition for national resources and capitalist forces mirroring British and American rivalry as economic and cultural “superpowers.”
 - Byatt explores anxieties surrounding the appropriation of cultural heritages and artefacts of other nations (while perhaps demonstrating a blindness to the British Empire historically committing the same cultural theft).
 - National museums and archives are figured as “mausoleums for dead relics” (Mitchell 99).
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“Roland had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his 'self' as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones. Mostly he liked this. He had no desire for any strenuous Romantic self-assertion.” (Byatt 459)

Possession and Postmodernism

Critical Question: Is *Possession* a postmodern text?

- While Byatt critiques postmodernism and “ruthlessly satirises the literary academy ... its most substantial pleasures are nonetheless reserved for members of precisely that academy” (Mitchell 103).
- In other words, Byatt blends the pleasures of (Victorian) literary realism with distinctly postmodern strategies (e.g. pastiche, intertextual allusions, metafictional self-awareness), thus reconciling “the authority of the author and the power of the reader, and critic, to make meaning” (Mitchell 103)



Possession and Romance

Romance: rooted in medieval literature

- Heroic quests, heterosexual love, courtly manners
- Key theme of faithfulness in adversity
- Often reworked legends, fairy tale, folklore and history
- Typically structured through a web of interwoven stories
- Later linked to the fantastic/fantasy and gothic genres

Gothic plot elements in *Possession*:

Adultery, lesbianism, suicide, frigidity, illegitimacy, infanticide, seduction, grave robbery, hauntings

Possession and Permutations of Sex, Gender, and Desire



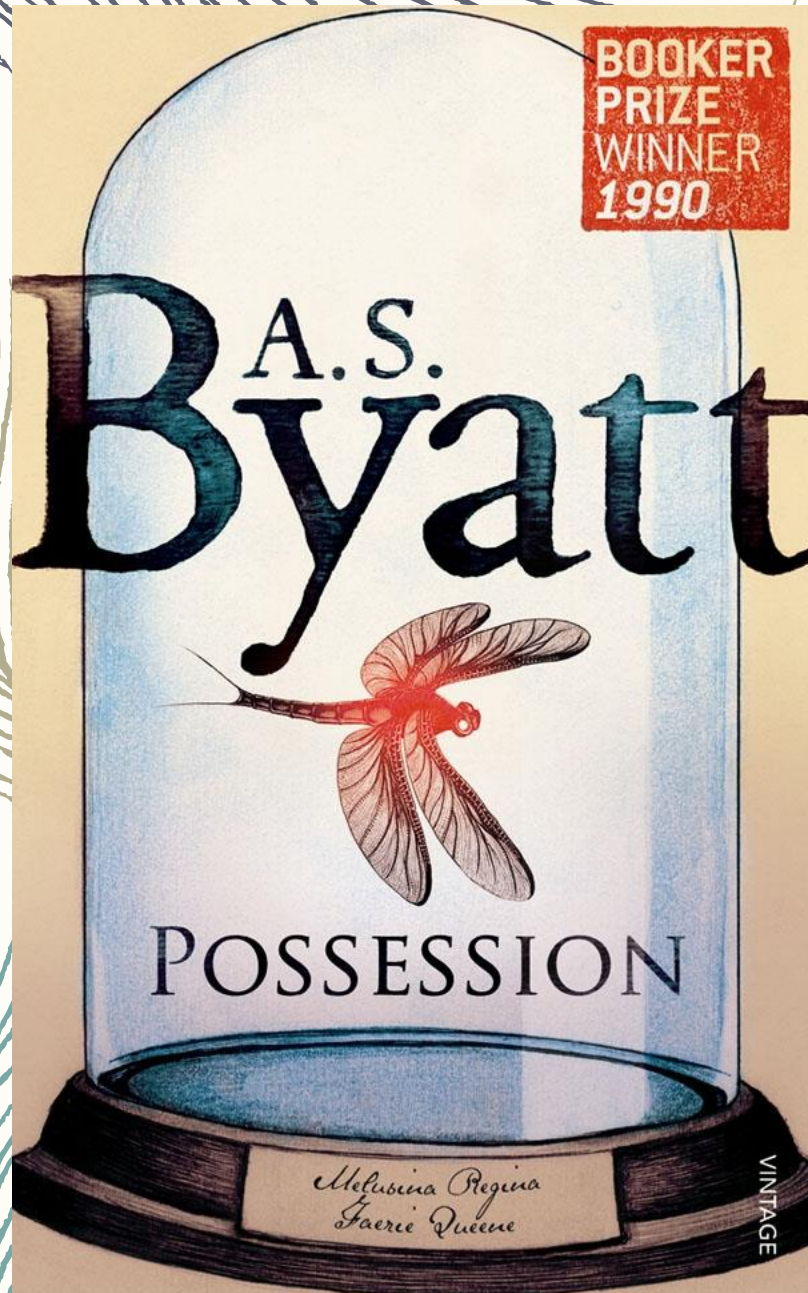
- *Possession* develops its dual romance narrative as metaphor for the relationship between text and reader as one of desire and “mutual possession,” where the reader desires to take possession of a text (to unlock its mysteries/meanings) while texts take possession of the reader’s imagination (Mitchell 106).
- The ideal of mutual possession, however, is complicated by patriarchal constructions surrounding gendered knowledge, writing, and spaces.
- The conventional dichotomous relationship between science and art is reflected in gendered binaries, where masculine rationality, reason and realism is often privileged over feminine irrationality, emotion and illusion.
- Ultimately, the text explores how women (or feminized others) are constructed as objects and possessions (of male desire) – thus, the importance of autonomy and self-possession for many of the female characters in the text.

Scientific and Literary Discourses



“The Historian and the Man of Science alike may be said to traffic with the dead. ... I myself, with the aid of the imagination, have worked a little in that line, have ventriloquised, have lent my voice to, and mixt my life with, those past voices and lives whose resuscitation in our own lives as warnings, as examples, as the life of the past persisting in us, is the business of every thinking man and woman.”

- *A.S. Byatt, Possession, p. 116*



1. Use the study guide questions to help inform your reading;
2. Read recommended poems by Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti, Lord Tennyson and William Yeats;
3. If you watch the 2002 film version, be advised that there are major changes and diversions from the text, and you should not rely on this as your sole “reading” of Byatt’s novel.

Suggestions