Transtemporal Feeling:
Intimacy as Hermeneutic in Engl(ish) Historical Fiction

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Introduction

“This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past…The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise…”¹

- Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)

“I’ll tell you your problem. No guts…By which I mean a visceral belief in yourself. Gut instinct. The part of you which doesn’t reason. The certainty for which there is no back reference. Because time is reversed. Tock, tick goes the universe and then recovers itself, but it was enough, you were in there and you bloody know.”²

- Tom Stoppard, Arcadia (1993)

In Tom Stoppard’s 1993 play Arcadia, preeminent literature professor Bernard Nightingale delivers this remark to dogged researcher and history author Hannah Jarvis. The play cycles back and forth between different timelines—the early nineteenth century and the late twentieth—on the site of the same English country estate. The present day investigation concerns the lives of the earlier inhabitants. Initially the interest, especially for Byron scholar Bernard, concerns the house's place in a sensational narrative history. Bernard believes that one of the inhabitants must have been killed by the visiting Lord Byron in a duel. What is actually unearthed is a much quieter relationship, one between the precocious (indeed, scientific genius)

² Tom Stoppard, Arcadia (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 50.
daughter of the house and her wry tutor. Though the present day investigators do not get the explicit emotional substance, they get the outline of something felt fully and then lost. Indeed, the daughter, Thomasina, dies before leaving her teenage years; in this way, she is twice removed.

The clash between Bernard and Hannah is one of methodology, discipline, and worldview. Yet both are concerned with their objects of study as people. They have a burning desire to know. Bernard’s remark is especially salient because it forces us to acknowledge the personal dimension of study, of investigation, of knowledge-making. Bernard is an unabashed defender of intuition, especially his own. He is misguided in the case of Arcadia. But this “belief in oneself” reverberates throughout the play. Hannah, for one, believes in herself much more than Bernard gives her credit for, only her concept of herself vis-à-vis the historical reality is more nuanced than Bernard’s. She leaves room for wrongness, confusion, loose ends, while trusting that in some rationalist solution to the puzzle, they can be resolved. Yet Arcadia does not discard entirely the spirit of Bernard’s assertion that knowing oneself is a crucial precondition for knowing others. This project will reckon with whether this process of knowing the past can be, like Bernard implies, a sort of instant thunderstrike, or if it is all bound to be quiet scribbling, false epiphanies, and middling conclusions. In essence, the chapters survey instances where historical fiction engages with historical methodology.

History is a popular subject in fiction. It is maybe the only subject. I have chosen novels with similar anxieties about history, both as an academic field and a constant practice of the human mind. These writers know that history is much more than narrative, but have tasked themselves with passing the unwieldy potentialities back through an authorial sieve. The three ambitious texts have a sometimes dizzying combination of self-consciousness and self-
confidence; the authors point to the complicated nature of historical reality broadly, yet streamline their novels. For Josephine Tey’s 1951 detective novel *The Daughter of Time*, concerning the guilt or innocence of one Richard Plantagenet, this means ordering evidence. A.S. Byatt, in the sweeping 1990 Neo-Victorian *Possession*, offers flowery epigraphs, diligent subdivisions, and rhythmic symmetry. Most recently, Lauren Groff, in her 2021 effort *Matrix*, smooths the medieval into stark prose and enigmatic characters.

Other books are vital to this discussion and excluded on account of scope. These include the works of mainstream acclaimed historical fiction authors like Tracy Chevalier, Hilary Mantel, Maggie O’Farrell. The latter two authors in particular deal with English history, twisting the collective imagination of iconic national figures, from Thomas Cromwell to Shakespeare. The role of personage and national identity in history-making will similarly factor into my study of the three selected novels. Another pertinent subgenre is historiographical metafiction, and the canonical works therein: John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, and Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, to name only a few. Historiographic metafiction is a term coined by literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, and will prove relevant in the following chapters, in specific principles and in larger spirit. For one, Byatt is frequently included in the canon of historiographic metafiction and is a key figure in postmodern literature generally; Hutcheon’s formation of the genre came out of postmodern studies. Historiographic metafiction, according to Hutcheon, reexamines history with self-reflexivity, for “the certainty of direct reference of the historical novel or even the nonfictional novel is gone.”

While pre-postmodern genre fiction like *The Daughter of Time* and post-postmodern buzzy literary fiction

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like *Matrix* would not be the canonical purview of the genre, I argue that they benefit from a reading within a historiographic metafictional frame. None of the novels buy into a foolproof historical method; all take pains to call the reader’s attention to the inevitability of uncertainty.

These authors are fortunate to speak with many readers, as all three novels were bestsellers. While each text is intellectually rigorous, they are also engaged in making history accessible, entertaining, and, yes, profitable. This project will not necessarily contribute to the codified field of “popular fiction studies” because the novels in question, though literally popular, have each established their status as “literature.”

But I do want to explore historical novels’ bid for resonance and acclaim. Critic and academic Megan O’Grady frames the current rise in status of historical novels as means of making sense of unrest: “Colson Whitehead and George Saunders, Anna Burns and Marlon James, Gina Apostol and Yaa Gyasi, to name just a few, have been making clarity of chaos…to capture the way history shapes, wounds and implicates us.”

O’Grady describes a theory of literary fiction, political fiction that is essentially disruptive and often explicitly postcolonial, anticolonial. Groff speaks most in concert with such a movement, sensibly, she has the temporal advantage, being the most contemporary author of the bunch. The bestselling novels I have chosen, each according to their author’s position to empire and larger historical context, chronicle popular historical novels’ evolving relationship to hegemonic historiography.

All three novels, as stated above, deal with English history. They come from authors with different relationships to Englishness (Tey, a Scot who thought of herself as British; Byatt,

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quintessentially English; and Groff, an American) and with different degrees of apologia. Place and place-myth are nonetheless integral to each work. They invite us to recognize historiography as a national project and occasionally a propagandist project. This is perhaps most directly articulated in *The Daughter of Time*, in which the long line of English historians and poets dedicated to Richard’s treacherousness comes under scrutiny. In *Possession*, Byatt admires the academic project surrounding English heritage overall (her villains are mostly Americans) while attending to the class divide and failing of women that have plagued the country; race, ethnicity, and empire feel more like detail work than something meaningfully addressed by the text. In Groff, the regression of democracy, civil rights, and climate action are filtered through a candlelit medieval England. Though all three of these novels come from women authors, this does not produce a clear throughline; their politics, though certainly in conversation, are generally bound by their respective historical and social contexts. What they share is the visceral mingling of historical narrative and present emotion.

Germaine, though not necessarily baked into my analysis of these novels, is affect theory. Still somewhat nascent, affect theory has its origins in psychology, but has had considerable influence in the humanities. Silvan Tomkins originated the discipline when he enumerated and classified nine affects (e.g. enjoyment, surprise) for the purposes of psychology.⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick extended affect into literary theory, queer theory, and gender studies. Sedgwick’s seminal work *Touching Feeling* essentially recenters the body (logically enough) in studying sexuality, surveying, among other affects, shame, “living, as it does, on and in the muscles and capillaries of the face.”⁷ Sedgwick interprets affect as contagious and creative, elusive to moral

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valuations, and incredibly influential to human lives. More recently the academic Zachary Samalin crucially critiques affect theory by excavating its continuity with hegemonic nineteenth-century European theories of emotion and racial difference, though still goes so far as to deem the turn of the millennium the “affective turn.”

What, then, is an affect? It is a feeling produced by, but not innately tied to, an object (itself infinitely layered with associations), but occasionally delineated as separate from subjectivity by an admittedly hard to follow order of philosophical operations. Affects are pre-consciousness, even pre-culture; sometimes we are told they are biological. This is hard for us to swallow; we are not clued into the workings of our own mind in the way we might want to be, and how could anyone profess to be? The place where affect theory usually finds its cozy end: it pleads with us to recognize the freeing collective experience of the electric shock before any one of us, doomed, attempts to articulate what we have felt.

Through the lens of affect theory, we can view the moments in these texts where characters and readers are synchronously pointed to an object (a painted face, sunlit shimmer, wax seal), pulled not only into history, but also toward an irresistible sensation of truth, as representing affect. There are indeed, by nature of these texts which deal explicitly across temporalities, experiences that collide and overlap. Groff, in Matrix, points to an experience among her nuns that feels suspiciously akin to affect, or the unnameable force (we might gloss it neatly as eroticism) between objects of the abbey and between the human minds:

Upon the nuns’ heads one by one the heat descends; and when it rises again out of each, it builds a great sympathetic shining that gathers strength and speed as it goes along, a swirling of red white and hot blue flame. The heat spreading from the body of one to the

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other is shared as all things in this abbey of women are shared. Marie can see it passing body to body.⁹

Marie de France, armed with Groff’s construction of a medieval cosmology, embraces something beyond thought, beyond God or religion, something essential intermittently housed in the body and between bodies. Groff’s writing here might be in/of the so-called affective turn.

Perhaps Byatt similarly deals with affect in that her Victorian poets are theorized by her contemporary scholars to be, free as they are from the intellectual anxiety of postmodernism, more bodily alive. Her poet Randolph Ash is certainly affected riding through the woods: “I had the sensation...that I was moving out of time, that the way, narrow and dark-dappled, stretched away indifferently before and behind, and that I was who I had been and what I would become—all at once, all wound in one…whether I came or went, or remained still.”¹⁰ This moment feels reminiscent of affect because it captures something instantaneous, prior to interpretation. In the end, as Ash’s movement “out of time” suggests, trans-temporal distinctions mostly dissolve, and investigators and poets alike are “possessed” by their own bodies. Byatt implies a consistent physiological architecture, even if the temporally estranged cultures transcribe sensation independently and therefore disparately. Even if the modern day investigators cannot explain why or how, they at times share bodily responses with people long dead.

And in Tey, what is her protagonist Inspector Grant’s initial sighting of Richard III’s portrait if not an affect? He does not recognize the king’s face. Something stirs in him that he is able to later identify as sympathy. Grant’s judgment is admittedly not instantaneous; he studies the picture for a generous period of forty-five or so seconds. In any case, the detective genre begs the embroiling of the body. Grant, injured policeman, tosses and turns in his hospital bed,

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reaching for the history books that feed his keen sense of Richard’s innocence. His domino-
esque discoveries inflict something physical, instant, on both himself and Tey’s reader, as when
he realizes Thomas More’s biased position in preparing his history of Richard: “[Grant] was so
disgusted that he flung the precious book on to the floor before he remembered that it was the
property of a Public Library…”11 Tey lends the quest lightheartedness, but the feelings are real,
coursing through Grant’s entire compromised body.

So maybe there are affects in Matrix, Possession, and The Daughter of Time, if you wish
to see them. There are certainly emotions, as I understand them, hot and bittersweet ones. But the
choices made by the characters and their authors when it comes to deciding what they believe are
deliberate. Maybe the choice is to embrace affect, or maybe, and I tend to err on this side of the
debate, the sentimental sparks are culturally constituted to their core. Roland Barthes offered up
the term affect with a slightly different aim when he said to us “the affectivity which is at the
heart of all literature includes only an absurdly restricted number of functions: I desire, I suffer, I
am angry, I contest, I love, I want to be loved, I am afraid to die…”12 We can dislike such global
phrases as “the heart of all literature,” but I think the stories I have chosen to discuss follow
Barthes’ model of affectivity, if not the models of affect theory, closely. History (with nation
often entangled), fervently sketched, is the novels’ bid to counter Barthes’ “banality of
affectivity,”13 to describe the essentials of life (of which I think desire and love are most central)
in specific. Even in turning into the body, history in these English stories is still a mind’s game;
it is the place where these authors command their imaginations to go. They haven’t fallen into

xvi-xvii.
13 Barthes, Critical Essays, xvii.
feeling but climbed down by rungs. They sink into old sensations methodically, wary that a foothold might at any moment give way.

Precisely because these novels are historical, understanding not only literature’s but history’s relationship to both affect theory and emotions broadly will be needed. In the same year *Matrix* was published, Ute Frevert, a historian of emotions, deems affect theory mildly interesting, but ultimately highly unhelpful:

Affect theory, as it has been developed by modern psychology and embraced by, above all, literary and media studies, does not seem helpful in this regard. It works with assumptions borrowed from evolutionary biology and reduces culture and learning to marginalia. From a historical point of view, it is more rewarding to study the vocabulary of emotions bound to time and space.14

Frevert’s statement is kind of remarkable; it insists that theory fit for a literature scholar is no good for the (serious) historian. The historian’s deep existential anxiety, *can I know the past, can I really?* figures roughly against affect theory’s insistent scraping away at some supposed universal emotional experience (though affect theory absolutely acknowledges culture’s role in mediating what produces affect, the affect itself is not culturally mediated). Indeed, in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,” Michel Foucault took a similar tack to Frevert: “We believe that feelings are immutable, but every sentiment, particularly the noblest and most disinterested, has a history.”15 What theoretical framing, then, should the student of historical literature make use of, especially when the texts at hand are seriously engaged with the practice of historiography? All three of these novels make narrative their primary theoretical tool; this is

obvious. These are popular, pleasurable books, with snappy writing, rich characters, and happy endings. But all three are doing deep reflexive work. In feigning embodiment of the past, the novels find their own answers regarding what they are embodying—a man, a feeling, an affect, a moment. My aim in the following three chapters will be an attentive analysis of what the stories of Tey, Byatt, and Groff claim access to and ignorance of.

Mostly they offer us sensations: these are sensory novels; this makes the biological bent of affect theory appealingly adjacent, though I do not think crucial, for my analyses. They bring us sensations of innocence, romance, sex, England (bogs, fields), impending death. The truth of these feelings, contested, twisting, but true, in the sense that only fiction can be true, are what make these novels meaningful to me. Yet, infinitely fascinatingly, they loop around and around their subjects, meaningfully uncertain, like the best histories ought to be.

Bernard’s theory in Arcadia, that which he “bloody knows,” ends up being wrong. Hannah’s scientific method is rewarded. Bernard is admonished for his cocksureness, yet the final scene of the play, in which past and present characters mingle freely across the stage, begs the question of whether truth lingers in Bernard’s vision of historical knowledge. If we reframe Bernard’s overmasculine, overbold “gut instinct” as intimacy, the attempt to reach out, not laying claim, but merely seeking touch, I think it could be a much more advantageous framework. Closeness could be a manner of knowing.

In Chapter 1, I will investigate Josephine Tey’s The Daughter of Time, with particular attention to how Tey flouts genre norms with a historical mystery that is, despite certain appearances, solved through intuition rather than deduction. In Chapter 2, I will attend to A.S. Byatt’s labyrinthine Possession, in particular her academics-protagonists’ struggle to overcome the barrier of history in order to approach the truth of past people and, by extension, themselves.
In the final chapter, I will discuss Lauren Groff’s _Matrix_, and how the mighty Marie de France is made flesh: at once proximate and elusive. Linking these three analyses will be the motifs of emotion, intimacy, and closeness, as they simultaneously pose epistemological problems and offer alluring solutions.
Chapter 1

Grant’s Good King Richard:
Intuitive Investigation in *The Daughter of Time*

In 1990, the Crime Writer’s Association awarded Josephine Tey’s 1951 novel, *The Daughter of Time*, the accolade “the greatest mystery novel of all time.”¹ Such a determination, of course, can never be definitive, but what strikes about this determination in particular is its underlying invocation: that the exceptional can be paradigmatic. For the crime at the heart of *The Daughter of Time* is unusual for a classic detective novel, in that the transgression occurred, or was purported to have occurred, five centuries prior. The crime in question? Richard III, that “bottled spider,” and his inhuman execution of his kid nephews.

Yet Tey’s choice of subject, while unquestionably inventive, is hardly surprising. The question of Richard III’s guilt or innocence per the “Princes in the Tower” has proved contentious for centuries. Most people know the story, and by extension a monstrous picture of Richard, from Shakespeare’s play, itself cast principally via chroniclers writing after Richard’s death.² Notable among these anti-Richard historians is Tudor statesman Thomas More, who in

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Daughter quickly becomes the sworn enemy of Tey’s protagonist.³ But the first post-Tudor detractor from this frame was by no means recent, dating to the 1619 writings by one of Richard’s descendants, George Buck.⁴ The fascination remains alive and well today—in a 2020 survey of famous historical mysteries, Richard’s case ranked far and away highest amongst listeners of a popular British historical podcast.⁵

One could read The Daughter of Time’s contribution to the immortal mystery as a straightforward, self-contained, unacademic vindication of Richard. That is not, I contend, the core of what is happening. Instead, The Daughter of Time exposes various tensions: between fiction and history; rationality and sentiment; the living and the dead. In this process, Tey broadens the scope of her genre.⁶ She adapts the role of the detective and allows his conclusions to reverberate beyond the context of the crime he solves. Yet this boundary-bleeding is itself continually complicated by the position of Tey’s protagonist, Alan Grant, in the contested categories of English and male identity.

Linda Hutcheon’s frame is helpful for such an inquiry into boundary-bleeding. Admittedly, there is considerable theoretical mileage between Hutcheon, who coined “historiographic metafiction” as a way to study a particular subgenre of postmodernism, and the study of Josephine Tey, an author of genre fiction during the so-called Golden Age of Mystery,

³ Tey, Daughter, 116. Here Grant’s friend Carradine, with all his American subtlety, declares More to be a “mean, burbling, insinuating old bastard.”
⁴ Myers, “Historical Tradition,” 185; there was another defense of Richard conducted a few decades earlier, but Myers emphasizes that effort was a purely rhetorical exercise; Buck’s writings were earnest.
⁵ “What has been voted history’s greatest mystery?,” History Extra, July 31, 2020, www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/history-greatest-mystery-what-poll-results/.
⁶ Andrew Monnickendam, “Locating and Vindicating Josephine Tey’s Detective Fiction.” The Scottish Literary Review 11, no. 1 (2019): 78. Monnickendam depicts Tey, in Daughter, as not only offering up a “metatextual conundrum” but refusing to solve it: as Grant skirts the typified rational methods of the Golden Age detective, she does not indicate whether Grant’s straying is moral, or correct, or likely to have solved, once and for all, the Princes’ murder. I would second this assessment, but submit the narrative weight Tey places on sensibility as possibly transcending the debate entirely, shifting the focus from methodology to experience.
which we might house within “that past … we now seem to label as modernism.”

But both historiography and metafiction, phenomena that inherently erode boundaries, are expressed in The Daughter of Time, despite theoretically epitomizing a genre defined by its architecture. Herein, I would argue, lies the singularity of the novel.

The Daughter of Time begins when Alan Grant encounters Richard III, at first without even knowing his name. While Grant is bedridden after being wounded on the job as an inspector, his actress friend and occasional love interest Marta Hallard brings plenty to distract him: a neat envelope full of photo prints, each a portrait of a curious historical figure. It is Richard’s that seeks Grant out. Tey arranges for them a fateful meeting, as Grant leafs through the prints:

It was the portrait of a man. A man dressed in the velvet cap and slashed doublet of the late fifteenth century. A man about thirty-five or thirty-six years old, lean and clean shaven. He wore a rich jewelled collar, and was in the act of putting a ring on the little finger of his right hand. But he was not looking at the ring. He was looking off into space.

Grant’s rapture is instant, and in the blank hospital room, accumulates, as he feverishly scans Richard’s features. Grant deems Richard’s glance “most arresting and individual,” so much so as to be beyond the artist’s talents. He senses that Richard was once a sickly child, now a “perfectionist … used to great responsibility.” He then turns the photo over and reveals Richard's identity; so this is “the destroyer of innocence.”

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8 Tey, Daughter, 22, my emphasis.
9 Tey, Daughter, 22.
10 Tey, Daughter, 22.
lies in his talent for reading faces, is quietly confounded: “He lay a long time looking at that face; at those extraordinary eyes…At first glance they appeared to be peering; but as one looked one found that they were in fact withdrawn, almost absent-minded.”¹¹ In this moment, Grant does something that he might not like to admit; he has leaped into history and felt a sudden shock of connection with the dead. Here is not an academic, scientific, investigational engagement, but an emotional one. For Grant, in viewing this portrait, a tentative reality of Richard constructs itself, a reality that will eventually emerge, fully formed, in a bold thesis. That is: Richard was unjustly maligned by the Tudors, when in fact it was his successor, Henry VII, who had the boys killed. Crucially, Grant’s initial perception of the portrait is the root of this proposed reality.

Nevermind that we know this portrait in particular was crafted post-1577, and that no portraits survive from Richard’s lifetime.¹² But whether or not the portrait was part of, or at least influenced by, the “Tudor propaganda machine” Grant will dismantle does not matter here. What matters is that Grant is communing with the past. With the help of Marta, the hospital staff, and especially through the investigative partnership he forms with boyish American research assistant, Brent Carradine (the love-connection of one of Marta’s friends), Alan Grant will stretch the epistemological limits of the detective.

The Author

Josephine Tey (one of multiple pseudonyms taken by Elizabeth Mackintosh, born 1896 in Inverness) published Daughter near the end of her life, and after years spent oscillating between a quiet Scottish family life and her career, as both a playwright and mystery author, in London.

¹¹ Tey, Daughter, 23.
¹² “King Richard III,” National Portrait Gallery, accessed April 4, 2023, npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw05304/King-Richard-III. We do have illustrations, however, including in the Rous Roll, named for the historian Jean Rous, who, unsurprisingly enough, exchanged his largely positive assessment of Richard for a searingly dehumanizing one once Henry VII took power.
The most salient feature of Tey’s personal life, for the groundwork of this analysis, is the extent of her Scottishness. First as a college student in the Midlands, and then as a playwright, immersed in the social circles of the West End, Tey found a second home in England. In her will, she left her estate, including proceeds from her books, to the National Trust of England. Indeed, the name Josephine honors her mother, who died early in Tey’s life and carried an English lineage, as opposed to the Gaelic-speaking remoteness of her father’s side. At a point when many of her literary compatriots were writing through an explicitly nationalist lens, in the early twentieth century movement known as the Scottish Renaissance, it is easy to presume in Tey a certain self-hatred, and that presumption has been made. Jennifer Morag Henderson outlines in her 2015 biography, however, how this interpretation oversimplifies Tey’s identity. Rather, her personal life in Inverness, where she spent most of her time while writing as Josephine Tey, and her professional stints in London were each crucial to her lived experiences and self-concept. The following analysis, which will in part investigate *Daughter* as a meditation on English identity, maintains that Tey’s ability to be both Scottish and English informs her (de)construction of historical narrative. Tey is aware of, and continually explores, the line between interior and exterior, the inner experience and outer perception of the self. In one reading, Tey’s exterior was of London, her interior of Inverness, though this again likely cleaves itself to false dichotomies. However, Tey’s persistent historical and literary interest in

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maligned figures, of whom Richard III was just one,\textsuperscript{18} belies an anxiety over what is public and what is private, and by extension over the terms of reality itself.

The Suspect

Richard III, who reigned as King of England briefly from July 1483 until his death in battle in August 1485, is a tantalizing literary subject for the same reason he makes an infuriating historical one: the study of Richard makes the interpretive core of historiography at large unavoidable. As such, among historians, the question of Richard’s moral character has been christened “The Great Debate,”\textsuperscript{19} a recognition of how often discussions of Richard stem less from pure inquiry and instead involve rhetorical, rather than evidentiary, contests.

In such a context any scrap of physical evidence is game-changing. There was accordingly a reinvigoration of interest in Richard amongst both academics and the public in 2012, with the sensational archaeological discovery of his remains in a Social Services parking lot in the city center of Leicester, England.\textsuperscript{20} Tellingly, this undertaking was not without a Ricardian bent. Philippa Langley, herself a founding member of the Scottish branch of the Richard III Society and one of the primary researchers credited with the find, writes fairly sentimentally in her account: “If we … allow history to be written by the losers as well as the winners, perhaps we can at last lay Richard III to rest with real dignity.”\textsuperscript{21} For Langley, the

\textsuperscript{18} She wrote a non-fiction vindication of John Graham of Claverhouse and earned breakout success as a playwright with \textit{Richard of Bordeaux}, which positively characterized Richard II. Both these works were written under another pseudonym, Gordon Daviot.

\textsuperscript{19} Paul Murray Kendall, “General Introduction,” \textit{Richard III: The Great Debate}, ed. Paul Murray Kendall (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965). This piece by canonical 20th century pro-Richard historian Kendall introduces a set of primary sources on the topic. It may or may not be the first to denote the debate as such.

\textsuperscript{20} Similar upticks in study have happened, as in 1933, when human remains, initially discovered in the Tower in 1674, surmised to be Edward V and his brother and buried in Westminster Abbey, were exhumed and analyzed. The possibility of the remains belonging to the boys was not ruled out, and no further examination (e.g. DNA testing) has been undertaken.

\textsuperscript{21} Philippa Langley and Michael Jones, \textit{The King’s Grave: The Discovery of Richard III’s Lost Burial Place and the Clues it Holds} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 52.
discovery of Richard’s remains was not just a momentous historical contribution, filling in crucial blanks in an often foggy fifteenth century, but also a matter of spiritual, emotional, and national healing.

The Ricardian phenomenon is too dense to tackle here, but it ought to be said that the organization’s blatant partiality is far from incompatible with good-faith historical inquiry; the Richard III Society has been a major institutional backer of further scholarship on Richard and the world surrounding him; though one could quibble over the extent to which the partisanship of a Ricardian can be compartmentalized in favor of the Society’s seemingly humble mission to “reassess” the king’s reputation, which has arguably already been done several times over. The broader academic consensus, however, seems that the project of history ought not to be so hinged on the moral valuation of one man. The cautionary tale then oft-extracted from the study of Richard by historians is the trap of personality. While the impulse to ransom Richard from depths of his Shakespearean demonhood laudably complicates one oversimplification, one can swing too far in the opposite direction, toward a humanity that inherently produces rational moral consistency and by extension encodes goodness. Human Richard becomes Good King Richard. The assumption that a person’s actions must “add up” to some humanist coherence is undoubtedly a culturally and temporally constrained one. Looking back to the Shakespearean interpretation helps here. Catherine Belsey, in analyzing the Renaissance self-concept and using

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22 They have sponsored scholarly works on him via publication, and similarly helped to make key documentary sources accessible via print publication, see Rosemary Horrox and P.W. Hammond, eds., British Library Harleian Manuscript 433 (London: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited and The Richard III Society, 1979).

23 “About Us,” The Richard III Society, accessed April 6, 2023, richardii.net/about/.

24 Daughter is the popular expression of many scholarly efforts sympathetic to Richard, pre-1951 examples include works Tey mentions in the book, including Horace Walpole’s Enlightenment-era defense and Clements Markham’s turn of the century history of Richard. Post-Daughter pro-Richard biographies include the seminal 1955 effort by Paul Murray Kendall.

the fractured Richard III as a prime illustration, reminds us that the “unity and consistency of character” instrumental to the later realist mode was not especially culturally constituted when Shakespeare wrote the play.26

Such a notion of a consistent, contained personhood is one The Daughter of Time seemingly adopts whole-cloth. At one point, Grant declares, “historians should be compelled to take a course in psychology before they are allowed to write.”27 For Daughter, the parameters of personhood that matter are the ones intelligible to Grant and his makeshift investigative team at the hospital. But Grant’s theory of psychoanalysis is not consistently applied, in that it favors its favorite, so Daughter does not chronicle the triumph of science over lies, more so sympathy toward the unloved thing over heartless cruelty toward it. A rewritten Richard is one result of Daughter’s project, but Richard’s narrative is not the primary one; we must instead understand the implications of the metanarrative (Richard III’s) on the master narrative (Alan Grant’s).

The Detective

Grant begins his journey by recalling his earliest experiences and only memories of Richard III, the site of both being his schooling: “Every schoolboy turned over the final page of Richard III with relief, because now at last the Wars of the Roses were over and they could get on to the Tudors, who were dull but easy to follow.”28 This moment is somewhat funny; it intrigues the residents of a twenty-first century media landscape, where the Tudors’ fairly bloody legacy still seems ripe for imaginative exploration. The characterization of the Tudor dynasty as

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26 Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (London: Methuen, 1980), 88. In this sense, we can complicate even the oft-reproduced gloss of Shakespeare’s Richard as non-human, perhaps he is a different sort of man than the contemporary audience is able to recognize. For a historian’s perspective, specifically how theories of personhood developed amongst historiographers, specifically contrasting medieval and Enlightenment era historiography, see Myers, “Richard III and Historical Tradition.”
27 Tey, Daughter, 199.
28 Tey, Daughter, 26, my emphasis.
“dull” may be an idiosyncrasy of Tey, who clearly had a particular interest in medieval England, or her Grant. In either or any case, this early statement from the narrator via Grant accomplishes a couple of key things. One, it declares intention and narrows focus; it identifies a subject, we are told, easily misunderstood and paid meager attention. Second, it evinces a direct engagement by Tey with historiography: history as it comes down to us, as it is categorized and formalized.

The more Grant learns about his subject, the more indignant, in many cases justly so, he becomes. He cannot believe the extent to which the claims of Tudor historians, who seem to have such obvious reason to vilify Richard, have been taken as gospel, trickling down into schoolbooks and community understanding. Grant frames this as a shortcoming of history broadly. Grant’s discontent with historiography is its valence of rationality and objectivity, which he feels is so obviously absent in reality. He remarks, “suddenly vicious,” in a discussion with Carradine on historical methodology: “if it’s mathematics they’ve no right to drag in backstairs gossip.”

Grant draws a line between himself and historiography, not without bitterness or anger. Grant’s steadfastness is fierce, disarming, and occasionally extreme: “The values of historians differed so radically from any values with which he was acquainted that he could never hope to meet them on any common ground. He would go back to the Yard, where murderers were murderers and what went for Cox went equally for Box.”

Grant does not view his difference from historiography as methodological, but moral. In Grant’s self-conception, his common sense, rather than a scientific discernment, allows him to be an equitable judge of character. Grant nods to the importance of critical distance, at one point near the denouement chastising his thoroughly aggrieved self: “cool off … you’re beginning to be partisan. That’s no

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29 Tey, Daughter, 200.
30 Tey, Daughter, 203.
way to conduct an investigation.”31 But despite these moments of frank self-knowledge, Grant never fundamentally questions whether his fairly mythological understanding of Richard, his time and his place, might be false. The clear limit of Grant’s investigation, the epistemological bridges he is not willing to cross, are simultaneously what make The Daughter of Time so initially satisfying and relentlessly lingering. At the novel’s close, the reader knows Grant’s Richard’s innocence to be true, but what about history’s Richard, the “real” Richard?

By the time of Daughter, not all historians had damned Richard as Grant initially surmises; the Great Debate had long been inaugurated. Therefore Tey is not content to merely repackage one side of a debate that has already been conducted (the case made for Richard’s innocence is masterfully constructed, and exhilarating to read, but hardly breaks historical ground). She instead gives Grant and his assistant Carradine reason to grapple existentially with the significance of their own work, both as historical study and criminal investigation. In the final act of the Daughter of Time, the realization that Richard has had his defenders for centuries, and therefore that his and Grant’s findings are not in the least revelatory, comes crashing down, especially on the young Carradine. The following exchange between him and a less indignant, much more fatherly Grant not only plays into the novel’s identity politic but raises pertinent questions about the reasons for scholarship:

“But it won’t be the same, don’t you see? It won’t be a great discovery!” He said it in capitals. A Great Discovery.

Grant smiled at him. “Oh, come! You can’t expect to pick Great Discoveries off bushes. If you can’t be a pioneer what’s wrong with leading a crusade?”32

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31 Tey, Daughter, 137.
32 Tey, Daughter, 194.
The choice of imagery here is not surprising. Despite their respective national identities, both Grant and Carradine continually stake their claims to Englishness, whiteness, masculinity, Christianity: in essence, power. Richard is a clear imagined antecedent to these identities both men cling to. Grant tells a now more inspired Carradine: “that sounds a little more like the spirit that won the Empire.”\(^{33}\) We get a snappy back-and-forth on the arbitrary distinction between English and American imperialisms; these are presented as asides, but the quest Grant and Carradine are sketching out is clearly configured in the landscape of imperialism, expansionism, and violence, all of which the men here gloss as heritage. The essentially gentle Carradine, whom Grant and Marta repeatedly call “wooly lamb,” recalls in this scene a more “blackguard” ancestor. He remarks, amidst his fervor on the subject of Richard, that he can feel “just how the old boy felt when he wanted to buy a particular forest and someone said that he couldn’t have it.”\(^{34}\) The vindication of Richard is a path with some object at its end; it comes with rewards and satisfactions; it is oppositional and rebellious. Yet despite the stick-it-to-the-historian veneer of the quest, Grant and Carradine’s continual investment in countless other existing power structures, perhaps the most obvious of which being kingship, certainly limits the critical bite of their argument. We can then partially process the severity of emotion Richard’s case arouses in Grant by grappling with an emblem of power that appears, then constantly reappears, throughout Daughter, until it is blinding: England. English identity is an explicit and foundational feature of Daughter’s historiography.

Grant’s first source on Richard, supplied by “the Amazon,” his pet name for one of his hospital attendants, Nurse Darroll, is “a Historical Reader. It bore the same relation to history as

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\(^{33}\) Tey, Daughter, 195.  
\(^{34}\) Tey, Daughter, 196.
Stories from the Bible bears to Holy Writ … To each episode went one full-page illustration.”\textsuperscript{35}

All the same, it is a starting place. When Grant understands from this elementary description of Bosworth that French support was instrumental in Henry Tudor’s successful seizure of the throne, he thinks to himself,

\begin{quote}
And how did the English like having the succession decided for them by French troops? But, of course, in the days of the Roses, France was still a sort of semi-detached part of England; a country much less foreign to an Englishman than Ireland was. A fifteenth-century Englishmen went to France as a matter of course; but to Ireland only under protest.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Here Grant proves that he knows a thing or two. He knows that the past must be decoded, and that little can be taken for granted. But the manner of his analysis also makes his Anglocentric position perfectly clear. England is not an extension of France (as might make sense, since one conquered the other), but the other way around. The English colonial project in Ireland comes in as crude humor. There are nods to historical relativism, but little investment in its critical utility; as will be seen, present English identity will prove crucial to Grant’s dissection of the English past. We end one of the first days of the novel, as Grant, in a somewhat feminized pose, literally lies in his hospital bed and thinks of England. Tey offers a deep, extended intrusion into his mind:

\begin{quote}
He lay and thought about that England. England over which the Wars of the Roses had been fought. A green, green England; with not a chimney stack from Cumberland to Cornwall. An England still unhedged, with great forests alive with game, and wide marshes thick with wild-fowl. An England with the same small group of dwellings repeated every few miles in endless permutation: castle, church, and cottages. The strips of cultivation round the cluster of dwellings, and beyond that the greenness. The
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Tey, \textit{Daughter}, 28.

\textsuperscript{36} Tey, \textit{Daughter}, 32.
unbroken greenness. The deep-rutted lanes that ran from group to group, mired to bog in
the winter and white with dust in the summer; decorated with wild roses or red with
hawthorn as the seasons came and went.37

The underlying magnitude of the debate surrounding Richard reveals itself here. It is exactly in
step with the magnitude of Grant’s nation, or the nation he most subscribes to. While Grant
establishes the distance between the past and present, the past England, the terrific vision of it,
matters terribly to him. As Daughter progresses, despite Grant theoretically knowing better,
modern English nationalism coats itself over the past. This turns into an artificially fashioned
contest amongst medieval figures, Richard III and Henry VII, parallel to the literal, long since
passed one, that resolved itself on Bosworth Field. It principally seeks to determine innocence or
guilt per the murders, but moreover who amongst them is most English,38 most deserving of this
utter Eden that Grant “was still thinking of … when he fell asleep.”39

The historical unreality of Grant’s mythic England is undoubtedly conceded by the text;
the notion that there might be a castle “every few miles,” for example, is deliberately fantastical.
Yet the text will not concede the image’s emotional reality. In a well-trodden mode, Daughter
and Grant scavenge through history searching for resonance. There is potential harm in such a
quest by Grant; history, especially British history, especially medieval British history, is poised
for exchange in economies of exclusion. These are economies that thrive on the willingness to
reassess certain historical narratives but not others, to exonerate a king but not to question the
whiteness beneath the greenness of Grant’s imagined England. What is then especially
fascinating is Grant’s own marginality, though slight, where the boundaries of nation are
concerned. The reverse of Tey, Grant is English by birth but Scottish by heritage. He even has a

37 Tey, Daughter, 32.
39 Tey, Daughter, 33.
self-concept on the issue: “I’m only a Scot once removed.” The context in which Grant reveals this bit of biography is especially salient to the theories of nationhood, community, and identity that coalesce throughout Daughter. Grant’s precise background (the clues are there; he has corresponded earlier in the text with his Scottish cousin, Laura) emerges as he discusses with Carradine a prime example of “tonypandy,” his two examples being instances of trumped up allegations by repressed national movements, the Welsh and Scots. Grant’s notion of “tonypandy” comes from the Welsh village of the same name where, in an incident the American Carradine likens to the Boston Massacre, an act of violence by a government (the British crown, in all of these cases) was blown out of proportion, and unjustly so, in Grant’s view. These examples feel remarkably different from the “tonypandy” of the Tudors which Grant refutes, since as both Tey and Langley remind us, the Tudors were “the winners.” Tey’s moments of fixation on the reckless spread of misinformation by the losers, especially the Scots, to whom she and her Grant straightforwardly if reluctantly belong, is curious. Nevertheless, Tey chooses her subject of her own accord, just as Grant chooses to defend him: an English king. Tey and Grant then fashion an ideal England that assists his defense. It is an England opposed to a France, a Scotland, an Ireland, a Wales. Building on his theory of Henry Tudor and his conspirators as outsiders, Grant frames risings against to Richard’s rule as contrary to English character, as in this instance: “Morton’s plan was washed away in autumn rain and English indifference, and Richard could be at peace for a little.” Amidst this nationalist frame, it is also crucial to remember that the Wars of the Roses were an internal conflict, contested by factions of family themselves contained by the faction of the nation. Richard, accordingly, must not only be on the right side of the Wars, but the right side of Englishness.

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40 Tey, Daughter, 139.
41 Tey, Daughter, 135, my emphasis.
Some Ricardians therefore defend Richard via a perceived marginality within English history and, crucially, geography. Richard spent much of his tenure as Duke of Gloucester (his title while his brother was king), unintuitively, in York, and the general wisdom is that he was a decent and judicious steward, winning his people’s favor as de facto Lord of the North. If one first accepts Richard as the victim of Tudor character assassination, such a disadvantage only intensifies when he is attached to a historically and presently marginalized region. Indeed, the connection resonates still today, and support has mounted for Richard’s reburial in York, rather than Leicester, where he was reinterred. The associations of Richard with the North, aside from his actual time spent there, are largely rhetorical and arguably over-emphasized, and in no way made him some sort of bastion against Southern domination. He would become, after all, the King of England. Daughter does not pursue so heavily the Richard-as-Northerner line of argument, but does reify in Richard a certain brand of Englishness decidedly divorced from perceived Southern frivolity. Grant’s feverish visions of a medieval England, too, are remarkably harmonious with historian A.J. Pollard’s characterization of historiographical tendency toward paternalistic romanticization of the medieval North. Pollard writes: “rather than remote, backward, and barbaric, it is unspoilt, uncomplicated, and clean. It is Merrie England; it is the lost garden.”

But if Grant’s Richard is not intelligibly a staunch Northman, he is still a man’s Englishman. Young Richard is by Carradine’s description “a very bonny fighter,” and he quickly becomes a gifted, hardened military man, in contrast to Henry, who has never been in combat come Bosworth, and indeed does not enter combat at Bosworth. The need for Richard to be something other than an aristocrat, to be capable of the work of war (read: able-bodied) is palpable. Richard’s precociousness in diplomacy is highlighted as Grant, before he graduates to histories of a higher order, rips through a fictional biography of Richard’s mother, Cecily Neville. Grant is disappointed with the author’s focus on Edward IV rather than the enigmatic and withdrawn Richard, “the dark one in a blond family.” Grant recounts two examples of the teenaged Richard’s remarkable competence during the turbulent Wars of the Roses: “the real work of outfitting the ships was done by Richard…and when Edward with an absurd handful of followers found himself once more camped in an English meadow…it was Richard who went over to Geroge’s camp and talked [him] into an alliance.” Grant and Carradine later commiserate over depictions of Richard as a “middle-aged grouch” despite his relative youth and “qualities as a soldier” who was “a brigadier at eighteen and general before he was twenty-five.” It quickly becomes hard for a reader to find any faults at all with Richard; he is reserved but loyal, clever but strong, sensitive but hardy.

Ironically enough for a novel that seeks to clear Richard’s name, this masculinizing tendency by Grant selectively embraces Richard’s violence. When awkward bits of Richard’s moral track record come up, Grant and Carradine only double down. Take, following Edward

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47 Tey, Daughter, 115.
48 Tey, Daughter, 115.
49 Tey, Daughter, 61.
50 Tey, Daughter, 62.
51 Tey, Daughter, 117.
IV’s death and his nephew’s becoming king Edward V, the Protector Richard’s swift arrest, then execution of, among others, Lord Rivers, the boy’s maternal uncle and primary guardian at Ludlow. This is a logical political move, surely, but somewhat incongruent to the image of Richard that Tey elsewhere reproduces: fiercely loyal, principled, honorable. Grant and Carradine do not seem to register the brutality here. Instead, we get Grant, “the one time soldier,” lauding Richard’s “expert handling of that very sticky situation.” Richard’s military skill is held up favorably against the “very cultured” Lord Rivers, who becomes simply “a man who writes books.”

This moment is punctuated with an exchange between Grant, who declares it “a very neat, discriminating operation altogether. I felicitate Richard Plantagenet,” and Carradine, with the cheeky reply, “I’m positively beginning to like the guy.” Grant even at one point delineates the precise boundaries of acceptable masculine violence, “whatever murder he committed would be the result of acute emotion, it would never be planned; it would never be a base murder.” At this moment, Grant is critiquing the work of real-life historian James Gardiner, who wrote a biography of Richard in the nineteenth century. He finds Gardiner’s attempts to reconcile Richard’s honorable moments with his belief in Richard’s murder of the Princes “contortionist.” Yet Grant is undoubtedly engaging in some of the same behavior, as Grant obscures the cool premeditation inherent in the ordering of an execution and deems only one crime, the murder of the boys, beyond the pale of acceptable medieval male political violence, and therefore incomprehensible for Richard’s character.

Grant thus recuperates, not without his own contortions, Richard’s masculinity from the degradation of More, of Vergil, and any more modern historians who followed too close in their

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53 Tey, *Daughter*, 117.
54 Tey, *Daughter*, 171.
footsteps. We might psychoanalyze Grant and say that the compulsion to undo Richard’s historiographic emasculation and status as disabled stems from his current predicament: the injury that relegates him to the hospital bed, barring him from the physical heroics that might otherwise partially prove his capabilities as a detective and a man. The self-involvement that saturates Daughter carves its limitations, both occasionally as a pleasant bit of reading and as a convincing Ricardian intervention. In their approach to the case of Richard’s character, Grant and Carradine are not altering the regulations of play, nor the stakes; they are merely reproducing them. However, there is plenty of self-knowledge on this score if we look both within and adjacent to the text. Grant knows the outcome, should Carradine write his book on Richard:

All the people who’ve never read a history book since they left school will feel themselves qualified to pontificate about what you’ve written. They’ll accuse you of whitewashing Richard: ‘whitewashing’ has a derogatory sound that ‘rehabilitation’ hasn’t, so they’ll call it whitewashing. A few will look up the Britannica, and feel themselves competent to go a little further in the matter. These will slay you instead of flaying you. And the serious historians won’t even bother to notice you.  

Tey may be speaking to herself here. She is a mystery author, not a “serious historian,” so Grant’s comments draw the reader’s attention to that reality. Yet, from reading Daughter, one also knows to interrogate what the moniker “serious” means vis a vis historiography. Grant has allowed his feelings, about England, about the decency of those he deems decent, to color his line of reasoning. But what Daughter does prove, is that men, including the “serious historians” among them, have been doing precisely the same thing for centuries. In telling the story of one of these men, Alan Grant, Tey exposes the emotional core of historical narrative and counternarrative.

55 Tey, Daughter, 195.
Alan and Richard

I will now focus on the method behind Grant’s reclamation of Richard as a king, an (English)man, and a decent person. I argue that the method is a straightforward one of sympathy and sentiment. By understanding the nature of the Grant-Richard coupling, the core relationship in Daughter, we can chart the boundaries of Grant's identities, both their toxicities and their redemptive potentials. Grant’s tendency for sentiment where Richard is concerned, as opposed to his moments of gruff indignance where historiography is concerned, limits the oppressive tenor of his argument and succeeds in humanizing Richard rather than making Grant seem an overbearing zealot. Unquestionably, the latter is possible for any old Ricardian argument; take the case of the introduction to a 1933 biography exonerating Richard, in which history is rendered absurdly cinematic and the author devolves into overemotional overture: “nothing could destroy that spark that Richard carried in his breast, the spark that kept him fighting, struggling on.”56 By contrast, Grant can be passionate while remaining razor-sharp. Grant’s sentimentality, however, runs the risk of upsetting the order of his genre, and therefore must be both discreet and compelling. For this reason, we ought to frame detective fiction broadly before we reckon with the perils that abound for a sappy detective.

Detective fiction is genre fiction, yet, unlike many of its “low brow” counterparts (read: romance), afforded certain critical credibility. For W.H. Auden, in his seminal essay analyzing the genre, this boils down to readership: those who find addictive pleasure in detective stories (which Auden views as generally less than exemplary artistically) tend to be successful, intellectual, and male.57 Unsurprisingly, then, detective fiction has long been an acceptable avenue of academic inquiry, and the detective novel can and has been mapped. Auden, for one,

56 Philip Lindsay, King Richard III (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933), 15.
positions the discovery of guilt as a Grecian catharsis. Belsey, in the feminist, postmodernist situated Critical Practice, exposes the tension in Sherlock Holmes stories between the supposed boundless yield of Holmes’ scientific method versus characters and objects, both sexual and political, that maintain their mystique and therefore elude Holmes’ power. The detective novel deploys rationality with a specific gloss, that rational inquiry is a means to exact truth. In this respect, there is a crucial internal taxonomy within detective fiction: the nineteenth century, typified by the superhuman Holmes, is cast against the twentieth century’s Golden Age, anchored in the interwar period. Golden Age detectives are a slightly different breed, in that they do not possess knowledge and ability outside the scope of the reader; theoretically, the Golden Age detective and the reader are partners, or at least near-peers. Daughter follows this trend to the extreme, in that evidence is laid out and interpreted in sequence, and as the evidence, being historical, is entirely textual, there are no microscopic shifts in characters’ eyelines, body language, speech patterns, etc. that the detective may latch onto where the reader remains oblivious.

Yet, just as Daughter typifies Golden Age theory, it breaks the mold of the genre. In an analysis of Tey’s work in the Golden Age context, Andrew Monnickendam points to a tension between an assessment of her method, in which “we know surprisingly little of the working of Grant’s inner mind” and an assessment of her protagonist, one of the “more complex figures than are normally encountered in Golden Age tales.” When it comes to Daughter, I would argue that Grant’s complexity derives not from the “working” of his mind, or his logic, but the strength of

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59 Belsey, Critical Practice, 116.
60 Monnickendam, “Locating and Vindicating,” 70.
61 Monnickendam, “Locating and Vindicating,” 70.
his emotion, which we certainly see plenty of, and is simultaneously portrayed as his best chance and the death knell of his quest for the truth surrounding Richard. This is the way Grant complicates genre, both the mandated affect of the protagonist and the reason for his existence in the first place. In adopting sentiment, Tey momentarily embraces everything about genre fiction that makes it unseemly, why Auden unabashedly denounces these books as addictive, like literary candy.\textsuperscript{64} That is, they exist to provoke certain feeling. Mysteries, romances, horror stories: we might read these as the spunky descendants of the sentimental novel, of the Victorian swoon.\textsuperscript{65} For this reason, the terms sentiment, emotion, and feeling all seem equally apt to describe Grant’s connection to Richard. In Daughter, certain feeling does more than merely justify the novel’s existence; it points to a fruitful and perilous transcendence: communion with other people and other times.

There are instances of all-but-blinding sentimentality throughout the book. A modern translation of a letter sent by Richard’s own hand is preceded by this flowery description of “the bouquet of good humour that came up from the page as a bouquet comes up from a good-humoured wine.”\textsuperscript{66} Grant and Carradine linger on Richard’s “heartbreaks” at the death of his son, shortly followed by the death of his wife. One instance, however, stands out, when Carradine, coming down from the high of resolving to write his book, mentions something to Grant:

He was silent for a little, and then he said: “Do you know what the town of York wrote—wrote in their records, you know—about the battle of Bosworth?”

\textsuperscript{64} Auden, “Vicarage,” 146.

\textsuperscript{65} This is far as I can tell my own (maybe specious) leap, but in light of Leo Braudy who argues that “the true heir of the eighteenth century novel, and its sentimental and gothic offspring, is not the nineteenth-century English novel but that great stepchild—the American novel,” see Braudy, “The Form of the Sentimental Novel,” \textit{NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction} 7, no. 1 (1973): 13. If as Braudy says, the American novel reproduces an eighteenth century English preoccupation, in sentimental and serious works alike, with “the weakness and insubstantiality of words,” I would argue that in Daughter, Tey inaugurates precisely the same reckoning in twentieth century detective fiction.

\textsuperscript{66} Tey, Daughter, 124.
“No.”

“They wrote: ‘This day our good King Richard piteously slain and murdered; to the great heaviness of this city.’”

The chatter of the sparrows was loud in the quiet.67

There are moments when Grant and Carradine’s method of inquiry feels unproductive; this is not one of those moments. Here the space between documentary and emotional reality has all but collapsed. The anonymized, communal nature of this particular scrap of evidence may have something to do with the force behind it. Here we are not bogged down in the words or arguments or acts of a particular man, but the grief of a community. The legibility of the emotional reality of the Yorkmen does not require the Alan Grant school of psychoanalysis (though the pair do later submit some reckless speculation on the precise nature of York’s horror at the murder, which, to be fair, was undoubtedly grisly). In its immediate aftermath, the pronouncement is depicted as appallingly close to truth, to self-evidence, as we see Carradine wrestle with the gravity of the words he has just spoken: “‘to the great heaviness of this city,’ he repeated slowly, rolling the phrase over in his mind.”68 Practically, it would be deeply unwise to cling to the revelatory potential or rhetorical punch of any one documentary source. However, this moment does capture a revelatory experience, in which a subliminal sentiment, a seedling, sprouts as one reads something that is, in at least one sense, real.

The tenor of Grant’s reverence for Richard should certainly give us pause, being clearly awash in sticky imperialist ideas, and glossy with the sheen of arbitrary authority: the royal circlet, the police truncheon.69 But as Grant lifts Richard from malignment, the architecture of

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67 Tey, Daught, 201.  
68 Tey, Daught, 201.  
69 In other works, Tey follows a Golden Age format of rhetorically decentering the cop protagonist from the institution of the police, see Monnickendam, “Locating and Vindicating,” 73. In Daught, such a deliberate dissociation is less evident, aside from the fact that Grant is unable to embody his role as an inspector, and his chief confidants in Daught, Carradine and Marta, are not policemen.
the detective story shifts away from an obsession with rationality and a fantasy of its ultimate liberatory potential. Instead, one man is saving another. In *Daughter*, Grant is not a brilliant hero because he’s an infallible detective\(^{70}\) but because he is a friend, to Richard, to Carradine, to Marta. He is a friend to “the Amazon,” Nurse Darrol, who brought him his first source, and whose assessment of Richard as having “really quite a nice face” concludes the text.\(^{71}\) Grant reflects just prior on their relationship: “she looked confused by his kindness, and he wondered if he had been such a bear in his illness that she expected nothing but carping from him. It was a humiliating thought.”\(^{72}\) The exchange between ruggedness and gentleness is constant with Grant. He is not a force but a man. Richard, then, must be a man, as Grant knows men to be, endowed with the sensibilities Grant knows men to have, for the mystery to make any sense at all.

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\(^{70}\) Monnickendam, “Locating and Vindicating,” 81.

\(^{71}\) Tey, *Daughter*, 204.

\(^{72}\) Tey, *Daughter*, 204.
Chapter Two

Living Letters, Breathing Lines:
Close Correspondence with Romantic Poets in Possession

The architecture of A.S. Byatt’s 1990 novel Possession: A Romance is complicated. The elaborate, woven-then-unfurled effect of its reading certainly strengthened its bid, a fulfilled one, for the Booker Prize, the same effect that sent it flying off shelves. By its own subtitular admission, we know Possession is not only popular fiction but romantic fiction, though not of lowly genre sort. As we read, we come to realize that Possession is Romance with a capital R.

Before we are faced with the first chapter, Byatt offers two epigraphs, one from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s preface to The House of the Seven Gables and another from Robert Browning’s “Mr. Sludge, ‘The Medium.’” Hawthorne remarks on Romance, an apparently more free-flowing form than the stoic Novel, yet which “sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart.”\(^1\) Browning similarly reflects on truths all made up, describing “a scribe you pay and praise for putting life in stones, fire into fog, making the past your world.”\(^2\) Both Hawthorne and Browning, in these excerpts, home in on authorship as a dishonest if comprehensive capturing of some “bygone time,”\(^3\) the exact focus of Byatt’s tale. From the outset, Byatt announces her metafictional impulse; maybe she flaunts. The reader is primed, rhythmically, to enter a concordant lie. Byatt’s exhaustive segmentation of Possession—the

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2 Robert Browning, quoted in Byatt, Possession, xii.
3 Hawthorne, quoted in Byatt, Possession, xi.
epigraphs, interludes, indentations—only magnifies the sense that this is a book, that one is reading it, Line by Line. Disbelief lies absorbingly unsuspended.

*Possession* occupies a particularly exalted and denigrated category, the bestseller, which Granville Hicks in 1934 called “as skillful as ever in dodging unpleasant facts and revolutionary ideas.” Though we might doubt that conservatism is always endemic to bestsellers, many critics have acknowledged a certain political inertia in *Possession* that would have made it a comfortable choice for readers and award committees alike. Though *Possession* is a reasonably canonical example of Hutcheon’s class of historiographic metafiction, the novel also continually expresses its complicated relationship with postmodernism, often critiquing the self-reflexivity that characterizes both Hutcheon’s subgenre and postmodernism at large. This critique is somewhat embedded in *Possession’s* default style, a fairly traditional realistic fiction, wherein, as Suzanne Keen describes, the “character-researchers [are] endowed with…corporeality and ‘round' psychology.” Reality is not bent in a particularly flashy way, save some notable gothic

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7 Buxton, “Got to do,” 102-103; Susanne Becker makes a similar argument from a slightly different angle, explaining that Byatt takes postmodernism to a natural “conclusion” by offering a critique of postmodernism that is itself self-consciously postmodern, see Susanne Becker, "Postmodernism’s Happy Ending: Possession!*" in *Engendering Realism and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2001), 19, 29. Frederick M. Holmes describes Byatt’s dynamic with postmodernism as an “ironic echo,” see Frederick M. Holmes, "The Historical Imagination and the Victorian Past: A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 20, no. 3 (1994): 320.  
9 The unlikely events are predictably constructed. Wells itemizes Byatt’s traditional techniques as “rounded characters, a bildungsroman plot, and multiple coincidences,” see Wells, “A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*,” 539. All of these have double significance as mainstays of nineteenth-century literature. Byatt’s contemporary “reality” reflects historical storytelling.
detours. *Possession*'s politics can be read many ways: nonexistent, reactionary, nostalgic, fluid. The disentangling of the novel’s political articulations, undertones, and silences will be a partial result of this chapter’s larger aim. First, I will examine the roots and premise of *Possession*, then chart some of the book’s conservatizing limitations, and finally explore how, within these confines, the cast of *Possession* negotiates intimacy with an at times overwhelming past.

It would be a mistake to assume that *Possession* was cocksure of selling copies. Rather, *Possession* was an unlikely popular champion, being steeped in and sprouted from academia. Its main characters are twentieth-century academics studying nineteenth-century poets, poets who are not themselves dissimilar from academics. Both sets of characters immerse themselves in history, myth, and language. *Possession’s* author Byatt was herself an academic, as are many of her most devoted readers. We can imagine academics were at least a segment of Byatt’s intended audience, since she spends substantial space in the novel critiquing the institution. Given these influences, it is no surprise that *Possession* is thick, twisting, and difficult. Byatt offers the reader, with what can feel like little room to breathe, a twentieth-century mystery narrative dissecting a nineteenth-century past, hundreds of lines of invented poetry from her invented nineteenth-century poets, extracts of critical writings by her twentieth-century academics, the recovered love letters of the nineteenth century poets, and the hesitant first lines of poetry from one of her twentieth century academic-protagonists. This is not naming all of it. Byatt only holds back by not including visuals: there are no puzzles, maps, or portraits. Even so, this choice further evinces the immensity of the text, a world made from words alone.
Like *The Daughter of Time*, *Possession* is an unequivocally British novel, even occasionally telling us so. Like *Daughter*, *Possession*’s Englishness drives its aesthetics and politics. *Possession* also shares with *Daughter* a basic architecture: two investigators, would-be or otherwise, untangle a historical mystery and, in doing so, attempt to speak with the dead. *Possession*, instead of a lead detective and assistant à la Grant and Carradine, employs a pair of fated lovers: Roland Michell and Maud Bailey. In the late 1980s, Roland and Maud are scholars of the poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, respectively. Ash is a well-renowned poet connected to the Pre-Raphaelite school; Byatt modeled him on Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson. In the basement of the British Museum, Roland and colleagues, under the leadership of the meticulous, deflated Professor James Blackadder (we are told Blackadder was a pupil of the real-world Cambridge literary critic F.R. Leavis; now he is “a grey man … respectable, well-worn and dusty”), run the “Ash factory, hutchled in the bowels of the building…the Inferno,” producing incremental, hesitant criticism. LaMotte is a more shadowy figure, made somewhat of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. She has a mystical Breton ancestry, was largely ignored until the seventies, and by the late eighties still remains of little interest to anyone but “the feminists.” Maud, in addition to being one of the two foremost global authorities on LaMotte, administers an archive, The Women’s Resource Centre, at the more

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10 One of the more ironic instances of this is the quest to keep the historical artifacts out of American hands; Sir George Bailey, current steward of Seal Court, tells Mortimer Cropper that he doesn’t “like English things being bought up by foreigners,” see Byatt, *Possession*, 379. Byatt both anticipates readings of her text as reactionary by looking obliquely at reactionary figures like Bailey, framing quaint Englishness in opposition to American greed, and giving the task of preserving English cultural heritage to off-center male champions: the middle-class Roland, the Scot Blackadder.

11 Wells, “A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*,” 539.


14 Wells, “A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*,” 539; Jane Campbell, *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 145. Campbell argues that while these women are clear influences, Christabel and the other women artists do not have neat analogues.
remote Lincoln University. When Roland by chance discovers that Ash and LaMotte may have corresponded, Maud happens to be the closest LaMotte expert. Roland goes to her, and *Possession* truly begins.

Heterosexuality is the preeminent form of love in *Possession*. It is given direct ancestors. Coupled with the side-eyeing and sidelining of lesbians, the liberatory potential of the text feels a narrow one. Leonora Stern, the other expert on Christabel, is boisterous, bisexual, American, vaguely non-white.¹⁵ Blanche Glover, the woman LaMotte lived with, is an unfortunate creature who eventually, predictably, and presumably heartbroken, kills herself. The feminists, tyrannically, Leonora chief among them, view Blanche and Christabel’s romantic relationship as all but canonical. But for male Ash scholars, Blanche’s diary proves a more vital resource for charting LaMotte and Ash’s affair. Tellingly, for Roland, “it did not have for him the magnetic feel of the two letters which were folded into his pocket, but it represented the tease of curiosity.”¹⁶ There is a tacit hierarchy in *Possession* of intimacies in and with the past; lesbianism is within the novel’s scope but continually minoritized. Ash, after he and LaMotte first have sex, considers that her relative sexual adeptness, given her undoubted virginity, might betray a past lesbian experience with Blanche. But the narrator flits over this thought, and it never becomes part of the twentieth century characters’ reality. Their chief task instead becomes facing the acute and revelatory heterosexual tragedy of Ash and LaMotte’s doomed relationship. Their mission also becomes working against time to thwart the covetous American scholar Mortimer Cropper. He is the subject of the novel’s most sensational turn: in the final pages, he violates Ash’s grave, digging up the box where his wife Ellen deposited an unopened, all-telling

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¹⁵ Byatt, *Possession*, 367. Or, it’s precise, in that Stern “claims” Indigenous and Louisiana Creole ancestry. She also retains a Jewish last name from her poet ex-husband. Is Byatt asking us to contest these claims? Why? Who, what do such investigations serve?

¹⁶ Byatt, *Possession*, 49.
letter from LaMotte. Louise Yelin illuminates how Byatt’s construction of Cropper is fundamentally homophobic, citing “the innuendoes about Cropper's penchant for looking at dirty pictures of children and the coding of his connoisseurship as a displacement of homosexual desire.”

Yelin, “Cartography,” 39. See also Byatt, Possession, 131, “[Cropper] had his own ways of sublimation.”

Cropper loves Ash wrong. If we read Possession’s homophobia as weaponized, pointed, it is crushing. But if we refuse to read the “right” way of loving past people, the supposed purview of Roland and Maud, as strictly heterosexual, normative, natural, or easy, we can complicate the intimacy of Possession and recuperate it from Byatt’s lapses into a latent and occasionally boring moralism.

Despite some discouraging moments, I think it’s fair to say that Byatt does more than conservatize, satirizing contemporary academia while aggrandizing an idyllic Victorian past. She explained in one instance that “the Victorians were not simply Victorian. They read their past, and resuscitated it.”

Byatt’s insights into LaMotte and Ash’s minds do occasionally feel more potent than her often slowly cerebral Roland and Maud, but they share many of the same desires. Christabel, in one of her letters—Roland and Maud discover the whole of the lovers’ correspondence at Christabel’s home, Seal Court—laments that Randolph never met her dead father, Isidore, a famed mythographer, who facilitated her interest in the Fairy Mélusine, the subject of her epic poem. Here Christabel wishes to press orphaned eras together, palm-like: the time of Breton fairies, the time of her father, the time of her affair with Randolph Ash. On a less sentimental level, Byatt shades the Victorian past by showing its ugly sides, specifically its devastation to women’s lives, not just Christabel’s but also Blanche’s and Ellen Ash’s.

As the quest of one era mirrors the other, none are robbed of their nuance, that is, reality.

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17 Yelin, “Cartography,” 39. See also Byatt, Possession, 131, “[Cropper] had his own ways of sublimation.”


Byatt pushed back on the label “omniscient” for the third person narrator she invokes three times in the text. This is the narrator that shows us the truth about the Victorian objects of Roland and Maud’s inquiry. This narrator is not distant, birdlike, but incredibly close. Maud and Roland, however, are relegated to an interchange between closeness and distance. At some points, they seem able to entirely embrace the past, yet eventually they taper away and begin something new, made up of themselves. This shift is enacted by Roland and Maud’s first sexual encounter, coinciding closely with their dispossessing of the past, namely the drafted letters Roland discovers, by happenstance, in the first chapter. However, I argue that Roland and Maud’s romantic relationship is not a splintering, but actually prefigured by the couple’s larger theoretical interest, “more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge.” The focus of this chapter will be not the literal ends, fastened neatly by a privileged authorial source, but the messier Truth of the Romance between Roland and Ash, Roland and Maud, presents and pasts. I will focus on the narrative as filtered through Roland, Roland’s journey means for Possession’s depiction of knowledge making.

Possession philosophizes at length on personal connection to the past, how it can cloud our vision. Ultimately, nearly all the characters must face Romance (kinship, transcendence, corniness, total humility), rather than run away from it, in order to relinquish shallow obsession and glimpse, if not fully conceive, truth. Along the way, Byatt satirizes and valorizes various aspects of academic and English life, refusing, in postmodern fashion, to settle on any precisely oriented stance. Roland Michell, the novel’s subdued hero, accordingly and uncomfortably circulates through spheres of methodology, ethics, class, gender, nation, love. Roland’s uneasy...

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20 Byatt, On Histories and Stories, 56.
21 Byatt, Possession, 574. Amazingly, Roland keeps the letters safe in his wallet until he presents them, and confesses his sin, to the novel’s entire ensemble.
22 Byatt, Possession, 95.
footing, while ultimately contained by a normative, heterosexual scheme, fuels his trans-temporal feeling, one shakily transferred over the course of Possession from a long-dead man to a living, breathing woman: Maud Bailey. By tying together the past with the personal, Possession admits that the hermeneutics of literature and history must be intimate because literature and history affect us intimately.

Childe Roland

For the reader with some knowledge of Browning or Romanticism or Victoriana or poetry—I evidently am not such a reader—Byatt’s choice of the name Roland might recall Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” a fairly grisly narrative poem in which a hallucinating young hero reports his ghastly encounters en route to, sensibly enough, a dark tower. The poem is inspired by Edgar’s song in Shakespeare’s King Lear. Childe is a medieval title; it means a boy who will one day become a knight. The word childe appears in Possession in one of Christabel’s poems, in which a young man must choose between three fairy women.23 If we consider Possession a palimpsest, and if we are, as one critic unceremoniously puts it, “culturally literate,”24 then these allusions spring forth, not just Browning’s, and not just those, like the medieval French La Chanson de Roland or Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s character Roland de Vaux in his uncoincidentally titled poem Christabel, or Tennyson’s Maud, that deal with the choice of protagonist names.25 For the sake of brevity, I focus here on Browning’s Childe, struggling through the dead wood. He is predictably similar to Possession’s Roland Michell. When Roland realizes he has no clue what woman Ash is writing to, his self-concept reads as especially

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23 Byatt, Possession, 165.
Childe-like: “this gave him a not uncommon sensation of his own huge ignorance, a grey mist, in which floated or could be discerned odd glimpses of solid objects, odd bits of glitter of domes or shadows of roofs in the gloom.” Byatt inscribes here not only the imagery of Browning’s poem but the exact positioning of both Rolands.

Like the Childe, Roland is not yet a Knight; unlike him, his life is materially improved by the end of his story. Browning writes as the Childe as he finally, painfully exits the mire: “Burningly it came on me all at once, / This was the place!” Roland will have a similar epiphany. But the Childe Roland does not end the poem by becoming a knight, or else conquering a foe, he merely arrives at the Tower, or, to use Christabel LaMotte’s term, at the Threshold. Roland, by contrast, leaves us with a host of job offers and a blossoming new romance with Maud. His epiphanies on Ash, too, lean more elated than weary. Yet, as with many stories, these happy endings are only beginnings. Given Byatt’s omniscient narrator’s final revelations regarding Ash, LaMotte, and their love-child, which remain outside of Roland’s understanding, Roland has not reached any sort of summit of knowledge. He remains partially in a Childe-state. The “gloom” he imagines so early on is not fully extinguished. Part of Roland’s job in Possession is coming to terms with this. He will release the need to “know” and do something different: trust. Until such a moment, Roland moves, though not through a wasteland, with the appropriate demeanor for it.

Possession opens with Roland discovering the drafts of letters in Ash’s copy of the works of Giambattista Vico. He learns later that these letters were intended for Christabel LaMotte. But while the discovery shocks him, electrically, his emotions quickly retract. Carrying the letters he

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26 Byatt, Possession, 8.
28 Byatt, Possession, 165.
has now stolen furtively in his pocket, “he progressed through his usual states of somnolence, sick juddering wakefulness, and increasing worry about Val.”

Roland is an unemployed postgraduate in a tense cohabitation with his girlfriend, Val, whose own academic career never took off. Val pays their rent through various temporary clerical jobs, none of them stimulating. The guilt and the discomfort Roland feels in this relationship radiates off of him, a state of being captured most vividly in the scent of cat piss that lingers in the carpet fibers and droops from the ceilings of their apartment.

Little about Roland’s life, save his sacred fascination with Ash, fits together. Byatt ventures into Roland’s background, including the pertinence of his class background, all of it riddled with incompleteness:

He thought of himself as a latecomer. He had arrived too late for things that were still in the air but vanished, the whole ferment and brightness and journeying and youth of the 1960s, the blissful dawn of what he and his contemporaries saw as a pretty blank day. Through the psychedelic years he was a schoolboy in a depressed Lancashire cotton town, untouched alike by Liverpool noise and London turmoil. His father was a minor official in the County Council. His mother was a disappointed English graduate. He thought of himself as though he were an application form, for a job, a degree, a life, but when he thought of his mother, the adjective would not be expurgated. She was disappointed…The wrath of her disappointment had been the instrument of his education.

Roland is not a natural fixture in the postdoctoral studies of Romantic poets. We might consider his class background functioning as both social realism and fairytale. There is the fantastical quality of Roland working up the ranks to an esteemed academic position, if admittedly not a

29 Byatt, Possession, 9.
30 Her evaluating committee assumed that her paper, being on Ash, was written by Roland.
31 Byatt, Possession, 11-12.
secure financial one. Yet in a story focused explicitly on ancestry, and the snaking ways the past seeks to predetermine the present, middle class Roland must justify himself, unlike Maud, who is discovered near the end of the novel to be not just the descendant of LaMotte, but also of Ash, via their love-child, Maia. This narrative imbalance places Roland in opposition to Maud. The earlier descriptor “wakeful” appears again when Roland is in Maud’s house for the first time: “Roland felt wakeful and misplaced, as though he was in an art gallery or a surgeon’s waiting room.”32 He can feel at home in the hallowed halls of libraries, but this display of personal rather than institutional wealth (assuming we can meaningfully separate them) causes him to stiffen.

Roland’s anxiety about class and his broader misshapenness also fuels an antagonism toward his colleague Fergus Wolff, which at the beginning of the novel lay dormant. Among other things, Fergus is Roland’s foil, though by no means competition, where Maud’s love is concerned. By all Maud’s accounts, her brief, pre-Possession relationship with Fergus annihilated her emotionally. Though Fergus is not ever specified as wealthy, and is even subtly admonished by the text for “his Irish voice,”33 he has all the bearings of male and aristocratic ease. Intellectually, Fergus is flashy, occasionally to the point of meaningless, disliking drudge work; he “could be brilliant or bathetic, but never dull and right.”34 A little later Byatt has Roland and Fergus meet in the flesh, as Fergus crucially directs a questing Roland toward Maud at Lincoln. There is a brief biography of Fergus:

He was older than Roland, a child of the Sixties who had temporarily dropped out, opted for freedom and Parisian revolutions, sitting at the feet of Barthes and Foucault, before coming back to dazzle Prince Albert College. He was pleasant enough in general, though

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32 Byatt, Possession, 58
33 Byatt, Possession, 65.
34 Byatt, Possession, 16.
most people who met him formed the vaguest of ideas that he might be dangerous in some unspecified way. *Roland liked Fergus because Fergus seemed to like him.*

Byatt uses this space, before we know the extent of Fergus’s misogynist machinations, not just to quietly introduce a villain, but to complicate her protagonist. Roland, wary, chooses to be cordial. He is not forthright. He capitulates. In the strictest of senses, Roland is no masculine prototype. He is often meek. Byatt describes him early on as “a small man, with very soft, startling black hair and small regular features. Val called him Mole, which he disliked. He had never told her so.” At the same time, the smallness of Roland doesn’t make him a terribly surprising hero, especially for such an academic novel like *Possession*, where generally the quiet are virtuous and the brash are dangerous. Roland would certainly figure awkwardly at the helm of a more traditional detective novel like *Daughter*; in *Possession*, he is not necessarily the natural male hero, but a valid variant. We root for him precisely because he is and feels unseen.

Roland reflects on his simmering feelings of inadequacy late in the novel, after Maud’s heritage is discovered. This moment follows a meeting between Maud, Roland, Val, and the wealthy lawyer Euan MacIntyre, Val’s new boyfriend. Maud and Euan are the transactors; they discuss the ownership of the letters chronicling Ash and LaMotte’s affair, namely whether they belong, legally, to Maud. The narrator probes into the dark places: “That was the problem. He felt marginal. Marginal to her family, her feminism, her ease with her social peers. There were a great many circles here, all of which he was outside.” We can read this as a masculine disinclination to be dependent. As we learn a few lines later, Roland “hated living off Maud,” a

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35 Byatt, *Possession*, 36, my emphasis.
36 Maud uses this word to describe him, dubbing him “a gentle and unthreatening being,” see Byatt, *Possession*, 165.
38 Keen, “Romances of the Archive,” 30: “his very marginality qualifies him for his role.”
feeling related, though not identical, to the one he experiences with Val at the novel’s start. I account for the difference in that Val, like Roland, grew up poor. Rather this particular moment identifies a discomfort not just with women but with wealth, one of the places where Roland is not certain he features in the story. *Possession* locates the solution to Roland’s loneliness deeper still within its historical subject matter. Feeling more secure demands Roland at once sink into and renegotiate his love for Ash and Ash’s past. In this endeavor, Roland is not the most privileged by his own society—though his Englishness/whiteness/maleness by no means work against him—but the narrative privileges him absolutely, in no small measure due to the same three signifiers. Roland ultimately coming closest to history of any character, even Maud, encapsulates Byatt’s oscillation between postmodernism and conservatism. Roland’s inheritance of the knowledge is not unlikely despite him not being first in line. Ash’s direct male descendants in fact feature, to borrow Roland’s word, marginally; we are meant to find them wanting, uninspired. Lynn Wells puts *Possession*’s call to action, the occasion Roland must rise to, like this: “Love, imagination, stable meaning, community – all of these things, Byatt implies, can be recovered in the postmodern world through respectful understanding of our predecessors and a willingness to see ourselves anew.” Roland has distanced himself from his upbringing and sought purpose in academia. He is deferential and never brash. He has longed for a blank slate but found mostly loneliness. This state of flux means he can blend into history, submit himself, where other men cannot.

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40 For example, when Roland and Maud come about the gun-toting, washed-up aristocrat Sir Geroge Bailey, the current steward of Christabel’s Seal Court and a distant relative of Maud’s, Roland regards him this way: “Such people, in his and Val’s world, were not quite real but still walked the earth,” see Byatt, *Possession*, 86.
41 Here I draw on a claim by Flegel, that “cultural, sexual, and class differences are dissolved—though always recognized,” see Flegel, “Enchanted Readings,” 414.
42 Wells, “A.S. Byatt’s *Possession,*” 549.
Then Roland is an uncertain young man with a touchstone in the form of poet Randolph Henry Ash. Whether his fractured identity is a result of, as Byatt and Roland and Maud occasionally insist, postmodernist malaise, or whether, as I think Possession more convincingly proposes, Roland is merely operating on a deficit of love and money, it leaves him vulnerable to curiosity. He must derive the truth about Ash’s correspondence, lest he misunderstand the one thing that makes sense.

Adoration Across Time

The actual shape of Roland’s devotion to Ash, while couched by the narrative as most respectful and pure vis-à-vis the more morally ambiguous scholars, allows Possession to press against what Monica Flegel aptly deems Byatt’s “conventionalizing” discourse.43 We can first dismiss the notion that Roland’s experience of Ash is sexless. Val puts it bluntly to Roland in the second chapter: “You do what turns you on…everyone does…You have this thing about this dead man.”44 As he does with much of Val’s language, Roland, I think unjustly, recoils and dismisses this: “something had upset her, Roland reasonably deduced. Something that had caused her to use the phrase ‘turn you on’ several times, which was uncharacteristic.”45 But the narrative does little to run contrary to the core of Val’s statement. Ash, in fact, seems the most obvious wedge in Val and Roland’s romantic and sexual relationship. At times the impediment is actually physical, as in their apartment: “His other two portraits…Val had banished these to the dark of the hall. She said she did not want them staring at her, she wanted a bit of her life to herself, without having to share it with Randolph Ash.”46 The apartment nonetheless becomes a crucial site for anatomizing Roland’s love for Ash, a love deep and intentional. We are told matter of

44 Byatt, Possession, 22.
45 Byatt, Possession, 23.
46 Byatt, Possession, 18.
factly that “Roland possessed three images of Randolph Henry Ash.”47 Specifically, this is the space where, I think somewhat unconvincingly, Byatt asserts a hierarchy of loving across time. There is a photo of Ash’s death mask on Roland’s desk which surprisingly shows the poet clean-shaven: “Who had shaved him, when? Roland had wondered, and Mortimer Cropper had asked in his biography The Great Ventriloquist, without finding an answer.”48 The wondering/asking dichotomy here insists that Roland’s love is polite, or at least more polite than Cropper’s. It is a love that avoids the inherent embarrassment of possessiveness. Yet Roland, as much as he believes he doesn’t, adores, and embarrassingly. The two portrait photos, exiled to the hall by Val, we learn, are by Edouard Manet and George Frederic Watts. Channeling the delicate, attentive gaze of Roland, the narrator expounds on the Watts picture: “The important features of this image were the eyes, which were large and gleaming, and the beard, a riverful of silvers and creams, whites and blue-greys, channels and forks resembling da Vinci’s turbulences, the apparent source of light. Even in the photograph, it shone.”49 Even as Roland takes great pains to identify himself as a textual scholar (he uses words where Inspector Grant uses faces), there is a clear connective spark for Roland in seeing Ash depicted in the flesh.

And so later statements, such as “Roland had never much been interested in Randolph Henry Ash’s vanished body…What Roland liked was his knowledge of the movements of Ash’s mind”50 ring partially untrue; they minimize the physical connection. Really Roland’s love for Ash appears much more total. Its origins are the language, undoubtedly, but it has sprouted. As Roland reckons with Ash not in a third dimension, that of passion/emotion, his love still grows. Roland, after realizing Ash may have had an affair, yearns for his earlier, less complicated love:

47 Byatt, Possession, 17.
48 Byatt, Possession, 18.
49 Byatt, Possession, 19.
50 Byatt, Possession, 23.
“Secretly, personally, he was rather pleased that all of this [Ash’s work] had been achieved out of so peaceable, so unruffled a private existence.”\textsuperscript{51,52} “Unruffled,” that is, by women.

In the next chapter, Roland expands the uncertainty to his own self-concept. Maybe he is like Cropper after all, he thinks, faced with a rising reluctance to return the letters: “He was dishonest. He now had a fair copy and could slip the letters back unremarked into the London Library Vico. But he did not want to. He felt they were his.”\textsuperscript{53} Of course there is the falseness of possession here, something Roland supposedly knows better of. But it is also the physicality of these things that Ash not only touched, but poured his thoughts into so passionately, that Roland cannot shake: “Roland’s Xeroxes were cleaner and clearer than the faded coppery-grey script of the originals; indeed the copy-ink had a black and gleaming freshness, the machine’s rollers must have been newly inked. But he wanted the originals.”\textsuperscript{54} Later he explains, after confessing to Maud, why he kept the letters: “because they were alive. They seemed \textit{urgent}.”\textsuperscript{55} And as Ash was urgent in drafting them, Roland was urgent in keeping them. The closeness here is replication. And then stammering, defensive, but convincing, he assures us “I’m an old fashioned textual critic, not a biographer.”\textsuperscript{56} Lena Steveker, in a sharp contrast, asserts that \textit{Possession} “negotiat[es] the hermeneutic impulse of biography.”\textsuperscript{57} Steveker also helpfully rejects Roland’s artificial distinction between the textual critic and the biographer, explaining that \textit{Possession} “point[s] to an approach to the past in which literature \textit{and} imagination play a vital role in

\textsuperscript{52} Kate Mitchell, \textit{History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages}, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 100: “Ash’s letters to LaMotte disrupt this comfortable, restricted curiosity.”
\textsuperscript{53} Byatt, \textit{Possession}, 25.
\textsuperscript{54} Byatt, \textit{Possession}, 25.
\textsuperscript{55} Byatt, \textit{Possession}, 56.
\textsuperscript{56} Byatt, \textit{Possession}, 57.
comprehending the other.” For Roland the process is often a fairly base one of self-identification, as in this instance from his first, tense meeting with Maud: “Roland considered the pale incisive mouth with a kind of hopelessness. He wished he had not come. The hostility towards Ash somehow included himself, at least in his own eyes.” Roland does not just relate to Ash but feels enmeshed with him.

So Roland has a soft spot for Ash, one maintained even as Roland falls in love with Maud, because his love for Maud is geometrically identical, if not made up of the same content, to the love of Ash for Christabel (both women “birdlike” and ivory and narrow). The soft spot has room for they four and few others. By contrast, Roland says of the other LaMotte expert, Leonora Stern, that though “she’s very good…I don’t want to see through her eyes. It isn’t a matter of her gender and my gender. I just don’t.” He voices this bias brazenly when there are others in the history that so want love, like Blanche Glover, writing, burningly, in her suicide note, “I have wanted to be understood by those not yet born. By whom else, after all?” So Roland tells us the limits of his love. It can shoot in one direction but it won’t flare out; it won’t be wide open; it will be possessive.

This is unlike what we know of Ash himself, as in this instance of LaMotte speaking to Ash: “She said, after he had held a countryman half an hour in talk, learning about the swivens, the burnt moorland and peat-cutting, ‘You are in love with all the human race, Randolph Ash.’” Though, perhaps importantly, Ash qualifies LaMotte’s claims by saying that he loves the earth only on account of his love for her. Byatt is then careful to complicate Roland and Ash’s

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58 Steveker, *Knitting the Net*, 24, my emphasis.
59 Byatt, *Possession*, 47.
60 Byatt, *Possession*, 303. Byatt is also able to sidestep a perceived militancy in feminism, decentering gender by name.
relationship; it is not a one-sided obsession but threaded in both directions. Ash, though sealed off from him by time/space, echoes Roland’s identity anxieties which we occasionally are made to think are inherently contemporary. In Crabb Robinson’s diary, we are told of a small comment at the garden party where Ash and LaMotte met: “Ash replied that the historical imagination required a kind of poetic belief in the mental universe of his character and that this was so strong with him, that he was in danger of having no beliefs of his own at all.”

Ash worries, like Roland worries, about “himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected,” only with a slightly different, pre-postmodern framing. Roland’s fixation on Ash is not arbitrary, but based on true resemblances. By the magic of novel writing, not time travel, Byatt can meaningfully connect Ash and Roland, show us impossible love, a love that becomes the precondition for intellectual discovery.

Maud: Sameness Attracts

Roland’s attachment to Ash is still fraught. At the start of the novel, it is not fulfilling; it does not drive toward an end. The love must then change, and by extension, end. Elisabeth Bronfren accordingly classifies Roland’s growing feelings for Maud as a transferal: “Roland is fully aware that Maud's entrance into his life will ultimately mean losing Ash as his privileged libidinal object.” The shift begins when Roland answers the call to make his love for Ash more true, to learn “what was the secret.” Roland can first pivot slightly to LaMotte since she is like a missing piece to the original object, Ash. The narrator signals Roland’s course change explicitly:

63 Byatt, Possession, 28.
64 Byatt, Possession, 507.
66 See Byatt, Possession, 283. Maud remarks to Roland as they retrace Ash and LaMotte’s steps in Yorkshire that the work of literary critics and detectives are similar.
“He went off to look for coffee. After that he could pursue Miss LaMotte, who now had an identity of sorts, through the Catalogue, like any other dead soul.” But clearly LaMotte is not anyone else; she is rather the invaluable ingredient in Roland’s sacred biography.

To do this, Roland must chart the hazardous waters of feminism. Christabel LaMotte is an obscure poet who wrote a treacherously long poem about the monstrous mermaid Mélusine. Roland and readers are primed by Fergus Wolff on, among other things, Virginia Woolf’s view on the myth: “she [Woolf] adduced [Mélusine] as an image of the essential androgyne of the creative mind—but the new feminists see Melusina in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality…I like it, it’s disturbing.” The scene is funny; Roland is nervous (“will [Maud] eat me?” he asks) and excited by an unfamiliar feminine world. But Fergus, the literary theorist, does some important theoretical work here. He isolates the hurdles Roland will face as he meets and falls in love with Maud. What do the gender boundaries, class boundaries between them mean? Are they essentially androgynous, platonically fused, or are they materially separated? Possession resolves these issues by planting in Roland and Maud a remarkably similar soul-architecture. They yearn in the same way; they are curious in the same way.

This I acknowledge is not the most immediate conclusion a reader might come to. At first, in typical romantic fashion, the differences between Roland and Maud are highlighted and their sameness obscured. Roland’s first impression of Maud is not a good one. It follows Roland looking over an image of Christabel in a biography he reads on the train. Christabel’s vague expression alludes him, and similarly, seeing Maud, he is immediately threatened:

67 Byatt, Possession, 35.
68 Byatt, Possession, 38.
69 Keen, “Romances of the Archive,” 36. Keen crucially uses the phrase “opposites attract.”
She was tall, tall enough to meet Fergus Wolff’s eyes on the level, much taller than Roland…She did not smile. She acknowledged him and tried to take his bag, which he refused to allow…Her voice was deliberately blurred patrician; a kind of flattened Sloane. She smelled of something ferny and sharp. Roland didn’t like her voice.  

Maud in one sense seems precisely the cold, Mélusine-esque feminist of Roland and Fergus’s satiric imagination. Yet there are pertinent details; in this passage, “ferny” seems the main one. It sets Maud apart, makes her individual, unlike a conventional woman who might wear a more bland, pleasing floral perfume. For the reader, this highlighting of Maud’s unattainable and singular beauty might be slightly boring. Of course, for all these same confounding reasons, Roland is attracted to her. In the Women’s Studies block, where Roland bristles at a couple of lesbians and “women in jeans,” he feels “Maud Bailey’s excessive elegance was even odder in this context. She was a most untouchable woman; Roland…who wanted secrecy and privacy, was forced to learn forward in a kind of pseudo-intimacy and speak low.” The magnetism is fairly immediate and has only a little bit to do with how Maud thinks, but soon Roland understands that they share something fundamental, an intellectual spirit.

Roland is able to gradually lend Maud his affections because he believes Maud has loved like he has. Maud describes her love for Christabel in similar terms as Roland’s for Ash, saying, “it’s the language that matters.” This causes Ann Marie Adams to contend that, despite the text’s insistence that Roland and Maud have different jobs, their philosophy of literary critique appears more or less identical. Maud’s knowledge of Christabel’s language is in fact so

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70 Byatt, *Possession*, 43.
discerning that she can recall, recite, and solve a riddle from one of Christabel’s poems, leading them like treasure hunters to the precise location of the letters at Seal Court (inside of a doll bed). While language is the basis of their love for their poets, Maud also has similar lapses to Roland into concerns with identity and body, with both academics at once desperately wondering and already knowing who Christabel and Randolph truly were. Maud has a parallel bruised ego at being wrong about her object of study, and a deeper concern regarding what the truth might mean: “Part of her was still dismayed...she preferred her own original version of proud and particular independence.”  

In place of her own version, though, Maud will be rewarded, like Roland, with the truth, if her intimacy with Christabel is not as proximal to the reader. Maud gets a philosophical foil in Leonora, who instead of loving Christabel, really, more so “did not like R.H. Ash.”  

Then we get Maud, virtuous, contemplative, sitting in the garden of Seal Court: “Maud bowed her head with the self consciousness of such a gesture, and thought of Christabel, standing here, looking at the frozen surface, darkly glowing under blown traces of snow.” This is the exact concern with dead bodies that the textual Roland and Maud are not supposed to have, but do anyway.

Through her ancestry, Maud is physically connected to the past in a dimension that Roland is not. However, this connection does not afford her special intuition. Like Roland, it is the depth of her love that gives her power over the past. She also shares many of the same concerns (or maybe the same concern, exactly) as Roland about her selfhood, the sense that it’s dissolving around her:

74 Byatt, Possession, 294.
75 Byatt, Possession, 164.
76 Byatt, Possession, 165.
77 Famously (and perhaps boringly) they both long for a “clean empty bed in a clean empty room,” see Byatt, Possession, 319. The bed is white.
Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I? A matrix for the susurration of texts and codes? It was both a pleasant and unpleasant idea, this requirement that she think of herself as intermittent and partial. There was the question of the awkward body. The skin, the breath, the eyes, the hair, their history, which did seem to exist.\textsuperscript{78}

Here, in the word “history,” Byatt points to Maud’s heritage. Yet that dormant truth, like all the truths in \textit{Possession}, somehow already known, cannot seal up the cracks. It then becomes a question of grounding the unstable bodies. Sex is one way. Bronfren asserts that Roland “doesn’t…take possession of her body until he has recognized in her the traits of the desired poet, that is to say, once he realizes that Ash is her ancestor.”\textsuperscript{79} I think this recognition is one of the moving parts, but by no means the tipping point when it comes to when and why Roland and Maud have sex.

Instead, they fall in love. They fall in love most crucially in Yorkshire, a depressed North across the country from Roland’s native Lancashire. One day at an outdoor market, Maud takes her scarf off, revealing her tightly pinned yellow hair: “He felt a kind of sympathetic pain on his own skull-skin, so dragged and ruthlessly hair-pinned was hers. Both put their hands to their temple, as though he was her mirror.”\textsuperscript{80} Just as their sameness is profound, they are different people with different pasts. In Yorkshire, they also come to the conclusion that Ash and LaMotte were once there together and in love, joined and separated in the same way. At one point they see the light dance in a specific way on the caves, and Maud is suddenly certain, reciting her poetry again, that Christabel saw with her eyes what they see with theirs. Roland says, after qualifying that the sight in all likelihood means nothing, “But it is proof, to me.”\textsuperscript{81} The comma is crucial. It

\textsuperscript{78} Byatt, \textit{Possession}, 300.
\textsuperscript{79} Bronfren, “Romancing Difference,” 133.
\textsuperscript{80} Byatt, \textit{Possession}, 310.
\textsuperscript{81} Byatt, \textit{Possession}, 318.
signals that Roland knows absolutely that Maud’s love for Christabel is true. It establishes the personal bent of everything at work here, between Roland and Maud and Ash and Christabel. They are fated and embraced and joined, they four.

In France (earthly paradise?) Roland and Maud fall in love acutely and they must touch each other “without progression;” the need for purity is still more acute. Back in England (or is this the true Eden?) they finally do it. Jackie Buxton describes the sex as “sterile.” Monica Flegel finds the possessive language, even with its self-conscious proclamation of “outdatedness,” disturbing. Possession maybe asks us whether love between this man and this woman, with their brains so similar and yet each familiar with the diametric mythology of their togetherness, can be pure at all. No, it is touched by history. Flegel points to a terrific passage, just after Maud and Roland have sex:

In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crushed wood and splashed sap, a tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful.

The apples and their foliage matter here. Ferny Maud, tart apples, a glassy pool, a great Ash tree; they all come from the same garden. In Possession, it is not swapping Ash for Maud, but using Ash to get to Maud. For this reason I think that Roland arrives at his personal finalities a little earlier in the novel, as he re-reads Ash’s The Golden Apples; in these moments the narrative gives him permission to be with Maud for real. Knowledge of history allows the present to unfold smoothly.

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82 Byatt, Possession, 506.
83 Buxton, “Got to do,” 97.
86 Byatt, Possession, 602.
Loving and Letting Go

Roland and Maud let go of the idea of a totally pure “correct” way to love their poets as “textual scholars,” and face the Romance as lovers. Besides turning to each other, they move on to other things, Roland mostly; Maud is just given her heritage. They turn to other things with a clarity that comes not from abandoning curiosity, but holding it close even though it can never reach a stable conclusion.

This transformation requires doing away with the straightforward self-identification of the earlier love. Roland revisits the photographic prints of the paintings in his and Val’s dark hallway: “Roland had once seen them as parts of himself. How much they had been that, to him, he only now understood, when saw them as wholly distant and separate, not an angle, not a bone, not a white speck of illumination comprehensible by him or to do with him.”\(^87\) This is a downcast moment but also a vital one. If Roland is to approach a total understanding of Ash, he cannot dissect and thereby dishonor him. Cropper, by contrast, blasphemously brings up the body.

In culmination of this shift, Roland experiences a fateful “impersonal” re-rereading of Ash’s *The Golden Apples*. It is not a moment in which the detective finds the final clue. The reading has little to do with the facts of the adultery story/mystery/Romance before the investigators\(^88\) and everything to do with Roland’s future, one he has been increasingly agonizing over as he and Maud grow closer, as he has all but abandoned his academic career (his only shot at societal embrace) to go questing in France. Roland realizes before his re-reading he has been saved by his boss Blackadder’s generosity and three job offers in various corners of the world. Now he must choose. There is Maud to think of now. In his climactic confusion he needs

\(^{87}\) Byatt, *Possession*, 556.
instruction in priorities, so Ash gives it: “What Ash said—not to him specifically, there was no privileged communication, though it was he who happened to be there, at that time, to understand it—was that the lists were the important thing, the words that named things, the language of poetry.”89 Byatt, Roland, the narrator, they all walk directly up to the semantic line of time travel but never cross it. Yet so clearly here the closeness between Roland and his past, fortuitous and not fated, is incredible. This moment even immediately follows one of physical touch, as Roland “touched the letters, which Ash had touched, over which Ash’s hand had moved, urgent and tentative, reforming and rejecting his own words. He looked at the still fiery traces of the poem.”90 Roland’s magical reading, with his hairs standing up on end, reacts to this touch.

Ash has given Roland a sign to embrace creative over critical writing.91 Throughout the novel, critical writing has proven occasionally useful but also cyclical and difficult. Roland’s creative spark also represents his privileged status that no other contemporary character maintains. For Roland writing, listing, quickly becomes the only natural thing: “An hour ago there had been no poems, and now they came like rain and were real.”92 Roland’s spontaneous creative output surprised me. It, in my view, brings his character outside of the rounded psychology reminiscent of nineteenth-century realism. Roland is transfigured. Academic becomes poet, just like that. It represents an actual change: Maud does not “become” the descendant of Ash and LaMotte but discovers what was already there. Roland, here, does not just discover the dormant essential philosophy of Ash regarding language, but takes that philosophy and immediately springs into action. Even if we agree with Ann-Marie Adams, who contends

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89 Byatt, Possession, 563.
90 Byatt, Possession, 563.
91 Adams, “Dead Authors,” 117.
92 Byatt, Possession, 566.
that the content of Roland’s epiphany while rereading Ash is a newness already known,\(^93\) his journey is not entirely circular, for the simple reason that “an hour ago, there had been no poems.”

Just because Roland cannot possess Ash or his story,\(^94\) it doesn’t render him without control of any narration. He can make his lists. In turning to poetry, Roland is both locating a new sense of self and reflecting Ash back to Ash. Possession insists that one person can be not only contained by, but simultaneously independent from and expressed by, another. In this we can read a postmodern all-at-onceness into all the relationships in the novel. The academics and their poets, Christabel and her Randolph, Roland and his Maud: they all have to give up on having each other in the manner of their first imagining. Affection in Possession amounts to nothing less than a recalibration of the meaning of life. Looking to history, passionately but considerately, is the means of extrapolating such meaning.

At the end of the novel, Byatt offers a scene to the reader that no historian could capture. Randolph Ash meets his daughter, Maia, who is living as the daughter of Christabel’s sister to hide her illegitimacy. But Ash recognizes her as his daughter instantly, and gives her a message for Christabel: “Tell your aunt…that you met a poet…who sends her his compliments, and will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new.”\(^95\) The reader cannot be sure that Maud and Roland will meet the same separation; their parting has not yet been sealed. Given the delicacy of the ending, on its “hot May day,” it seems in any case that “letting go” is not the same as dying, not the ending of closeness or warmth.

\(^93\) Adams, “Dead Authors,” 110; see also Byatt, Possession, 562: “always there…always known.”
\(^94\) Mitchell, Victorian Afterimages, 102.
\(^95\) Byatt, Possession, 606. Here Ash is quoting Milton’s Lycidas, adding to Byatt’s lengthy metatext, the echo fundamental to Possession’s theory of history. I would argue in part here that the echo is not extant but constantly being reverberated as people, like Roland and Maud, reach back and feel.
Chapter Three

Big Hearts in Distant Bodies:

Imagining Medieval Lesbians in *Matrix*

Lauren Groff’s bestselling 2021 novel *Matrix* was completed during the pandemic. This makes some sense; it is a novel about nuns in their enclosure. They quietly carry out mundane tasks—Groff paints them in deceptively quaint strokes—that are really a matter of life and death. Perhaps future scholars will see in Groff’s nuns echoes of Americans in 2020 working from home, disinfecting their mail, and supervising children’s remote school. *Matrix*’s timing makes sense also in that the novel wants us to feel the joys and agonies of community, close community. Many women are close and in all manners of closeness.

At the center of *Matrix* is Marie de France. She was real. She lived and wrote in the late twelfth century. Historians are not totally sure that she was, as her name implies, from France, but she wrote in Old French and lived in England. Her famous *lais* (stories in verse) take inspiration from Breton folktales. Two other works have been attributed to her; these do not make an appearance in Groff’s text.

In choosing her subject, Groff picks at the problem of not knowing, not being able to know. There isn’t a trick that can make this all unravel. This is medieval history, more distant than Byatt’s Victorians and even Tey’s Richard. Groff does not linger over Marie’s writing, but moves into a space of extratextual imagination. While grounding her work in historical knowledge and praxis, these are more aesthetic arguments than the substance of *Matrix*’s truth. I would place this truth as, in brief, the universality of lesbian, indeed *human*, agony and ecstasy.
Groff herself identifies another motive for writing *Matrix*: escapism. “I just wanted to go live in a feminist utopia,”¹ she once remarked in an interview, characterizing the novel as a reaction to the backslide of, among much else, gender equality and reproductive justice during the Trump presidency, processes that are surely ongoing. Indeed as we read, we can pick up on a pastoral instinct; in internet parlance, this is the “cottagecore” lifestyle promoted via social media at the height of the pandemic. A taste of this: “Sister Pomme, the gardener nun, puts the apricot seedlings in wicker cages and gives them manure, and they leap to Marie's height quickly.”² At some points the novel indulges escapism straightforwardly, but mostly it is continually, meaningfully challenging itself. The aesthetics come with interiority. It is nonetheless noteworthy that in locating a “feminist utopia,” Groff goes to a remote past, one fixed around England before Empire. In a different book, this might become a place "before" colonization, a magical "before." However Groff, as will be discussed, dedicates space to countering this interpretation; the medieval does not become whitewashed nostalgia. Groff instead deploys a unique combination of discreet, footnote-worthy detail and deliberate denaturalization in her treatment of history. Groff gives the reader a baseline of believability (she sticks staunchly to the ordering of nuns’ lives, using the hours as constant punctuation: “Matin in the deep night, Lauds at dawn, followed by Prime Terce, Sext chapter, None, Vespers, collation, Compline, bed”³) elevated with touches of surreality (Christian mysticism becomes, in essence, time travel). Groff’s decision to write the novel in the present tense, for one, sharpens the faroff medieval moments, bringing them flush with the now.

Matrix as an “escapist” novel and as a historical novel is also critically different from the previous two novels discussed in this project. Unlike The Daughter of Time and Possession, it has no present-day narrative, but steps directly into the historical action. That said, the narrator’s oftentimes direct mediation of past and present makes the novel hard to temporally contain. The narrator, despite being faceless, then becomes our detective Grant, our scholar Roland, and will therefore serve as a touchstone for this analysis.

Groff is an author of contemporary literary fiction. Her previous work (horror-studded meditations in Florida, a haunting marriage portrait in Fates and Furies) would probably not lead most to predict a medieval author as her next subject, but Groff says she has nursed a fascination with Marie since her time as an undergraduate. Matrix, however, is her first foray into historical fiction, a genre she had previously been quite down on. Groff takes the genre and makes it her own, makes it literary, with all the literary flourishes. But Groff’s relationship to historical fiction constitutes much more than cosmetic retrofitting. She asks, maybe not answering fully, whether depicting some truths benefits from, if not requires, the wisdom of distance. Because so few people (and fewer women still) in the premodern era transcribed their inner worlds, and even Marie, who by a miracle did write, leaves much of herself hollow, Groff attends to the gaps.

Groff is not the only author to explore gender identity, societal power dynamics, life and death through a historical fiction novel about medieval nuns. There are probably even a handful more, but a case pertinent for this context is Sylvia Townsend Warner’s 1948 novel The Corner That Held Them. The novel is quiet and episodic (and lesbian, insofar as it comes from a lesbian author and concerns women embracing societal alternatives to marriage). The text is also, like its

4 Wyver, “Groff interview.” In this interview, Groff recalls thinking of historical fiction as “literary tourism.”
author, Marxist; it deals explicitly with the finances of an abbey, illustrating how even spiritual institutions are entrenched in materiality.\(^5\) Groff tackles the ebb and flow of her own abbey’s prosperity in a similar fashion. But the crucial lesson we can take from Warner’s novel and Warner’s Marxism is the manner in which historical fiction, specifically historical fiction concerning the marginalized, can directly address, maybe more than any other genre, the intersection of the personal and political.\(^6\) The breadth of history gives the reader and author the benefit of context, centuries of context. Arguments construct themselves more seamlessly from the largeness and the echoing of everything. Matrix asks that we remain close in the dark times.

It is worth spending a little time on Groff’s evocative title. “Matrix,” appropriately, comes from the Latin mater, meaning mother. Most basically, a matrix is an environment, a place from which things come. Women are matrices, as are places. Place matters a lot in Matrix. England, or as Marie thinks of it, Angleterre, matters. The abbey especially does, particularly insofar as it becomes a feminist fortress and “an extension of [Marie’s] own body.”\(^7\) It is also the name for an implement used to impress a wax seal into parchment; Eleanor of Aquitaine at one point gives Marie one to render their correspondence clandestine. Matrices become the way women grow out of one other, enrich one another, devastate one another.

The construction of the interwoven community is no easy task. Groff has the advantage in Matrix of a protagonist, someone around whom the novel and the abbey can orbit. Groff’s task becomes deciding who Marie is, solving the mystery of her identity. I therefore want to discuss Groff’s methodology in imagining Marie de France, her hermeneutic for understanding her. We

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\(^6\) Catherine Riley and Lynne Pearce, “Historical Fiction,” in Feminism and Women’s Writing, An Introduction (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 180.
\(^7\) Groff, Matrix, 226.
could view Groff’s opting to include and center Marie, the lauded, the learned, as misguided, as too obvious of a choice, and thereby removed from the buried truth. But Groff does not choose Marie because she is an “important” historical figure with an eventful life, but rather because she is a shadowy figure, the outline of a woman, whom Groff adamantly insists must have inhabited a vibrant emotional world. All the while Groff peppers the text with casual-seeming, but in actuality carefully-researched historical morsels that substantiate her imagination. Groff’s innovation in Matrix becomes the negative space left by the awesome figure of Marie. In her wake is a portrait of a community that, despite the endless quibbles one could submit per the specifics of Marie’s life, smacks of truth, refracting through the ages. This is not the veracity of specifics but the sum of Groff’s aesthetic efforts: the outline of the ash tree, the damp dirt of the garden, the faraway figures, a pair, wading through the grass.

Groff’s Marie

Marie de France has this habit, it rings audacious, where she constructs herself. She is quite the narrator. Scholars know little certainly about her life and yet the first-time reader, even through translation, feels Marie’s personality. If I cannot describe it in a culturally, historically contingent way, I can still feel its potency. It is vicious and smiling in her prologue. She also introduces and accounts for the origins of each lai. Groff asserts that the lay “Guigemar” would have been Marie’s favorite,8 one which tellingly begins with astonishing confidence: “hear, my lords, the words of Marie, who, when she has the opportunity, does not squander her talents.”9 And then there are the stories themselves, typical and atypical. R. Howard Bloch attributes to Marie “an awareness perhaps greater…than any other author of her time of the extent to which language

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8 Groff, Matrix, 36.
escapes the attempt to master it.”

The form gleams chivalric, but beyond it, there is haunting. A fear of losing, of dying.

Groff has settled on one of historians’ proposed candidates for Marie’s identity, a Plantagenet bastard and abbess called Mary of Shaftesbury. Groff’s choice to attach Marie to the royal family is deliberate; she can now be a part of a preexisting cast of characters. The backdrop is not just medieval history generally but medieval English political history specifically. Groff captures multiple historical methodologies in this choice. In the mists of the abbey she can focus on the more intellectually en vogue pursuit of understanding everyday life, everyday people.

By connecting Marie to the hallowed Plantagenets, readers get access to the wider arc of history: the narratives, heroes, villains that have been inscribed many times over, as Carradine so brutally realizes at the close of The Daughter of Time. This choice also puts Groff’s Marie, in her early years, close to another notable medieval woman, Eleanor of Aquitaine, who married Henry II of England in 1154. Groff plants in her Marie a punishing desire for Eleanor, who, especially early in the novel, seems to stand many stories tall. This lesbian desire, when Marie is sent away from the English court by the very same Eleanor to the abbey, fuels her writing.

The lais are a moving part of Matrix, but only one of many. They are one entity that marks a before and after in Marie’s life, which though contained in a slim, fairly spartan text, comes across as chasmic. In making her heroine’s life long, Groff can scan over more of the history, offering us rich and real details offhandedly, such as the interdict on England in 1208.

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11 Bloch, Anonymous, 39-41, on Marie’s framing and form as self-aware of the impossibility of her task, and yet the deep necessity to do it: to write, record, remember, live forever.
12 Katie Bugyis, the historian whose book served as Groff’s foremost historical source on nuns’ lives, is herself of this school, writing that she prioritized prayer books among documentary sources in order to “reconstruct the histories of nuns from the bottom up, rather than from the top down,” see Katie Anne-Marie Bugyis, The Care of Nuns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 17.
Her old age is also undoubtedly a feminist assertion. Groff lingers on the sensation of aging, at one point relaying Marie’s views on the matter in the first person: “For I am all poured out like water. And all my bones are out of joint. And my heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me.”  

Bleak honesty mixes here with celebration. Marie stands in opposition to more unfortunate figures at the abbey, particularly the young, wealthy novice Avice who falls pregnant and dies in childbirth. We mourn her, “a garden shut up, a spring stopped, a fountain sealed,” the waste of her life eulogized in the traditional medieval poetic language applied to holy virginity. Groff can be frank about the brutality endemic to medieval and contemporary life while insisting, optimistically, that attention be paid to Marie, that great exception. Much of Marie’s features and thoughts are, though stained medieval, part and parcel of contemporary feminist thought. Marie’s political initiatives for the abbey, particularly fashioning her nuns into copyists (this was men’s, monks’ work) are especially contemporarily satisfying. She wants her women educated and stimulated and fed and monied.

Like the author of any good bildungsroman, Groff is attentive to her Marie’s origins and identity formation. We are told she doesn’t make sense to anyone around her. Marie has royal blood but is a child of rape. She is not beautiful or delicate or in keeping with the standards of femininity of the time, then or now. We hear a lot how it would have been nicer for her to have been born a boy. Marie’s deliberate misshapenness makes her endearing to a contemporary feminist audience, but also estranged to her own time. Matrix’s theory of history makes room for variance from norms, especially gender norms.

Though as much as Groff fashions Marie as an underdog, basic historical principles mandate she at least be proximate to immense privilege; her ability to write, her manner of

13 Groff, Matrix, 238.
14 Groff, Matrix, 170.
writing, and her works being widely read all point to Marie being of fortunate birth. In *Matrix*, Marie’s royal heritage, though not safeguarding her place at court, does serve her in other ways; it makes her mythological. In one dimension, which becomes a refrain, this is literal; she is the progeny of fairies. A young Marie hears women gossiping behind closed doors about the circumstances of her birth. Marie’s mother, they say, knew her rapist by the flower tucked into his helmet: “A broom flower is the Planta Genet, you see, Plantagenet. Descendants, by the way, of Mélusine, fairy queen who lived among the humans with her children until she was spied upon in the bath where her tail unfurled; then she flew through the window, abandoning humanity forever.” The murmuring woman, conveniently for us readers, knows the Mélusine myth well. She makes us privy to the images of isolation and feminine antagonism that will be so crucial to Marie’s evolution.

Mélusine comes up frequently after this initial mention. In a happy coincidence, Mélusine is the same fairy that so fascinates Byatt’s made-up poet Christabel LaMotte. Mélusine is a natural focal point for the transhistorical Byatt and Groff because the mechanics of her myth anticipate, or at least appear to anticipate, contemporary feminism. There is the danger of being watched, the striving for isolation from men, a theme Groff extends into the realm of finding new, non-patriarchal community. Women in both *Matrix* and *Possession* take their own seemingly controlling archetypes and twist them. In a less revolutionary tenor, Marie also invokes Mélusine to justify her position of power: “Marie did have in her veins the blood of the fairy Mélusine, after all, as did her siblings, and they all had a magic to them that was visible, something under the surface shining. Like moonstone.”

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this statement, especially underscored by the image of moonstone, makes Marie a force to be reckoned with for an arbitrary reason of birthright, and not the more sensible reasons of her fierce love and determination elsewhere supplied. Groff isn’t asking us to assent to this discourse, but accept its presence.

Bloodlines are but one of many subjects we are told feature in the *lais*. Marie’s writing of the poems, which only actually occurs for a brief period in the book, is still a crucial place for Groff to explain who Marie is. Her early days at the abbey are agony. She has been forsaken, so writing, as it was for Groff during the pandemic, permits Marie to escape. It is even a means of exiting consciousness: “The life of the abbey is the dream. The set of poems she is writing is the world.” Groff does not explain the poems in detail or recount them much at all but lists off some of Marie’s inspirations, including the poor women of the abbey, the now distant queen Eleanor, and predictably “Mélusine, the fairy, whose strange blood beats in her own veins.” This is interesting because Mélusine is not included, at least not straightforwardly, in Marie’s poems. In these lines I believe we are getting not just a made-up Marie’s relationship to her own work, but also Groff’s personal associations with the text as an attentive reader and longtime admirer of the *lais*.

Marie’s writing becomes not just about the text itself, but about its figuration in *Matrix*’s truth, in which Marie loves Eleanor desperately. The writing is tangled up with the love, even a shorthand for its imagined magnitude. Marie views her work as an arrow that can cut through distance between them, and the truly insurmountable, love unrequited: “Marie has a swift vision of herself as a tiny figure, climbing the walls; oh someday she will find her way over the queen’s

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rampart, someday she will be inside, out of the wind.”

Here it is hinted early on that this romance, fervent and constant though it may be, cannot be the *raison d’etre* of the novel, nor of Marie’s life. She will not leave the abbey, but will grow accustomed to the wind, constructing with her nuns protective circle after protective circle, hoping never to be hurt again. The love even occasionally rings of self-interest, to Marie, Eleanor is an instrument for her own magnification: “Eleanor will be like a cut glass through which Marie’s light flows.” So there are lesbians, but this is not a lesbian love story, at least, not one in the traditional mode of triumphant togetherness or synchronous death.

When Marie’s dedication of the *lais* to Eleanor (obliquely, the narrator tells us, in literal textual and historical terms, Marie dedicates/dedicated her work to the king) is met with silence, the *lais* become synonymous with time gone by, the old grudge never forgotten. At thirty-two, still glimmering with hope, when Marie nearly crosses paths with Eleanor, she resolves to “use the best of her manners to show how very little she still forgives the queen for rejecting Marie’s gift of lais, which was, of course, the gift of her own soul.” This equivalence will prove false. Groff’s Marie becomes much more than this young, starved writing; how curious, since for the purposes of history, this is nearly all that is known of her. I propose that Groff decenters the lais because, though they are the only reason *Matrix* can exist at all, Groff wants to explore the sensory experiences that could not be voiced within convention, namely but not exclusively same-sex desire.

When Eleanor does visit the abbey, and stay, the same comparison of the lais to Marie’s soul is made, but this time with a sense of distance: “She had once transferred her soul to

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parchment and the queen had ignored it…The old rose of hatred, of love, buds in her and blooms again.”

There is no naive illusion of a happy, uncomplicated love but a recognition that Eleanor brings out something in Marie, a love-shaped thing. Maybe it is larger than love. Eleanor now animates Marie ideologically rather than artistically. Marie’s increasingly fortified abbey will stand starkly against Eleanor’s entrenchment in the world of men, who “in her great arrogance believes herself to be free.” In this way Groff fills in Marie de France, the lonely, mysterious woman writer, as a woman unflinchingly dedicated to community, security, prosperity. In the Christian sense, a realm everlasting.

Work and Play

Both Daughter and Possession feature an underlying obsession with Truth, with the existence of some ironclad narrative, even if not fully committing to unlocking it. They agree that there is something there; maybe we cannot ever see it clearly, but in searching, that is the story. Groff rearranges things. The unknowable historical reality, as will be discussed, is not discounted as extant, but writing the story becomes conjuring instead of excavating. Despite Byatt and Tey’s novels also obviously being fiction through and through, they nor their narrators never fully announce this, never break the seal. Byatt keeps up the appearances of a realist novel; Tey follows the pulse-raising beats of the detective genre. Both set the reader’s expectations and rigorously fulfill them. Groff’s work is less constrained and ordered, more flowing and fuzzy. We wade through Marie’s years like a dream.

With Marie, brilliant, anonymous Marie, there is an opening. She could have been many people, yes, but more importantly, she could have felt many things. So while Groff adheres to a historiographic script when it comes to assigning Marie an identity, Groff and her narrator play

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23 Groff, Matrix, 127.
24 Groff, Matrix, 147.
with the flavor of her feelings. For one, they ask the reader, plainly, wouldn’t it be nice if Marie
felt another woman’s touch, carnally? Author and narrator make this feel so probable as to be
inevitable, and it quickly becomes hard to fathom anything else. There are even respectable
intellectual frameworks by which we can adopt this view; historians tell us there was some
contemporary legislation prohibiting sex between nuns, but generally lesbians flew more under
the radar than gay men.²⁵ There is, for example, one twelfth century Bavarian letter, translated by
scholar of medieval Latin poetry Peter Dronke, which heavily implies a sexual relationship
between two nuns.²⁶ So we can become fast and happily biased. By punctuating the text with
snappy self-assurance, even occasionally discarding historical quibbling, Matrix can play with
history while still committing to its own truth.

Groff’s narrator takes this position firmly, with cheek. She conveys biographical
information, social mores, and especially the trappings of lesbian sexuality giddily (the sex itself
is delivered with more gravity). The fumbling, queer Marie, upon arriving at the abbey, is
afforded an entrance reminiscent of a romantic or slapstick comedy, as “she slips in the muck of
mud and horse shit and falls swift upon her face at the feet of the abbess.”²⁷ Sometimes the cheek
manifests in a girlish affect in the diction; in one case, we get the phrases “girl children” and
“dog-girls” in one paragraph.²⁸ Here the narrator is filtering the outsized rumors about Marie’s
family, relaying darkness with a cutesy indifference that is haunting, amusing, and distinctly
feminine.

²⁵ Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheinghorn, “Charting the Field,” in Same Sex Desire Among Women in
the Middle Ages (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 25-34.
1966), 480-481. Most evocatively the speaker writes “with what words of joy you caressed my little breasts.” The
letter is roped into queer history in John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, (Chicago:
²⁷ Groff, Matrix, 11.
²⁸ Groff, Matrix, 28.
The lightheartedness also comes from contemporary-sounding turns of phrase. For some this might be an unsavory choice; could it be authorly trickery? Perhaps. It primarily makes Matrix conversational, just as Marie’s *lais* are. Marie spoke to her readers, implied dialogue; so does Groff. Unlike Byatt, fastidiously ventriloquizing hundreds of lines of Romantic poetry, Groff opts for a subtler evocation, and does not censor the contemporary when it can expose the emotion more efficiently, perhaps even more honestly. This technique also places her narrator with one foot in the past and another in the present; the phrasing tugs on both sides. As young Marie hears the gossiping about her, we are told, “if she had any self-love left she would flee.”

Self-love is not necessarily a time-bound phrase, but the narrator relies on our conception of self-love as a twenty-first century virtue. Similarly, Marie writes to Eleanor imploring her to “buck up.” This is not a matter of avoiding anachronism, a total impossibility, but purposefully inserting anachronisms when they best describe Marie’s emotional world. The syntax all through Matrix is similar to many other works of contemporary literary fiction, unadorned and stark. Groff gives little preamble, no quotation marks. Take this simple remark from the addled Sister Goda, spokesperson for the patriarchy inside the abbey: “Goda says angrily of course. But but.” The narrator’s unique positioning allows her to knot reader and subject together, with contemporary forms housing medievalish loanwords, from “acedia” to “villeiness.” We cannot watch at a distance, but are continually implicated.

Understandably the narrator does not speak about Marie in the manner that historians would, but settles on a consistent interpretation. Groff probably leans too sharply in one direction, but it is precisely such strong statements that force grappling with historical fact.

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Hedging would be nauseating to read and render political expression and narrative much more difficult. Early on, the narrator positions Marie as sympathetic, on “our” side, that is, the assumed positioning of the contemporary reader. From the first five pages, Marie has committed sacrilege:

And it was true, the religion she was raised in had always seemed vaguely foolish to her, if rich with mystery and ceremony, for why should babies be born into sin, why should she pray to the invisible forces, why would god be a trinity, why should she, who felt her greatness hot in her blood, be considered lesser because the first woman was modeled from a rib and ate fruit and thus lost lazy Eden? It was senseless.\(^{32}\)

Marie becomes the mouthpiece of many readers, who no matter their virtue, occasionally think of medieval Catholicism (or, indeed, contemporary Christianity) as backwards or terrifying. It also presents Marie as somewhat outside time; note the use of the phrase “had always seemed.” This would imply a Marie somehow outside or beyond inculturation. Thus we have a Marie that sometimes feels closer to us, modernity, than her temporal peers. The reasoning can keep going around, too—are we quick to brand Marie anachronistic, anti-medieval in this moment because we are unwilling to believe that historical people existed outside controlling structures, outside archetype?

Groff also brings a sense of play to the text by aestheticizing deviance. Her “nuns are already suspect, unnatural, sisters to witches.”\(^{33}\) There are any number of ways to express the implacable instability of women’s power; it is sometimes put less twinklingly and more frankly: “women in this world are vulnerable; only reputation can keep them from being crushed.”\(^{34}\) Here a critical distance is invoked between our world and this one. By pairing such unadorned honesty

\(^{32}\) Groff, Matrix, 5.
\(^{33}\) Groff, Matrix, 57.
\(^{34}\) Groff, Matrix, 60.
about the past with familiar, aesthetically appealing tropes—while nuns aren’t inherently romantic, what girl hasn’t wished to be a witch, or like Mélusine, a mermaid—Groff laces *Matrix* with play, and suddenly the distant Marie has charmed the reader.

There comes a momentous declaration, seemingly more in/of Groff herself than any other in the book, when Marie goes to the scriptorium and scratches Latin forms into the feminine: “Slashing women into the texts feels wicked. It is fun.”\(^{35}\) Here Groff takes a recorded historical phenomenon\(^{36}\) and fills in the emotional gaps, the substance of the rebellion. For what else but chaotic female delight could inspire such a daring move, which feels to the reader so out of step with everything we know about the medieval world of gender?

Marie de France as constructed by Groff initiates a conversation. She produces a series of what ifs. What if parts of Groff’s story are true? What if some or much of it is decidedly false? What would that mean for Marie? In this respect, Groff’s self-conscious narrator never discards historiographic anxiety. *Matrix* isn’t just for fun.

The novel’s metafictional conversation nods to the political and ideological formations that have shaped historians’ views, their occasionally overbold presuppositions. Groff attends to the issue of English and British national identity, their historical transformations and the seeds that were there in Marie’s time. In particular *Matrix* negotiates impending empire via medieval English and European conceptions of race, religion, and nation. For one, a young Marie saw a Crusade, saw her female family members “unwomanly, shouting, swords drawn, their hair loosed and flying behind them, all in the white and red tunics, ululating, fearsome.”\(^{37}\) This account of “adventurous” “genderbending” women is romantically tinged yet also stained with

\(^{35}\) Groff, *Matrix*, 188.  
\(^{36}\) Bugyis, *Care of Nuns*, 202. Bugyis discusses here the Wherwell psalter, in which a scribe “changed the masculine grammatical forms scripted for the supplicant…to feminine.”  
discomfort, with phrases like “the sanctity of bloodshed” widening the gap between the reader and Marie/her world. Marie accordingly understands her need to insulate the abbey as connected to the impending apocalyptic violence of her outside world: “Christians will be slaughtered and raped and made slaves. Jews throughout the Christian lands will be blamed and caught in their houses and burnt at the stake and murdered without pity.”\textsuperscript{38} The humanization of Jews by Marie comes packaged within an extant Islamophobic framework for her own cultural anxiety, the fall of Jerusalem; indeed Christianity, though initially and continually contested by Marie, still obviously lies at the heart of her worldview.

\textit{Matrix} also deals explicitly with the Norman conquest, with political and cultural borders situated as they were and not as they are. Most of the nuns do not speak (Anglo-Norman) French as their first language. We get an acknowledgement of the long history of separatist movements within Britain with the demise of a particular sister: “Sister Gwladus, a Welsh princess stripped of her insurrectionary family and given to the abbey as punishment, for if she had not been given to god, she would have bred great strong intelligent Welsh nobles who would also inevitably chafe against the English crown.”\textsuperscript{39} Statements like this cause one to wonder, whose critique is this? Does Marie feel this same disdain for English military aspirations? She seems to have no soft spot for the royals, save Eleanor, so it doesn’t seem much of a leap. There could be the fantasy of an anti-imperial Marie, but Groff deftly resists committing, for in all likelihood Marie’s “actual” position must have been much more complicated, much harder to cheer on. Vigilance, when it comes to Marie, when it comes to most careless oversimplifications, weaves itself in.

\textsuperscript{38} Groff, \textit{Matrix}, 101.  
\textsuperscript{39} Groff, \textit{Matrix}, 179.
The narrator points us to Marie’s likely areas of culpability in the systems that would produce empire—the hoarding of land, wealth, authority—while also acknowledging her acute marginalization as a discarded woman. Matrix documents Marie’s hunger for power and notoriety, her misunderstanding of people smaller than her. She was real, after all. She is not a figment, like Mélusine, that ever reappearing fairy to whom she professes lineage. She cannot even be a lesbian fairytale for a contemporary reader; it is important to Matrix that there be a consequential human reality at bottom, regardless of whether Groff’s narrative illuminates or obscures it. Marie would have herself seen as larger than life, “myth…saint…witch.” But telling her story is not just literary play; it is also meticulous, recorded. Groff will leave no stone unturned. She wants to show you a whole woman.

This requires leveraging history, familiar and unfamiliar, comfortable and disquieting. The daily life details, the broad societal worldviews, are sure to be concordant with historiographical consensus. This place setting gives Matrix the latitude for the decidedly non-normative Marie. At one point the narrator describes the nuns’ way of life, maybe critiquing, maybe admiring: “All they bend their bodies to is prayer; the daily office is prayer, the hard work of the body is prayer also. The silence of the nuns is prayer, the readings they listen to prayer, their humility prayer. And prayer of course is love.” The characterization is not only theologically, historically sound, but serves the story’s larger meditation on the passage of time.

Even Marie’s audacious assertion of her power as a woman is characterized specifically, not merely transposing contemporary feminism but warping it to fit the medieval-filtered world

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40 Groff, Matrix, 152.
41 Groff, Matrix, 14.
42 Bugyis, The Care of Nuns, 38.
of the novel. Room must be made for, for example, feudalism. While discussing the villagers' unlikely initial support for Marie’s leadership at the abbey, her authority is couched in feudal logic: “most [are] half proud to have a woman so tough and bold and warlike and royal to answer to now. For it is a deep and human truth that most souls upon the earth are not at ease unless they find themselves safe in the hands of a force far greater than themselves.” Marie takes paternalism and fashions maternalism, a perhaps less volatile variant. The narrator is not bashful about explaining Marie’s power in such terms. The old masculine model is still everywhere, it allows her to be amazed at the feats of her nuns while acknowledging that “so few…have the capacity to think for themselves.” On this score Marie is not totally villainous; she acknowledges that her nuns’ shortcomings result from the social conditioning of monasticism. It is a cycle she herself perpetuates: “she justifies it by telling herself this is how she keeps her daughters in innocence.” At one point the narrator captures for us one of Marie’s thoughts on the matter in the first person: “I, as abbess, am the mother of this place, the parent of my daughters with all the authority of a parent given by god.” The assumption of motherhood connoting authority and the disputatious use of the little-g god (Groff’s preferred stylization) each weave into Matrix’s ongoing justification for the essential rightness of women wielding power.

While Marie’s need for control causes discomfort, the narrative still positions her as a hero. In the most immediate sense, she comes to a place where women are starving and diseased and dying and does whatever she can to stop it. She saves them because she must save them; it is

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43 Groff, Matrix, 51.
44 Groff, Matrix, 130.
45 Groff, Matrix, 130.
46 Groff, Matrix, 182.
her right to be ravenous, to be superior, to be violent, to be sinful. All of this sometimes. It can
lie together with her other, softer, side.

Moment(s) of Truth

As the reader opens *Matrix*, they are greeted by Groff’s dedication “to all my sisters,” a
universalist, trans-temporal invocation. Although, as has been discussed, Groff never gets very
dislocated from Marie’s specific, timebound vitality. This choice in turn bars Marie, I think
meaningfully, from relating seamlessly to the reader. At first Marie is romantically unkempt and
oversized, oozing queer sexuality. But as she grows, Marie’s impulses increasingly veer into
thorny places—protectiveness, aggression, pride—yet Groff’s approach to portraiture, to history,
remains warts-and-all. Marie does not fit squarely into contemporary sensibilities, lending her an
inconvenience, an unsavoriness, itself indicative of truth. This perception of authenticity, even if
only half-believed, makes the turning points of Marie’s life mean that much more.

Specifically, Groff homes in on Marie’s moments of profound loss. Indeed, this is one of
the central themes to her *lais*: the agony of loves, times lost. These vulnerable glimmers are the
moments where she can emerge from her world, her historiographical stature, and face her
readers. Early on we get Marie’s outlook on her harrowing first experiences of the abbey: “Later,
Marie will remember those days just after arriving at the abbey as thick and black. When she
would peer back into that time, it was like looking from a well-lit room through the window into
night; nothing to see but her own face hovering like the moon.”

The image is one of stark contrasts, insisting on a narrative, a before and after. Marie, seventeen and afraid, but also Marie, older and solemnly remembering, shed some of their mythos and invite us into the feeling of terror and its aftershocks.

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When Emme, who is abbess when Marie arrives as a prioress, dies, it is suddenly implied not only that we can see the true Marie, but that Marie can see us, for “she can see for a great distance now. She can see for eons.”

Certainly it is no surprise that death shifts her gaze forward, but the word “eons” does a lot here to clarify meaning. Is that her big ungainly hand reaching out to us? There comes confirmation when Wulfhild, the novice who eventually opts to have a family, but stays on at the abbey as bailiff, also dies. Marie is distraught, reflecting, riding back to the abbey on her horse. The narrator takes this blow as an opportunity to reveal that Marie’s prescience is not vague but knows our times in uncomfortable detail. In this case, the detail is climate change: “Human folly and greed made too hot for [the earth] to be willing to bear any more life upon its back.”

In these moments, *Matrix* is not escapist but unrelenting. Marie is Groff’s instrument of provocation. Groff wields her by drawing her out, making her a tether, affixing her to us.

Groff also fosters trans-temporal feeling by rooting instances of intimacy and violence (themselves oftentimes indelibly linked to great loss) in Marie’s rough, rounded personhood, extending an at times harsh truth to sensation in the novel. Groff has characterized her Marie as “a very carnal person. She experiences the world through her body first. She's a woman of great hunger.”

The body, specifically the body’s housing of emotion, is one of *Matrix*’s main tools for accessing its past.

Midway through the novel, things lean surreal when the nuns must do bloody battle with the villagers. The happy relations have gone sour, and the villagers, men, are increasingly threatened by the abbey’s power. The passage is distressing and demands rapt attention. Groff

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50 Groff, quoted in Wyver, “Groff interview.”
suggests that no violence can be carried out in a respectable way, despite their orderly preparations: “With awful slowness a head lazily bounces off toward the novices, spraying them with blood.” The violence is cartoonish but simmers off the pages. Its effect is not so far removed from the jarring violence in the lais. We can take, for example, the lai “Laüstic”: a treacherous husband crushes a nightingale in his fist, then thrusts it at the feet of his adulterous wife. By the logic of the lai, this act of violence cuts the woman off from her lover, who spoke with her by night at the window where the nightingale lived. Though also shocking, Groff’s brief battle is similarly not left hanging, meaningless. At the end of things Marie becomes a dealer in absolution: “The dead she delivers herself to the estates she knows well, where she has sat with women drinking ale and eating nut tarts. Now the same women silently reach up for the bodies. They cannot look at Marie.” Her formidable has consequence, reverberating less so toward the dead men, but into the bodies of women. Sometimes it feels like the abbey is everything in Matrix. The battle broadens the scope and shows the places the community cannot reach, the bodies that cannot make contact; “they cannot look at Marie.”

There is sex (Groff was adamant that there should be), but also intense physical and emotional closeness, in the novel. The vivid encounters Marie has with Nest the infirmatrix (“her skin shivers the length of itself”) and later Sister Elgiva are important for sociological picture making but don’t get at the brunt of Marie’s emotional turmoil. Of course, for much of the novel, she is lost in a deep love for Eleanor. She has solace in sex, and in friendship. One of her deepest connections is with Sister Ruth, who she met when she arrived at the abbey as a teenager. The

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51 Groff, Matrix, 142.
53 Groff, Matrix, 144.
54 Wyver, “Groff interview.”
55 Groff, Matrix, 82.
touching of bodies, though figurative, matters here. Ruth, “in whom long friendship has built a window between them, can briefly see inside Marie’s mind,” achieves a supreme intimacy, getting inside. Marie, whose illusions and ambitions can be remote, who can even be frightening, is like any other woman puzzled out by her closest friends. When Eleanor, a great love, but never her friend, dies, there comes confusion, pain, but ultimately relief. Her old feeling can return because she has a higher purpose now, a wider love. With Eleanor dead, “She will make something useful, a lake, out of something useless, this bog of mud and stink.” She can recover her drive even when others around her are long weary. When the project is completed, she feels her own divinity: “the radiance in her hands, her feet, in her belly…royal…papal.” Somatics lend impact to the smirking heresy, making it more than amusement.

At the end of the novel, Marie’s oldest friend and oftentimes bedfellow from the royal court returns to her. Cecily, who throughout the story is a memory, a comforting warmth, becomes sharp, visceral in the flesh. They are intimate again as the lights go steadily down on Marie’s life. I think, though, that their moment of true closeness comes when Cecily, in the traditional romantic mode, explains why Marie is good, and why Cecily loves her:

Cecily goes painfully down on her creaking knees before Marie and takes her hands and brings them up to her lips, and says Marie may have some accidental royal blood in her veins, but the rest of her is entirely old fool. For when it comes to strength and goodness and brilliance and gentleness and grandeur of spirit so vast that it takes one’s breath away, beauty is nothing, beauty is a mote to a mountain, beauty is a mere straw alight beside a barn on fire.

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56 Groff, Matrix, 204.
57 Groff, Matrix, 244.
58 Groff, Matrix, 212.
59 Groff, Matrix, 216.
60 Groff, Matrix, 241.
Cecily’s declaration is moving but not simple. She is carrying on her back historical and contemporary notions of inner versus outer beauty. She demonstrates that even Marie, with all her spiritual declarations on the perfection of women, can be intermittently blind to what matters most. She humanizes Marie, who even the narrator often seems to believe in excessively. Cecily keeps her a woman and not an idol.

In her last moments with Cecily, memory returns “so vivid it is nearly a vision.” While Cecily serves the story well by cutting Marie down to size, it is important to leave any analysis of Matrix with the reminder that Marie, though no more than a woman, possesses magic. Like other women of her time and place (take Julian of Norwich) she is gifted with visions. Groff did not have to make Marie a mystic; the lais are notably not the writings of a mystic. In another dimension, Groff is a historical do-gooder, because she does not attempt to apply contemporary notions of hallucination, psychosis, etc. onto this part of Marie’s imagined personhood. Marie’s religious visions are taken seriously and are appropriately emphasized somatically. The visions’ assertion of authenticity, coupled with their resonant “feminist” poetics, make them the passages most semantically linked to truth-telling in the novel.

Her most extensive vision, and potentially the thesis statement of the novel, comes in the wake of a fallen tree during the construction of the labyrinth around the abbey (this idea itself came from its own, earlier vision). The narrator transcribes what Marie would write in her “private Book of Visions,” so for a little while the novel shifts to the first person. Eve and Mary appear to her, kiss one another, and produce in her a divine conclusion:

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61 Groff, Matrix, 241.
62 This is the controversial practice of “retrospective diagnosis,” see Peter Elmer, The Healing Arts: Health, Disease, and Society in Europe 1500-1800, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), xv.
For, I saw, it was from Eve’s taste of the forbidden fruit that knowledge came, and with knowledge the ability to understand the perfection of the fruit of Mary’s womb and the gift given to the world. And without the flaw of Eve there could be no purity of Mary. And without the womb of Eve, which is the House of Death, there could be no womb of Mary, which is the House of Life. Without the first matrix, there could be no salvatrix, the greatest matrix of all.63

The clarifying phrase “I saw,” coupled with the unabashed assertion of female humanity, speaks not only to Marie’s need to safeguard her community, but her personal call to speak on why. We cannot understand Marie’s reasons for being in the dimensions of selflessness or bashfulness. She is hungry. She does not apologize. After Mary and Eve “rose up in a slow and shining band of light to the heavens,” Marie recalls that in her solitude “all that was left was the thickness of the morning behind them and a smell of myrrh lingering in my nose and the sweetness of the first birdsong.”64 We don’t consume the vision as ideological abstraction but as something rooted in Marie’s body. The body, Marie’s body, is the site of history, our assurance that it happened.

Prioress, then abbess, Tilde looks at the vision-book after Marie’s death. As she flips through the pages, she gives us more of the flavors of Marie’s psyche: “god is a colossal dove hen laying the eggs of the world; Marie herself is protector well above the power of any woman born to woman.”65 Then Tilde throws the book into the flames. While Matrix is oftentimes unconcerned with the maintenance of artifice, in this plot beat, the novel echoes the self-contained quality of detective fiction, realistic fiction. It is almost a gimmick: the supposed burned manuscript, the evidence for Groff’s version of Marie, could exist in our world. The Book of Visions is a blank space filled in, a stand-in for the buried evidence that must be out

63 Groff, Matrix, 117.
64 Groff, Matrix, 117.
65 Groff, Matrix, 253.
there. Though, as Byatt and Tey suggest, even when the crucial piece is dug up, the story can never write itself. So though the fullness of Marie is bound to be forgotten, *Matrix* insists on the truth of lost things.

The precise truth cannot be known, so Groff shows us what must be: that things were bloody, warm, intimate, blissful, haunted. Medieval people, the nuns, Marie de France, all wanted to love and be loved. Because Groff tasks herself with fictionalizing a group that either by virtue of not writing their feelings down, or by having their feelings deliberately overlooked by historiography, she fills in the emotional gaps animatedly, and ultimately optimistically.

Fictionalizing Marie is a risky choice. Things could ring hollow, optimism especially so. But Groff’s connection to the historical subject, her clear investment, work in the novel’s favor. Facing death, the narrator again reveals some of Marie’s thoughts in the first person, directed to her younger self: “Open your hands and let your life go. It has never been yours to do with what you will.” Marie speaks to the limitations put on her by society, but also speaks to us, to history, to the narrator, to Groff, who each manipulate her, with both love and selfishness, toward their own ends.

Then Marie dies. The book can breathe deeper. It is easier to remember remotely than to enact history bodily, to feel the beating heart. Marie, her greatness, is beautiful but burdensome. After she is gone, the narrator draws the eye to, amidst other vignettes of the abbey, a pair of young lovers: “Out in the orchard, small, quick Sister Petronilla catches up to Sister Alix on her way to the abbess’s house with a stack of clean linens in her arms, and darting her eyes about to ensure nobody is watching, she kisses the young blushing nun swiftly on the mouth and runs

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on.”\footnote{Groff, \textit{Matrix}, 257.} Marie is the protagonist of \textit{Matrix} but not the beginning and end of its world, that world being the long history of women.
Conclusion

These novels are not, and nor do they put themselves, up to the task of puzzling out two great philosophical and historical conundrums: how did it feel to be *them* and how did it feel to be *then*? On one point, however, none of the texts relinquish ground: there is something, if a far cry from a straight line, connecting them to us, then to now.

*The Daughter of Time*, like, I am inclined to believe, many other works of genre fiction, ought to be credited more for entering a metafictional space. Tey tackles historical authorship and the places where fable, fact, and politics have their thorny intersection. While the vehicle, a mystery novel, is lighthearted and formulaic in many respects, Tey’s text belies incredible interest, made manifest intermittently as worry, pleasure, and rage, in history as narrative, and a fickle one.

*Possession* announces its existential fears more openly. Where *Daughter* concealed complex epistemological concerns in a shiny package, *Possession* declares the breadth and the tangledness of history, employing the setting and lexicon of English academia to do so. Byatt meticulously crafts a postmodernist crown jewel. This means occupying a third space in the reflexivity debate, skirting around endorsements in either direction. *Possession* does not reach a conclusion regarding the reality of transtemporal feeling, but makes plain that the actuality and/or artifice of such feeling is tantamount to experiencing history and to the human experience. Roland and Maud see each other because they see the past.

*Matrix* forgoes the flip-floppiness one feels while reading *Possession*, being less rooted in academia¹ and further removed from the reflexive turn. But the underlying anxiety remains, as it did in Tey’s work. While offering Marie’s story with little qualification or preamble, the

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¹ Though Groff researched Marie de France via the usual institutional channels, the language of scholarship does not overly penetrate the style of *Matrix*. 
audacity of the narrative is evident and provocative. We are instructed to recognize that in Groff’s Marie, there could be truth. In reading Matrix, we become intimate not only with Marie’s potentiality, but the potentiality of an entire world of women. Most straightforwardly, Matrix offers contemporary political commentary through a medieval lens, but in a more metafictional sense, the novel questions the divorce between the contemporary and the medieval entirely. Gendered experience across time is Matrix’s means of disassembly. As the narrator brings the reader closer to Marie, bodies nearly touch, and worlds merge like veils.

Each of these novels demonstrates the utmost importance of the personal for the hermeneutics of history and the hermeneutics of fiction. The novelists accordingly foreground human to human contact. In The Daughter of Time, though Grant professes a no-nonsense, policeman’s rationality, he is emotional. He is tangled up with Richard, because he knows that, despite the jumbled paper trail, the king’s life and death were real. In Possession, Roland and the other scholars cannot finish their quest without seeing the poet Randolph Ash’s grave, the rotted proof of death. In Matrix, Groff’s narrator cannot help but be haunted by the evidence that some Marie, somewhere, breathed. There is reality to contend with beneath each story, a cloaked thing that charges the novels, that provokes the feeling.

In the novels I have studied, the way forward in following such a feeling is embrace, with the past, with one another. At the same time, I acknowledge that the historical conclusions approximated by Tey, Byatt, and Groff, are culturally and politically mediated. They are beholden to myths of nation, race, class, and gender—that is, the myths of history. But because these novels so deftly anticipate and/or work in concert with reflexivity, and by extension, history’s tenuous relationship to reality, societal narratives operate without being granted absolute authority. The intimacy proposed by the novels with historical subjects is not a reckless
one. In a sense, these novels combine the competing philosophies which Tom Stoppard situates in opposition to one another in Arcadia: the Classical rationality of Hannah Jarvis versus the Romantic “bloody knowledge” of Bernard Nightingale. Touching the past becomes a self-aware submersion, an open-eyed embrace.
Bibliography


