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The Cauda Pavonis and Byatt's Female Visionary in the Tetralogy*

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ABSTRACT

British writer A. S. Byatt employs alchemical imagery substantially in her Tetralogy. She redefines god as an androgynous being in the four occult narratives, and the four gods represent virginity, life, death, and rebirth, the four stages of an alchemical process, which also symbolize the life stages of the main character, Frederica Potter. The alchemical structure serves at least a double purpose for Byatt. First, she successfully brings her heroine's sex versus intellect conflict into a metaphorical scheme already constructed by Jung. Second, she successfully creates a whole repertoire of female visionaries whose prototypes are crosses between fertility goddesses and alchemical divinities, and by so doing, she underlines the importance of intellectual pursuit for her female artists.

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British writer A. S. Byatt once commented on a character in the Tetralogy in her *Nature* journal article: “Lysgaard-Peacock was named originally for the alchemical thread of my patterns—he was the cauda pavonis, the peacock's tail of multi-coloured light before the single white light of the opus, the philosopher's stone”.¹ This was one of the rare occasions that Byatt admitted her use of alchemy in fiction. Critics have acknowledged that there is a revival of medieval Hermeticism in contemporary fiction exemplified by Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding*, Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee*, Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, Gustav Meyrink's *The Angel of the Western Window*, Hilary Mantel's *Fludd*, Patrick Harpur's *Mercurius—The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and Michel Butor's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Ape*, to name only a few.² According to critics, these novels either exploit the mysticism surrounding Hermeticism or manipulate alchemy as a metaphorical device. Both David Meakin's critique of Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* and Carina Hart's comment upon contemporary Hermetic novels as a whole represent the two focuses in contemporary Hermetic fiction studies. David Meakin says: “There is no doubt that Eco evokes with immense virtuosity the excitement and lure of the hermetic quest, but he also shows up its mystifications and potential dangers more sardonically than any of our other novelists.”³ Carina Hart deciphers the

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¹Byatt, “Fiction Informed by Science”, 296.

²Sikorska, 81–100; Szonyi, 405–23; Meakin, 138–97; Ziolkowski, 188–228; and Lambert.

³Meakin, 173.

alchemical symbols loaded in these novels as indicating psychological integration processes. She says:

In particular, the individual is regarded in these fictions as psychologically isolated and fragmented, and so psychological concepts informed by alchemy—as pioneered by C. G. Jung in his psychoanalytic works—are adapted into fictional narratives that show self-analysis and narrativization as a way for individuals to reintegrate themselves into a unified world order.⁴

No critic has so far dubbed Byatt's Tetralogy "Hermetic fiction" for the possible reason that the four novels involve neither a historical alchemist nor an explicit and coherent Hermetic inquiry. Alchemical symbols are scattered here and there and usually mingled with other occult symbols. However, the virtuosity with which Byatt manipulates the alchemical symbols certainly deserves a perusal of the way that she appropriates them into her own symbolic system. There is no denying that esotericism becomes an important source of originality for Byatt when she blends the arcane knowledge with Christian beliefs. The general reader identifies something analogous with yet distinct from their known mythologies and it's exactly this feeling of both familiar and strange that lures them. What really strikes me, however, is not the explicitness with which she scatters the arcane symbols so profusely in the novels, but just the opposite, is the implicitness and intricacy with which she represents the four distinct stages of an alchemical process as the organizing principle of the four novels. It's exactly the latter that marks her ingenuity as a writer whose works do not pivot on blatant mysticism but on the metaphorical significance aligned with alchemy. The Tetralogy fully endorses the literariness of esoteric symbols. The purpose of this paper is to examine the way the occult narratives are assimilated into the frame stories, and the interplay between the four occult narratives, how the thematic concern, the body vs. mind dichotomy is expressed in terms of an alchemical process, and finally, how the idea of androgyny is associated with Byatt's notion of female artists, or in her own term, female visionaries.

Byatt, Jung and Alchemy

The ultimate purpose of alchemy was to get the philosopher's stone, "a substance supposed to have mystic-magical powers that could transmute lead into gold, cure disease, restore youth, and prolong life."⁵ Jung's works, nevertheless, foreground the mystical aspect of alchemists' work and are mostly preoccupied with the interpretation of God's imagery as manifest in matter. Jung stresses from time to time that Jesus Christ's passion is a convenient metaphor of the transmutation of metals that takes place in an alchemist's furnace. Mercurius, or the philosopher's stone, an alchemical counterpart of Jesus Christ, has a myriad of synonyms. He is otherwise known as the opus, the stone, the dragon, the lapis, and the uroboros. Such geometric shapes as a double pyramid, concentric circles and trees are expressions of Mercurius, who as a divinity is conceived to be androgynous and an arch unifier that can reconcile opposites and bring warring factors together. The union of opposites became the central mission of the alchemists in their labour who usually toiled to bring together moist and dry, cold and warm, upper and lower, spirit and body, masculine and feminine.⁶ It is

⁴Hart, 86.

⁵Barry, 345.

⁶Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 3.

exactly this central concern of alchemy that appeals to Byatt who more often than not sees her artists, especially female artists, need to solve the paradox of sexual passions and intellectual engagement, two forces usually at odds with each other. She expresses explicitly her strong fascination with as well as her frequent use of such typical alchemical symbols as concentric spheres and trees in her fiction. The reason is exactly that they are cogent symbols of union. In her *Nature* journal article, she tells the reader:

But this spiral (the Fibonacci spiral) informed ... all sorts of natural phenomena, from climbing plants to the sprouting of twigs round stems, from snails to pine cones and sunflowers. ... I felt that the Fibonacci spiral was an example of a platonic order—a sense that an invisible mathematical order informed all our physical accidental world. My fearful mathematician at the end of the third novel moves from studying the computer as a brain to studying this spiral. This is for him a kind of paradisaal completeness.⁷

This visualizing of spirals as “a platonic order” and “a kind of paradisaal completeness” is an alchemical notion that Byatt expresses in scientific terminology.

Although in her Booker-Prize winning novel *Possession*, Byatt directly references Paracelsus' works, in her Tetralogy, most of her Hermetic lore is drawn from Jungian sources. Carl Gustav Jung, famous Swiss Psychiatrist, did exhaustive work in extracting from treatises written by famous European alchemists including Paracelsus and revealed in a fashion sensible to modern readers the metaphors heaped upon both the philosopher's stone and the alchemical process. His works *Aion, Psychology and Alchemy, Alchemical Studies* and *Mysterium Coniunctionis* are dedicated to alchemical studies. Byatt quotes directly from *Psychology and Alchemy* in the first novel of the Quartet, and in the last one she quotes copiously from *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. Elsewhere in *The Virgin*, obviously Marcus's visualization of the garden as a double pyramid is an indirect referencing to *Aion*, and in *Babel Tower*, Colonel Grim's mythical view of a local tree is inspired by Jung's studies of the philosophical tree in his *Alchemical Studies*. In “The Conjugal Angel”, Byatt writes “a series of obscene theological stanzas” about Sophy, or Sophia, goddess of creation in Gnosticism, of which I quote only two stanzas below, and in her meta-fiction *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt admits that the source material was Jung's account of “Sophia and the calling of chaos into matter” in *Alchemical Studies*.⁸

The Holy Ghost trawls in the Void
 With fleshly Sophy on His Hook
 The Sons of God crowd round to look
 At plumpy limbs to be enjoyed
 The Greater Man casts out the line
 With dangling Sophy as the lure
 Who howls around the Heavens' colure
 To clasp the Human Form Divine⁹

⁷Byatt, “Fiction Informed by Science”, 295.

⁸Byatt, *On Histories*, 113.

⁹Byatt, “The Conjugal Angel”, 285.

Androgynous Gods in the Occult Narratives

A. S. Byatt's Tetralogy, or the Quartet, is composed of *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996), and *A Whistling Woman* (2002). They represent an intellectual woman Frederica Potter's four different life stages. The first novel *The Virgin in the Garden* tells the story of Frederica Potter as a middle-school student, a virgin, who plays a part in Alexander's play about Elizabeth I, *Astraea*. In *Still Life*, Frederica becomes a Cambridge undergraduate student who dates quite a lot of men and gets married at the end of the novel. When it comes to the third novel, to her abhorrence, she encounters both domestic violence and her husband's infidelity and gets involved in a protracted divorce lawsuit. Finally, *A Whistling Woman* chronicles her days as a single mother and a pretty successful TV talk show hostess and at the end of the novel she meets a new lover and becomes pregnant again. In each of the novels, besides the mainstream Frederica Potter's narrative, there is a sub-narrative that is dedicated to occult experiences where alchemical symbols appear profusely. Altogether Byatt portrays four members from four different occults—Lucas an alchemist in *The Virgin in the Garden*, Van Gogh a fertility cult follower in *Still Life*, Culvert founder of the religion of cruelty in *Babel Tower* and Josh Lamb a Manichean in *A Whistling Woman*, who turn out to be all in fanatical quest of an androgynous god and finally all become schizophrenic.

Ostensibly Lucas neither becomes infatuated with the making of physical gold nor resorts to the alchemist's furnace or retort. Nevertheless, what spurs him on his quest for his "Noussphere" is the alchemical notion that the philosopher's stone can induce religious visions. Jung in his works reveals a common fallacy or illusion held by alchemists: "God himself, through the Holy Ghost, enters the work of man, in the form of inspiration as well as by direct intervention in the miraculous transformation."¹⁰ His best friend, Marcus in the novel is a genius mathematician who can visualize mathematical problems and often sees apparitions of geometrical patterns sometimes transparent and sometimes in motion when he is contemplating maths problems. Lucas deciphers Marcus's vision as a religious one and tells the latter that what he sees "may have been more or less what Saul saw on the way to Damascus".¹¹ He decides to emulate Marcus. He comes up with a plan to find or produce "the Noussphere, the Earth-Mind" that is defined as a union of the corporeal and the spiritual, an equivalent to the philosopher's stone.¹² He explains its nature to Marcus: "It would seem reasonable to suppose that the present Goal of Existence is the transference of Material Energy into Mental Energy."¹³ He conducts two experiments to produce his "Noussphere" central to which are objects considered by alchemists to be Mercurius. In the first experiment it is the dog's mercury and in the second it's the ammonite. Jung tells the reader in his *Mysterium Coniunctionis* that the dog's mercury is associated with "magical effects".

In addition, the plant *Mercurialis* (dog's mercury) is indicated. Like the Homeric magic herb Moly, it was found by Hermes himself and must therefore have magical effects. It is particularly favourable to the coniunctio because it occurs in male and female form and thus can

¹⁰Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 319.

¹¹Byatt, *The Virgin*, 163.

¹²Byatt, *The Virgin*, 191.

¹³Ibid.

determine the sex of a child about to be conceived. Mercurius himself was said to be generated from an extract of it—that spirit which acts as a mediator ... and saviour of the Macrocosm, and is therefore best able to unite the above with the below.¹⁴

Obviously, as a keen reader of Jung's works, Lucas is very much receptive of the mythical quality of the dog's mercury and he "lectured Marcus incomprehensibly for a long time on the meanings of the word Mercury, mythical, chemical, alchemical and botanical: they had found creeping dog's mercury at Knaresborough, there was meaning in that."¹⁵ In the first experiment he mixes the dog's mercury together with other herbs like the gentian, the aconite and the fern that he found nearby and then spins together with Marcus, like "school-children who spin in playgrounds in such tense figures of eight in order to disorient themselves", but to no avail.¹⁶ In the second experiment, he uses an ammonite which he interprets as Mercurius by borrowing from Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*.

Time and again the alchemists reiterate that the opus proceeds from the one and leads back to the one, that it is a sort of circle like the dragon biting its own tail. For this reason the opus was often called *circularis* (circular) or else *rota* (the wheel). Mercurius stands at the beginning and end of the work ...¹⁷

In the second experiment, Lucas first mixes the ammonite with the herbs that he used in the first experiment as well as with various other objects and then he invites Marcus to spin, to follow what they did previously, and finally he burns the assortment of objects, but for a second time, religious visions elude him. Lucas, like a medieval alchemist, believes that these experiments can grant him religious visions, but becomes terribly disillusioned in the end.

The second novel of the Tetralogy, *Still Life*, is informed by an occult narrative whose main character is Van Gogh. The Dutch painter is fictionalized by a British playwright Alexander in his new play *The Yellow Chair* and although it largely represents Van Gogh the artist, the play foregrounds the mythical implications of both his life and his works. *The Yellow Chair* portrays Van Gogh as a fertility myth maker, but unlike in *The Virgin in the Garden*, in the second novel, occult beliefs are represented only implicitly. When Alexander is writing the play, obviously, he ruminates about such facts that Van Gogh's self-mutilation took place near Christmas, on the 23rd of December, that the artist held a mythical view that "the expenditure of sperm in coition weakened the power of painting"¹⁸ and that a certain art critic J. Olivier believed that "Vincent Van Gogh's self-mutilation in Arles was an aspect of some bull-ritual",¹⁹ and these facts obviously foreshadow the fertility myth symbolism that predominates Alexander's stage. Alexander's play uses the agon between the French painter Paul Gauguin and the Dutch artist as the central event, and many still lifes as well as landscape paintings by the latter are staged that depict the basic rhythm of nature, plants' decay in winter and

¹⁴Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 484.

¹⁵Byatt, *The Virgin*, 395.

¹⁶Ibid., 311.

¹⁷Ibid., 397.

¹⁸Byatt, *Still Life*, 206. Frazer discovers two opposite attitudes towards sex during important farming activities. Some primitive tribes would indulge themselves in sex while other tribes usually abstained from sexual pleasures. However, the diametrically opposite views can be accounted for by the same reason. Frazer speculates in *The Golden Bough*: "In various parts of Europe customs have prevailed both at spring and harvest which are clearly based on the same crude notion that the relation of the human sexes to each other can be so used as to quicken the growth of plants"(170).

¹⁹Byatt, *Still Life*, 70.

revival in spring, alluding to the central event. The life and death of humanity is thus read in terms of the growth and decay of vegetation, and this is typical of fertility cult cosmology. The playwright redefines Van Gogh's Muse, Venus of Arles as an equivalent of such Mediterranean fertility goddesses as St. Mary Jacobus, St. Mary Salome, and Sarah, and such classical fertility deities as Cybele and Venus, who are also represented as being androgynous. The novel represents carved Sarah as a figure "lying there knees to chin, folded, flaking, tendons taut",²⁰ a posture reminiscent of both "Rodin's Danaide"²¹ and Jung's "a sort of circle like the dragon biting its own tail"²² that Lucas quested in *The Virgin*, a Mercurius-like figure. Alexander also interprets Cybele and Venus as "conical stones", and that further attributes hermaphroditism to fertility goddesses, and also to Van Gogh's Venus, since in classical mythologies conical stones usually represented male procreation.²³

Culvert appears in a roman a clef *Babbletower* in the third novel of the Quartet, written by Jude Mason, a character in *Babel Tower*. Culvert and his followers come to La Tour Bruyarde to establish what he envisions as a free new world where every member of the society is free to express his desires, and that reform finally leads to man slaughter. Culvert needs a religion to help him "dissect and galvanise human nature" and provide necessary rationale for his reformation.²⁴ The reader is told that the whole La Tour Bruyarde venerates gods that demand human blood as sacrifice. Colonel Grim relates tales to Lady Roseace of how slaughtered men's blood became the bloody sap of a local thorn tree. An old midwife narrates how in old days people of La Tour Bruyarde celebrated the new year by tortures of various kinds and that the final execution of Babu, or Lord of Misrule, a human sacrifice marked the climax of such a festive occasion. Lady Mavis disseminates stories about ancient Babylon god who demanded roasted human beings as offerings. Culvert, greatly inspired by the scene of violence in the old local religious worship, decrees that his carnival will be a reenactment of "the cruelties of religion, or the religion of cruelty", and as a result, on that occasion, he is so much whipped by Lady Mavis that his "blood began to blossom, more and more furiously, cutting his backside into a trellis of weals . . ." ²⁵ All of them, surprisingly enough, still cling to the alchemical notion of god while delineating their respective religion of violence. Colonel Grim's interpretation of the bloody sap echoes the mysterious philosophical tree in alchemy that functions as a strong symbol of union, representing a man, the lapis, and also Jesus Christ.²⁶ He tells Lady Roseace in earnest:

And there is also a tale, such as you will find all over the world, but without the attestation of bloody sap, that the trees are transfigured men and women, or maybe transfigured Krebs, that the Krebs may be trees that walk . . . ²⁷

In the midwife's tale, the sacrificial hero, the snail, becomes Mercurius that unites all opposites. "They go between, you see, my dear boy, they go between earth and sky, they go

²⁰Ibid., 100.

²¹Ibid., 101.

²²Byatt, *The Virgin*, 397.

²³Byatt, *Still Life*, 101.

²⁴Byatt, *Babel Tower*, 257.

²⁵Ibid., 258–9, 267.

²⁶Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, 337–41.

²⁷Byatt, *Babel Tower*, 136.

between fire and water, they can play the king and the queen too, and their children are like glass and pearls.”²⁸ Significantly, Culvert reads his own version of god of cruelty as bearing the same emblem of androgyny, as someone who turns out “to be all things to all men, Scapegoat and Whore, Mother and Father, Life and Death, Punished and Punisher ...”²⁹

Josh Lamb or Joshua Ramsden in *A Whistling Woman* is a fervent follower of Mani, founder of Manicheism. He visualizes a polarized world where light is permanently at war with darkness, and he takes it as his central mission to embrace light, the source of all good and combat darkness, the source of all evils. As a token of acknowledging Mani’s cosmology, all the occult members are clad in white, the colour of light, their living places are decorated with mirrors to reflect the sunlight, and they only eat vegetarian food, food produced by plants’ photosynthesis. They shun sex, meat, and milk, things perceived to be synonymous with darkness. Nonetheless, like a medieval alchemist, Josh Lamb is seeking a conjunction between disparate bodies of light and also a union between heaven and earth. His religious hallucinations tell much of his secret yearnings for a union. On a full-moon night, he can visualize from his own reflected image on the window that his “other self” is imparting him divine teachings, and this moment of communion, his “other self” defines as a moment of union in an alchemical sense. “The other said he was the Syzygos, the Heavenly Twin. He was the Word. He had returned at the syzygy or conjunction of the bodies of light, the sun and the moon”.³⁰ In another of his hallucinations, he witnesses his own life-death-rebirth transformation in the fashion of Mani. He descends to the roots of a tree, is flayed by “the Syzygos” there, then his dismembered body reassembles itself, and he climbs along the trunk until he reaches the top of the tree.³¹ In his hallucinated ritual, the tree becomes the philosophical tree that unites both heaven and hell, both life and death, and both the sun and the moon.

The Alchemical Structure of the Tetralogy

There is no denying that Hermetic lore becomes necessary source materials for Byatt’s construction of occult narratives and brings a certain degree of mysticism to the four academic novels. Nevertheless, Byatt’s truly admirable wisdom lies in the larger pattern that she fits the four occult narratives into as well as the way they are interplaying with Frederica Potter’s narratives. Alchemical symbolism plays a more significant role in shaping the overall pattern of Frederica Potter’s narratives and bears more significance in defining Byatt’s vision of her female visionaries. God in each occult is visualized as an androgynous being and in so doing Byatt paves the way for constructing the overall alchemical structure of the Quartet which might have been intended when Byatt was writing the first novel, *The Virgin in the Garden*. On one occasion, Byatt admitted that she wrote *The Virgin* to pay tribute to T. S. Eliot’s famous theory of the “dissociation of sensibility”.

²⁸Ibid., 262. Snails as alchemical symbols are Byatt’s own coinage. She is greatly inspired by the alchemical symbol of concentric spheres and says in her article “Fiction Informed by Science”:

I realized, one idle morning, that a snail in Latin is helix. And a snail’s shell is in the form of a spiral. Later I discovered that there were two species of snail, *Helix hortensis* and *Helix nemoralis* (the snails of the garden and the grove), that could be fitted into both my paradise garden imagery and my realist scientific tale (295).

²⁹Byatt, *Babel Tower*, 266.

³⁰Byatt, *A Whistling Woman*, 125–6.

³¹Ibid., 311–4.

Eliot believed that feeling and thought, body and mind were a unified sensibility until the seventeenth century ... It is hard to recapture these odd beliefs now, but at the time I found them useful for the form of a book about the body–mind problems of a young woman ...³²

The idea of getting connected is foregrounded throughout the whole Tetralogy, not just *The Virgin* alone. Fiona Cox finds that even the last novel *A Whistling Woman* bears witness to “the pleasure that she (Byatt) finds in establishing connections and teasing out links”.³³ If we follow the general spirit of the novels to connect the allegorical meaning each god represents, we may find that what they spell out is an alchemical process with four distinct stages. If Byatt has derived much pleasure from constructing every single alchemical god, she must have got much more pleasure from designing the overall alchemical structure of the Quartet. It’s exactly the latter that underscores her virtuosity as a writer who has successfully domesticated alchemical symbols.

Although they are all defined as being androgynous, when contextualized in different occults, each god has his own inherent meaning. The adepts interpreted their opus or stone as a virgin.³⁴ For Lucas, a pseudo-chemist in *The Virgin*, his frenzied search for “the Noussephere” indicates his yearnings to retain his virginity, that culminate in his final self-castration. Historically, fertility cult venerated life, growth and procreation. *Still Life* visualizes Van Gogh’s painted ripe vegetation as fertility goddesses incarnate, and his harvest as a moment epitomizing the apex of life and growth. Culvert’s religion of cruelty treats man torture and human slaughter as the norms, and it signifies death. Finally, as light is a conventional symbol of spirit, Josh Lamb’s Manicheism symbolizes a spiritual rebirth. An androgynous divinity undergoes his virginity, life, death and finally his rebirth, and this is an alchemical process whose end product is the philosopher’s stone.³⁵ This is the larger alchemical pattern that lurks beneath the four occult narratives.

Byatt carefully colour-codes the gods in the four occult narratives in such a way that they represent the four stages of producing the philosopher’s stone, further consolidating the link between the novels’ overall structure and an alchemical process. Alchemists believe that the four alchemical stages are represented by “melanosis (blackening), leukosis (whitening), xanthosis (yellowing), and iosis (reddening)”.³⁶ That is to say, with the fire burning the prima materia in the furnace will undergo colour changes—black, white, yellow, and when finally it becomes the philosopher’s stone it appears red. It is not surprising to find that in the Tetralogy Lucas the alchemist’s god is black, Van Gogh’s painted god of fertility is yellow, Culvert represents his god with red, and finally Josh Lamb’s god is white light. The colour changes of the four gods spell out the colour changes of an alchemical process, although the order of changes is slightly varied. While Paracelsus as a physician delineates the alchemical process as if it were a science lab experiment, Jung tends to interpret alchemy by borrowing from mythologies. Jung’s works accentuate the parallels between an alchemical process and the life-death-rebirth metamorphosis of a divinity

³²Byatt, “Fiction Informed by Science”, 294.

³³Cox, 139.

³⁴Jung interprets in his *Aion*: “In alchemy Mercurius is male-female and frequently appears as a virgin too” (252).

³⁵In his *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung says that the alchemical process is marked by four stages: an initial state of prima materia, a union of opposites in the fashion of a union between the male and the female, death of the product of the union, and the soul released being reunited with the dead body (219–20). On another occasion, he explains in *Alchemical Studies*: “... the opus is a life, death, and rebirth mystery ...” (338).

³⁶Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 218.

that is central to many mythologies of the world, exemplified by Jesus Christ's crucifixion. He concludes: "It is not surprising that the lapis-Christus parallel came to the fore among the medieval Latin authors at a comparatively early date, since alchemical symbolism is steeped in ecclesiastical allegory."³⁷ Byatt fully endorses the Jungian approach in her Tetralogy. Narratives of divinities being put to death and brought back to life again run throughout the four occult narratives in the Tetralogy, and it's exactly on these solemn occasions that the gods are colour-coded. In *The Virgin*, Lucas believes that the ammonite is the alchemical god Mercurius. He tells Marcus that "... the secret meaning of the petrified snake, its real relation to holiness, is to be found in Jung's account, in *Psychology and Alchemy*, of Mercurius—as a dragon."³⁸ He burns the ammonite together with some herbs, mercury, as well as their hair and blood to enact the religious drama of god's resurrection, so that he can obtain the spiritualized matter, "the Nousphere" and as a result, the ammonite becomes black.

On the napkin, a charred circle, a black hole, spread silently, eating away the glare, briefly gold where the black advanced. There was a smell, animal and vegetable, of protesting, consumed matter. Over the hump of the ammonite the cloth flaked into darkness and fell in shreds, leaving a black and juicy tracery on the stone coils.³⁹

In *Still Life* Van Gogh's painted *Reaper* represents an agricultural harvest moment that Frazer's *Golden Bough* usually associates with rituals of fertility cult. The painter's interpretation of the painted wheat is resonant with fertility cult views of the cosmos, and in his letter to his brother Theo he says:

I saw then in this reaper—a vague figure struggling like a devil in great heat to come to the end of his task—I saw then in it the image of death, in the sense that humanity would be the wheat one reaps. So it is, if you like, the opposite of that sower I had tried before. But in this death, nothing sad; it happens in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold.⁴⁰

Reaped crop is likened to slaughtered humanity, and like vegetation that can sprout from under the earth in spring human beings can expect a resurrection after their deaths and therefore, "in this death, nothing sad". This is a notion central to fertility cults that tended to put their kings to deaths at fixed terms in mimesis of the yearly withering and decay of vegetation. This view is confirmed by Sue Sorenson when commenting on *The Sower* and *The Reaper* in the novel who says: "Van Gogh explicitly identifies Christ with the seed and grain central to these paintings".⁴¹ The wheat-god is yellow. "It is all yellow, except a line of violet hills, of a yellow pale and blond".⁴² In Culvert's narrative, the colour of red predominates his New Year celebration. Greatly inspired by the old traditions of La Tour Bruyarde, Culvert devises his ceremony in such a way that it dramatizes the death of the old Sun and the birth of the new one. As the old Sun incarnate, Culvert is clad "in the scarlet robes of a priestess, with long blond curls on his head, and a red mouth and painted fingers."⁴³ Then, after being ritually beaten and whipped by the Pope,

³⁷Ibid., 343.

³⁸Byatt, *The Virgin*, 396–7.

³⁹Ibid., 404.

⁴⁰Byatt, *Still Life*, 375.

⁴¹Sorenson Paragraph 37.

⁴²Byatt, *Still Life*, 375.

⁴³Byatt, *Babel Tower*, 266.

“... Culvert’s blood began to blossom, more and more furiously, cutting his backside into a trellis of weals ...”, and what ensues is that “... Reason and Ananke brought great tubs of red winelees, and poured them over Culvert’s scarlet posterior, so that the stage was a sea of blood and wine.”⁴⁴ When finally the new Sun is born she becomes virtually “a blood red naked child”.⁴⁵ In the last occult narrative, the occult members, the Hearers light Need-fires “through which infected cattle—or in this case, sinful people—are herded”, to “purify the place”.⁴⁶ This ritual purification was germinated from the afore-mentioned ritual of god’s death and revival. Unfortunately, however, the ceremonious fire develops beyond control and claims three lives one of whom turns out to be the man god of the occult, follower of Mani, Josh Lamb, whose sacrificial-hero role ironically turns from ritual to real. As typical Manicheans, they are all dressed in white. Jung finds from old alchemy manuscripts that there is a mythical “fabulous four-footed ‘Ortus’, which combines in itself the four colours, black, white, red and yellow”.⁴⁷ The “Ortus” becomes a metaphor of the synthesis of the four alchemical stages. “The Ortus is the alchemical ‘animal’ which represents the living quaternity in its first synthesis”.⁴⁸ Thus the four gods marked by black, yellow, red and white in the occult narratives represent the four colours of an alchemical process.

The alchemical structure of the Tetralogy has more to do with Byatt’s metaphorical scheme than with mysticism. The four alchemical stages serve at least a double purpose. For one thing, she brings the theme of the mainstream narrative, the war between sex and intellect that confronts Frederica Potter, into a ready-made metaphorical framework established by Jung. For the other, she reinvigorates the idea of androgyny and makes it an appropriate symbol of both fertility and spirituality. In an interview with Stephen Frosh, Byatt says:

Which I discovered very slowly because I grew up in a world in which the inner life was the aesthetic and literary, so it had a dead religion behind it. We were a post-Christian family and I think the forms of Christianity are still very important to the way I think, although on the whole I don’t like them. I don’t believe them. I regard them antagonistically, but I use them.⁴⁹

Her ambivalence about religion is exemplary in the Tetralogy where she both satirizes and romanticizes alchemy. The four occult members are all driven mad by their gods and in a post-modern world all mythical coating of alchemy has been stripped off. Whereas she lampoons those who quest an alchemical god literally, she certainly admires those who quest him metaphorically. Hence, she appropriates all the important shades of metaphorical meanings Mercurius has into her own symbolic system, making adaptations wherever necessary, and makes it an appropriate symbol of her female visionaries. The philosopher’s stone can no longer transmute any base metal into physical gold, and the whole point of using it in the Tetralogy is to express a psychological transmutation that Byatt sees central to her female visionary, Frederica Potter and also to the construction of a symbolic system for her whole repertoire of female visionaries.

⁴⁴Ibid., 267.

⁴⁵Ibid., 268.

⁴⁶Byatt, *A Whistling Woman*, 403.

⁴⁷Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 213.

⁴⁸Ibid..

⁴⁹Byatt, “A. S. Byatt and Stephen Frosh”, 150.

Richard Todd in his study of A. S. Byatt's myth narratives stresses the importance of studying "the ways in which they (myth narratives) are incorporated into larger narratives".⁵⁰ Critics such as Christien Franken who studies the story of Melusine in *Possession* and Celia Wallhead who checks the fairy tale in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* agree that the embedded myth narratives are usually symbolic expressions of the dominant motifs of the larger narratives.⁵¹ Byatt's *Nature* journal article about the Tetralogy is a verification of such views. She tells the reader that each of the four novels has a central motif that knits together the varying strands of narratives. She expatiates that for example, the central motif of *The Virgin*—"a unified sensibility" between body and mind—informs both Frederica Potter and her brother Marcus's narratives. "So my heroine, brooding about seventeenth-century metaphors in sensual language for what was beyond the sensual world, and my mathematician, were in fact struggling with the same problem".⁵² Therefore, it is not surprising to find that virginity is the central motif of both Lucas' and Frederica's stories. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, Frederica is a middle-school student, a virgin who plays the part of young Elizabeth I in *Astraea*. Despite her longing for sex, she is constantly rejecting men's courting and wooing. In the whole novel, her love for men is platonic and she remains a virgin until the penultimate chapter of the novel. Van Gogh's fertility cult narrative parallels Frederica's Cambridge days when she finds pleasure in the body. Her indulgence in sex culminates in her marriage at the end of the novel. Culvert's religion of death intertwines with Frederica's story of a marathon divorce. In the third novel of the Tetralogy, Frederica not only experiences real violence in her own house, but also starts an abstinence that can be viewed as the gradual death of the carnal desire. Josh Lamb's obsession with light coincides with Frederica Potter's near celibacy, her avowed dedication to the intellect. In the last novel, she is preoccupied with her new career as a TV talk show hostess and men have been relegated to a secondary place in her life. Only near the end of the novel does she find a new lover and become pregnant by him. So, virginity, life, death and rebirth exemplified in the four occult narratives also epitomize the four different life stages of Frederica Potter. Mariadele Boccardi summarizes Frederica's life experience as: "Indeed, the sequence takes the form of the key realist genre of the Bildungsroman, tracing the life of Frederica Potter from the threshold of adulthood to fully realist womanhood, encompassing sexual awakening, intellectual and emotional understanding, marriage and a career".⁵³ The alchemical structure therefore, becomes a symbolic expression of Frederica Potter's metamorphosis from a middle-school student into a woman in academia, and it transcends the otherwise rather secular and mundane narrative of a contemporary woman and deifies Byatt's female visionary.

When *A Whistling Woman* ends, Frederica finds herself pregnant again and starts to search for Luk Lysgaard-Peacock, the man who fathers the child. Their final reunion takes place in a setting loaded with alchemical symbols, and can be conveniently deciphered as the place where occult narratives and frame narratives converge and end. Pregnant Frederica, her son Leo, and Luk Lysgaard-Peacock finally "stood together and looked over the moving moor", and this situation echoes a legend depicted in Sir George Ripley's

⁵⁰Todd, 40.

⁵¹Franken, 93–8; Wallhead, 124.

⁵²Byatt, "Fiction Informed by Science", 294.

⁵³Boccardi, 42.

verses.⁵⁴ Jung paraphrases the story in his *Psychology and Alchemy*, and interprets it as another metaphor of the alchemical process. The story goes that there was once upon a time a noble king who had no offspring. He then wished to return to his mother's womb and get reborn. His mother concealed him under her robe until she had incarnated him again and became pregnant. During her pregnancy she ate peacock's flesh and drank the blood of the green lion. Finally, she gave birth to a child who resembled the moon and then changed into the splendour of the sun. The new-born baby or the reborn king, Jung believes is the lapis, Jesus Christ, or the philosopher's stone.⁵⁵ Therefore, the union of pregnant Frederica, the Queen, Leo, the lion, and Luk Lysgaard-Peacock, the peacock, is indicative of the final completion of the alchemical process. Furthermore, the brilliantly scarlet colour of the gorse field that Luk is reaping his harvest in intensifies the alchemical overtones of the final scene because red is perceived to be the colour of the philosopher's stone. Alchemists believe that after the albedo following the cauda pavonis, their lapis "still has to be raised to the sun condition", a stage that they name "rubedo", and red is the colour of the sun.⁵⁶ The reader is told that Luk is virtually surrounded by "a sea of fire".

The gorse was out, and spread like a sea of fire, along the sides of the road, across the heather. It was bright, bright, sun-yellow, with flecks of scarlet and crimson. It was full of movements in the turmoil of the air, it bowed, and flickered, and lapped with vegetable flames at the sooty roots of the heather and ling.⁵⁷

Finally, Frederica stops her gaze at the three gigantic spheres of "the man-made Early Warning System", that loom "like visitors from another world, angelic or daemonic" and brings the story to an end.⁵⁸ The three gigantic spheres that have appeared frequently in the novels now echo what was in Frederica's mind the moment when she saw Peacock, a medieval cosmology that viewed the universe as being composed of concentric spheres as a manifestation of divine creation and an era that revered alchemy.

She found herself thinking about *Paradise Lost*, which seemed to float beside her mind like a great closed balloon of its own colour of light, a closed world, made of language, and religion, and science, the science of a universe of concentric spheres which had never existed, and had constructed the minds of generations.⁵⁹

Conclusion

What Byatt wishes to highlight by narrating Frederica Potter's story in the shape of an alchemical process may be the inner struggle that her heroine experiences on her road to becoming a successful intellectual woman. Jung states in his works many times that he uses the alchemical process as an ideal model to demonstrate a psychological process that he names "individuation". "I use the term 'individuation' to denote the process by which a person becomes a psychological 'in-dividual', that is, a separate,

⁵⁴Byatt, *A Whistling Woman*, 421.

⁵⁵Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 390–2.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 221.

⁵⁷Byatt, *A Whistling Woman*, 420.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 421.

⁵⁹Byatt, *A Whistling Woman*, 420. In his *Alchemical Studies*, Jung tells the reader that alchemists believe that the universe is composed of concentric circles (316).

indivisible unity or ‘whole’”.⁶⁰ He continues to argue that it is the collaboration between the conscious and the unconscious, or the assimilation of the unconscious content into the conscious that proves central to this process.⁶¹ Or to put it in other words, it is the bringing together of intellectuality and sexuality that matters in Jung’s interpretative framework of how human psyche searches for wholeness. Byatt certainly sees the aptness of bringing her heroine who is “interested in her own sex-versus-intellect conflict” into a metaphor scheme already constructed by Jung.⁶² Frederica’s psychological fragmentation has already been exemplified in Byatt’s introduction to her novel *The Shadow of the Sun*. She says:

My own mother had herself studied English at Cambridge, and I might, in the 1960s, have felt I should have written about the generations of women who faced the same problems. As it was, I avoided approaching her perpetual rage, depression, and frustration, which were, in fact, the driving force that made sure none of her daughters became housebound.⁶³

She also says in the same article: “I tried to write a thesis at Oxford under Helen Gardner, who believed, and frequently said, that a woman had to be dedicated like a nun, to achieve anything as a mind”.⁶⁴ The predicament of women in the 1950s and 1960s who could only choose to become either “housebound” or “a nun” is fully dramatized in Frederica Potter’s story. Her marriage to Nigel proves to be only a sexual union that gives no room to her intellectual pursuit. Her efforts to seek anything intellectual are thwarted by her household setting. After her divorce, she gets jobs as an intellectual woman, a school teacher and a TV talk show hostess, but only at the expense of forfeiting her sexual pleasures. Neither is what she needs or what she wants. The end of *A Whistling Woman* is a resolution to her conflict: now she can have both her sexual passions and her intellectual pursuit simultaneously. The alchemical symbols charged suggest that she finally manages to reconcile the two warring forces and becomes psychologically whole.

When we check the female visionaries in the whole canon of Byatt’s works, we may find that Frederica Potter is not the only female character whose life Byatt represents in an alchemical pattern. A character in *Possession* interprets Melusine, a Mercurius-like snake divinity as an emblem of art creativity. She says: “... Virginia Woolf knew it (Melusine), she adduced it as an image of the essential androgyny of the creative mind ...”.⁶⁵ This is exactly Byatt’s own voice. There is a persistent clinging to the notion that hermaphroditism represents female art creativity in her entire oeuvre. With the publication of *A Whistling Woman* in 2002, she has successfully constructed a unique symbolic system for her female artists. The alchemical symbols have successfully located Frederica Potter into Byatt’s genealogy of female artists, or female visionaries, and she has become a true heir to Elizabeth I, whom Byatt defines as a template for her fictive female artists. The way she incorporates the idea of androgyny into her own symbolic confines of creativity sheds significant implications that actually she does adaptive work to Jung’s theories. Alchemists believe that “... it (the philosopher’s stone) is the parallel of Christ and is called the Saviour of the Macrocosm”.⁶⁶ Whereas Jung time and again lays stress on the

⁶⁰Jung, *The Archetypes*, 275.

⁶¹Ibid., 275–89.

⁶²Byatt, “Fiction Informed by Science”, 294.

⁶³Byatt, *The Shadow*, ix.

⁶⁴Ibid..

⁶⁵Byatt, *Possession*, 34.

⁶⁶Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 539.

lapis-Christ parallel, in Byatt's mythic landscape, hermaphrodites tend to be more feminine than they are masculine. She tends to attribute hermaphroditism to fertility goddesses in her fabricated myths, and such a hybrid of fertility and androgyny becomes an apt prototype of her female visionaries. In her introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun*, she associates Elizabeth I, who appears in a story within story in *The Virgin*, with fertility goddesses:

But she was mythologized by her poets and courtiers as a complex virgin moon goddess, not only, as Frances Yates pointed out in *Astraea*, the queen and huntress chaste and fair, Diana, but the Eastern goddesses of earth and harvest, turret-crowned Cybele, Astarte.⁶⁷

This queen, she associates with the enigmatic hermaphrodite in folklores in the novel, and in her meta-fiction *On Histories and Stories*, she quotes poems to consolidate her link with androgyny. "I am and am not, I freeze and yet am burned, /Since from my selfe another selfe I turned".⁶⁸ In a similar vein, she interprets Matty Crompton, a female artist in her novella *Morpho Eugenia* as another cross between a fertility goddess and Mercurius. She identifies her as "Spenser's Dame Nature, who 'hath both kinds in one'".⁶⁹ Sheba Brown in "Art Work" finally succeeds as an artist, and she is represented at the end of the story by Robin as Kali the Destroyer, a fertility goddess, in the pattern of "tantric mandalas", symbols of androgyny.⁷⁰ In *Possession: A Romance*, Byatt uses Melusine, a snake as a symbol of the poetess, Christabel LaMotte. Melusine is a cogent symbol of fertility, who "built castles" in Poitou,⁷¹ and "brought Beans to Poitou",⁷² "a French Ceres",⁷³ and at the same time, she is a close kin to both Paracelsus' Melusina⁷⁴ and the Chinese dragon,⁷⁵ equivalents of Mercurius. In the Tetralogy, Byatt employs the same strategy and on more than one occasion fertility goddess is synonymous with Mercurius. In *The Virgin*, Lucas attributes symbols that stand for male fecundity to female goddesses. "One of the things I've found out in my reading is that the very early gods—and goddesses, Aphrodite for instance—were just pillars or cairns or cones of stone".⁷⁶ In *Babel Tower*, Samson Origen points out that the prototype of Culvert's androgynous God is "the Whore of Babylon", the "original Scarlet Woman on her scarlet beast, swallowing the stars", a figure representing fertility.⁷⁷

Liliana Sikorska interprets the alchemical thread in Lindsay Clarke's novel *The Chymical Wedding* as a metaphor of postmodern writing. "Since most of their research is done through and within the written culture—the themes of literature, philosophy and writing in general reverberate all through the novel—alchemy becomes a metaphor for writing."⁷⁸ In Byatt's case, it's the need to revise the traditional image associated with females that spurs on her exploration of alchemy in her fiction. In her meta-fiction *On Histories and*

⁶⁷Byatt, *The Shadow*, xv.

⁶⁸Byatt, *On Histories*, 158.

⁶⁹Ibid., 120.

⁷⁰Byatt, "Art Work", 89–90. In his *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung interprets the mandala symbolism as an expression of what he calls "individuation", the same as alchemical symbolism (206–13).

⁷¹Byatt, *Possession*, 33.

⁷²Ibid., 174.

⁷³Ibid., 174.

⁷⁴Byatt, *Possession*, 171. In his *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung says: "Alchemy applied the Edem-motif to Mercurius, who was likewise represented as virgin above, serpent below. This is the origin of the Melusina in Paracelsus" (292 footnote).

⁷⁵Byatt, *Possession*, 196.

⁷⁶Byatt, *The Virgin*, 451.

⁷⁷Byatt, *Babel Tower*, 263.

⁷⁸Sikorska, 82.

Stories, she expresses her concern with traditional symbols of women in philosophy. She castigates the false analogies of Neo-platonic creation myths that compare women to “inert Matter” while men to “divine Nous”, by saying “... as though both men and women were not both body and spirit or mind, related in complicated ways”.⁷⁹ It is exactly this need to view both men and women as symbols of union that has inspired her assimilation of her female artists into medieval alchemical system, a philosophy that pivots on the union of opposites. She acknowledges her need to use fertility goddesses as cogent symbols of female art creativity. She says:

I wanted my harvest, both in my life and in my work, and I was afraid that my light was a lesser one, a cold one, that could only mildly illuminate, however hauntingly. But I did go on from there, to Queen Elizabeth as Corn Goddess, to Van Gogh’s Death the Reaper working happily, to a poem in *Possession* by Randolph Henry Ash about the Norse Creation myth, in which the light that gives life to the first man and woman, Ask and Embla, is a female sun. And in his poetry too Ash accepts that the ‘golden apples’ of the underworld dark goddess Persephone, are, according to Vico, the corn that springs from the furrow.⁸⁰

Yet those goddesses traditionally have been so much associated with agricultural harvest and sexual procreation that Byatt might have sensed the inadequacy of using them alone in depicting her female characters who work in academia, a domain associated with the mind. It’s the opus as a representative of the sun or spirituality in alchemy that has a strong appeal to Byatt who needs it to counterbalance the idea of corporeality that philosophical and literary traditions tend to ascribe to women. The philosopher’s stone in alchemy is “a ‘stone that hath a spirit’”,⁸¹ and “both material and spiritual”.⁸² Alchemists believe that the sun, a symbol of spirit, their Sol, “is regarded as the masculine and active half of Mercurius”.⁸³ By establishing a link between fertility goddesses and Mercurius, Byatt creates a symbolic system that highlights both the analogy and the distinction between agricultural and intellectual harvests. Her female visionaries are creators of wealth whose abundance can be measured in terms of a real harvest in the field, yet that belongs to the realm of the intellect. By using androgynous fertility goddesses as the prototypes of her female artists, Byatt declares that what she cares most about in her fiction is her female visionaries’ intellectual harvest, their artistic creativity. What she creates is exactly a female sun, a symbol of both fecundity and spirituality.

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⁷⁹Byatt, *On Histories*, 111.

⁸⁰Byatt, *The Shadow*, xvi.

⁸¹Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 539.

⁸²Jung, *Aspects of the Masculine*, 178.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 103.

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