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## GENDER SUBVERSION AND VICTORIANA IN A. S. BYATT’S “MORPHO EUGENIA”

### Summary

*The article explores the concept of Victoriana and its relationship to the Victorian as presented in A. S. Byatt’s novella “Morpho Eugenia” from *Angels and Insects* (1992). The analysis is done on two levels: firstly, on the level of form, or different narrative strategies that Byatt is using in order to make her text “Victorian.” Secondly, the article detects, explores and describes those aspects of Victoriana in “Morpho Eugenia” which relate to the gender roles and relationships of its three central characters: William Adamson, Eugenia Alabaster and Matty Crompton. The argument is based on the supposition that Byatt uses Adamson’s character in order to both alienate the reader from and attract her/him to the text by reversing the gender roles and subverting our expectations of “Victorian” fiction. By choosing the “New Woman” Matty over the “Old Woman” Eugenia, Adamson’s character confirms and promotes the progressive worldviews thus addressing not only the Victorian time but our own time (and expectations) as well.*

**Key words:** *Gender roles, intertextual/intertextuality, postmodern, subversion, text, Victoriana/Victorian*

Our view of the Victorian period has changed immensely over the last century. What was once considered fixed, precise and very “real” has turned into “a kind of conceptual nomad, not so much lost as permanently restless and unsettled” (Kaplan, 2007:3). In our mind’s eye, the Victorian period seems elusive and slippery, playing tricks on us. Being a concept founded on an interpretation of various texts, artefacts and remains of the past, Victorian (and any other) history is necessarily subjective, especially in its joints, i.e. those blank connecting points that require speculation and educated guesses. A. S. Byatt’s mind seems to be a natural born player of that game. Her “Morpho Eugenia” is a landscape created of texts and discourses – if not thoroughly made up of other texts (and perhaps paintings), then made up of their structure, their feel, their attitude and their motifs.

Set in the Victorian times, “Morpho Eugenia” was first published in 1992, more than a century after the events it describes (1860-63). It is a novella that should be classified under the literary description of “historiographic metafiction.” In the words of Linda Hutcheon, who coined the expression, in historiographic metafiction “the theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs... is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (Hutcheon, 1988:12). Historiographic metafiction that deals with the Victorian times is, paradoxically, an imitation of a realist text questioning the sheer possibility of realistic representation, of showing things as they *are*, thus “rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents” of the Victorian past. The intention of metafiction is to point out that the past, the same as the present, is impossible to capture, to “catch.” The “historiographic” in “Morpho Eugenia” refers to the Victorian times, re-imagined and re-conceptualised from the late twentieth-century perspective, and as such also an example of contemporary Victoriana.

We shall follow Cora Kaplan’s definition of Victoriana taken from her book *Victoriana – Histories, Fictions, Criticism*, in which she defines it as a “self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives [meant to] to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself, [in which] the transformation of the Victorian past cannot be... neatly characterised” (Kaplan, 2007:3). Thus, like some other works of historiographic metafiction, such as Fowles’ *French Lieutenant’s Woman* or Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, “Morpho Eugenia” rewrites the past, both installing and subverting certain historical facts and narratives. The defamiliarisation produced by such a use of fact and fiction results in a new awareness of the formerly “suppressed histories.” In our specific example, we shall see that by diminishing the difference between the public and the private sphere, by changing gender roles, by resurrecting the characters and breathing new life into them, this novella questions our (contemporary) ideas about the Victorians – all of which making it an example of “Victoriana.”

### **“Dragged along willy-nilly – by the language, you know”**

In “Morpho Eugenia,” Byatt foregrounds the textuality of her text by using different modes of writing: letters, diary entries, non-fiction, didactic fable – offering a rich intertextuality. Moreover, the plot thickens because of the effects this strategy has on the reader: since such diversified narrative structures and different viewpoints existed in the Victorian fiction as well (in Eliot’s *Adam Bede* or Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, for example), it adds more layers to “Morpho Eugenia,” making it even more textually complex. Byatt’s intention behind these narrative strategies is to recreate the “Victorian” effect through Victorian-looking extracts of text.

A suitable introduction to the following textual considerations can be found in Genette's statement that "the subject of poetics is not the text considered in its singularity ... but rather the *architext* or, if one prefers, the architextuality of the text ... the entire set of general or transcendent categories – types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – from which emerges each singular text" (Genette, qtd. in Allan, 2000:101). Architextuality is a subcategory of transtextuality, which is "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (ibid.).

"Morpho Eugenia" converses with many such "transcendent categories." First of all, looking at the text as a whole, "Morpho Eugenia" resembles a book of natural history. Although such books were not as popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as in the century before, it was in 1863 that Henry William Bates published his own natural history, *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*. It is quite possible that this book served as a source, both factual and fictional (in other words, as a hypotext) for "Morpho Eugenia." After all, Bates was a scientist who lived in the Amazon exploring its wildlife (especially ants); he was shipwrecked in the Atlantic for fifteen days and he wrote a book about his experience in the Amazon jungle once safely back in England (see Seeber, 1999). The books on natural history included illustrations of animals, and one finds such illustrations in "Morpho Eugenia" (see Byatt, 1995:1, 21, 129, 136, 160). Thus, both the overall appearance of the novella and that of the book within a book (the natural history Adamson and Matty are writing and of which we read extracts) are that of a *nature book*, very similar to the one by Bates. However, Byatt's literarisation far exceeds Bates': in a way, she, as Seeber claims, "invents the idea of a popular Victorian nature book" (Seeber, 1999:120), and she does it by creating a pastiche of Victorian natural histories, mixing the "media of prose, both scientific and poetic, nature poetry and drawings of insects" (Seeber, 1999:122).

At its heart, a literary pastiche is a literary work that imitates the style of a previous work. It might be called a second-hand text, and has been called by Ihab Hassan "a form of the mutant replication of genres" (Gutleben, 2001:25). Although, like parody, pastiche depends on its model, unlike parody it imitates the model and does not transform it. In Genette's terminology, pastiche is "essentially and intentionally hypertextual";<sup>1</sup> in other words, it is "based on the notion of specific hypotexts" (Allan, 2000:108). As a postmodern narrative device, pastiche carries connotations of playfulness and ironic distancing. However, Byatt's use of pastiche seems to be more conservative. She recreates the Victorian era respectfully – her pastiches are used to highlight the inner life of her protagonists, showing them as sincere and earnest. She does not do it for the purpose of parody or irony, but to playfully and creatively give

1 Hypertextuality involving "any relationship uniting a text B (which we shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not of commentary" (Genette, qtd. in Allan, 2000:107-8).

them life, i.e. to tell a story. She recreates the Victorian era structurally and lexically, but it is only the (kind of) life she breathes into her characters that distinguishes this novella from any Victorian one and makes it postmodern and metafictional. The debunking of stereotypes is done via different means, specifically on the level of content.<sup>2</sup> Echoing Hutcheon, Campbell says that “Morpho Eugenia” uses a plot that “through patterns of restoration and renewal, both subvert[s] and uphold[s] the romance genre” (2004:148).

There are several forms of pastiche in “Morpho Eugenia”: Adamson’s diary entry; scientific prose (Adamson’s popular natural history and Alabaster’s attempt to reconcile Christian theology with scientific discoveries); Matty’s didactic fable and a letter from the publisher. As we have mentioned already, the textuality of the text is further foregrounded through rich intertextuality.<sup>3</sup> For example, we find numerous poems by British writers from different literary periods, such as Ben Jonson, John Milton, Robert E. Browning, and John Clare. Also, Biblical references are present almost everywhere. One finds many quotes by different thinkers and scientists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ure, Bates, Darwin, Huber, Owen, Feuerbach, Michelet, Asa Gray).

Other forms of intertextuality might include instances when a character is given a thought, or a sentence which is patchworked out of some literary nineteenth-century text. For example, in an episode we find Eugenia pronouncing “I wish I were dead” after looking at a poplar tree nearby (and sitting near a ha-ha, or a moat), echoing Tennyson’s “Mariana in the Moated Grange” (Byatt, 1995:47). One also finds different stories weaved into the main woof. On the first pages of “Morpho Eugenia,” Eugenia’s sister talks to Adamson about the fairytale of the dancing princesses<sup>4</sup>. In another instance, Miss Meade tells the story of Amor and Psyche. All of these stories serve their purpose in the protagonists’ characterisation, at the same time pointing to the textuality of this and all texts. Besides this, textuality is highlighted in the anagrams played out by Matty and the children (Byatt, 1995:91), the final one involving Adamson as (152-153). It is as if the idea that “all is text” is almost too apparent in “Morpho Eugenia.”

In addition to the genre of popular natural history, Byatt also combines the characteristics of the popular Victorian genres of romance, the sensation novel and the detective fiction. The sensation novel, on the rise in the early 1860s, centred its complex plots on (often scandalous or sensational) secrets, providing insights

2 The debunking is present even on the level of narration, for the omniscient narrator removes the curtains of Adamson’s marital bed and allows us to read about explicit sexual scenes, which were not present in the Victorian romance or the sensational and detective novels.

3 In Genette’s terms (intertextuality as the actual presence of one text within another [Genette, qtd. in Allan, 2000:101]).

4 From Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s *Household Tales* “The Shoes that Were Danced to Pieces,” 10/28/07, *Sur la Lune*, 07/28/08 <<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/authors/grimms/133shoesdancepieces.html>>

into things usually hidden through description and examination of uncanny psychic phenomena, “[and] the depiction of extreme emotional states, such as hysteria, jealousy, sexual obsession, paranoia; and most important of all, through their representation of madness and other forms of social and sexual transgression or deviance which respectable society labels as madness” (Pykett, 2002:203). “Morpho Eugenia” truly reads as an example of the sensation genre, not least because some of its female protagonists are “not simply passive victims of male power and their own feelings – but actively desiring and sometimes self-consciously manipulating” (Pykett, 2002:204). Also, the detective novel, like almost every Victorian novel, as Roland R. Thomas aptly puts it, “has at its heart some crime that must be uncovered, some false identity that must be unmasked, some secret that must be revealed” (169). We find that the plot of “Morpho Eugenia” also revolves around a secret, and the task of the detective is placed in the hands of William Adamson – Adamson being “after all, a scientist and an observer” (Byatt, 1995:6).

Such transcendent categories in “Morpho Eugenia” – types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – are in the post-structuralist understanding the parts of intertextuality. Julia Kristeva described the idea of intertextuality as “the transposition of elements from existent systems into new signifying relations” (Allan, 2000:113). In that vein, Jenny writes: “What is characteristic of intertextuality, is that it introduces a new way of reading which destroys the linearity of the text. Each intertextual reference is the occasion for an alternative” (qtd. in Allan, 2000:113). Such intertextual processes make “Morpho Eugenia” a postmodernist work, whose meaning is not linear and straightforward but elusive and uncertain.

Relying heavily on hypertextuality, i.e. on our knowledge of all those Victorian literary works with which “Morpho Eugenia” stands in a relationship, or at least our assumptions about them, Byatt plays with that knowledge, turning our ideas upside down. Our assumptions are being thwarted and questioned, calling attention to themselves. There are many ways in which “Morpho Eugenia” tackles Victorian ideas about gender, sexuality, race, empire, class, religion, and science, but our research will focus on what is, in a way, the most prominent one. It is seen in its basic structure, in its basic “Victorian” plot – the maturation of the central character. That central character and his maturation in interaction with the two main female characters will be further explored and analysed next.

## “Things Are Not What They Seem”

The hero of the story is William Adamson<sup>5</sup>, a natural biologist who conducted expeditions to South America where he explored the social insects, and who survived a shipwreck in the Atlantic Ocean. He finds himself without prospects and accepts a

5 No names in “Morpho Eugenia” are accidental. For example, Adamson as the last name suggests that he may represent men in general. Also, “Byatt says that William and Harald refer to William the Conqueror and Duke Harold, the new man and the old” (Sturrock, 2002-3:102).

station offered to him by Sir Harald Alabaster of Bredely Hall. He marries Alabaster's amoral daughter Eugenia, who has an incestuous relationship with her half-brother Edgar. After five children (Alabasters, not Adamsons) and a direct intervention, presumably by the family's governess Matty Crompton, he discovers the affair and leaves his wife. Realising that the intelligent and resourceful Matty is his true love, he sails off to Brazil with her on another expedition.

The story of "Morpho Eugenia" is thoroughly soaked in analogy as a way of human thinking. Perhaps the most visible analogy is that between the society of Bredely Hall and the ant colonies and beehives, which all centre on the reproductive females whose places in the human world are taken by Lady Alabaster and Eugenia. As Heidi Hanson observes, in "Morpho Eugenia" all of Victorian society, conventionally understood as male dominated, is challenged through comparisons with the female dominated ant/bee worlds (Hansson, 1999: 4). Hansson also points out that Adamson is in the Cinderella position; however, we would rather say that he is in the Sleeping Beauty position – he is the princess and Matty is his prince whose kiss is to wake him up from his "Victorian" slumber.

Indeed, William Adamson is a sort of a gentleman in distress. Having left his father's way of life (in the course of which his father had disowned him), he now makes a living as a scientist, a profession that was only starting to take shape in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The professionals had an uncertain position within the Victorian novel – they either "had come to replace the clergymen as a source of moral counsel and disinterested advice" (one part of William's relation to Harald Alabaster) or they were "something of a servant" (the other part of William and Harald's relationship) (Kucich, 2002:231). Adamson therefore inhabits the no-man's land between servanthood and the position of equality within the family, which in is normally taken by a governess or the dependent woman in the nineteenth-century novel (by characters like Jane Eyre or Fanny Price). Byatt makes William aware of this, and we see it reflected in his own thoughts: "He was more and more relegated to a kind of between-world, a companion of the little girls, a companion and assistant to the old man" (Byatt, 1995:44). We say Byatt, for it never escapes our minds that the author is behind the narrator, pulling the strings, didactically, if not moralistically, inviting us along. And so we as readers are, like William, "doomed to a kind of double consciousness" (Byatt, 1995:24), his consisting of the Amazon and England, and ours made up of "this text" and "other texts" that "Morpho Eugenia" makes a nod to.

Adamson, as a scientist, is hired to sort out Harald Alabaster's specimens collected from all over the world, but also, to make sense out of the old man's thoughts ("He was to pay, he saw, with his thoughts" [Byatt, 1995:57]). He must agree to this because he is without prospects. The matter of prospects is, as it should be in a proper Victorian

novel, emphasised throughout the novella (e.g. “Our stations are unequal, and more than that, I am penniless and with no prospects,” [Byatt, 1995:13-4] or “I know most painfully that I have nothing to offer that could weigh against my lack of prospects” [Byatt, 1995:56], just to name a few). Again, similar instances of such a position and such ruminations are usually relegated to female characters in nineteenth-century fiction.

In order to completely highlight this game of gender reversal in “Morpho Eugenia,” we must understand that the basic ingredient of a Victorian novel (whose style, register and set of assumptions Victoriana is using as a starting point, a premise) is “the relation between self and society” (Shires, 2002:61) and the maturation it entails – the bringing together of the romantic individual and the social consensus which usually results in a marriage or death. Examples abound in Victorian novels: Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre*, Maggie Tulliver in Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, Margaret Hale in Gaskell’s *North and South*, and Esther Summerson in Dickens’ *Bleak House*. However, the first striking difference between the romantic individual of “Morpho Eugenia” and the afore mentioned literary works is that, in the latter, the position of the subject maturing is largely occupied by a woman. The central character in the Victorian novel was usually a woman “placed in adverse social or emotional conditions, finally having her qualities, her forbearance, [or] her attractiveness rewarded by marriage to a suitably sensitive yet manly husband” (Flint, 2002:27). Rarely do we see a stranded gentleman, struggling to come to terms with himself and the world around him<sup>6</sup>. However, that is exactly what happens in “Morpho Eugenia.” By using a very typical Victorian routine, but by putting in its centre a man instead of a woman, Byatt immediately informs us that her story will be different from what we expect. We are distanced from the text and invited to participate in the “hermeneutic activity” (Gutleben, 2001:97), following Byatt’s obvious point-making process.

So, the starting difference is the fact that our heroine is, in fact, a hero (or vice versa?). As we have noted, the central character in the Victorian novel is supposed to go through the maturation process. “Relying on a structure of psychological development, the classic realist novel allows lapses from a bourgeois code, but treats them as errors of judgement owing to immaturity” (Shires, 2002:65). After the error of judgement is rectified, the protagonist usually either dies or gets married. What happens in “Morpho Eugenia” is that the “lapse” turns out to be Adamson’s marriage to Eugenia. The Victorian narrative solution that is taken as the panacea for all social maladies here turns out to be the very social and private “lapse,” the “error of judgement owing to immaturity,” bringing all of one’s bourgeois (i.e. Victorian!) assumptions down in one stroke. Byatt’s placement of this typical narrative ending to

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6 Wilkie Collins’s Walter Hartright in *The Woman in White* (1860) springs to mind as an exception to the rule, even though he (re)claims the typically male Victorian place in the novel toward the narrative’s end.

Victorian novels at the very beginning of her novella's plot in addition subverts the fairytale aspect usually associated with it by asking a direct question of her readers "And so he [William] lived happily ever after?" (1995:69). Such an abrupt meta-narrative intrusion makes the reader re-think both his and her received ideas about the role of marriage in Victorian plots, as well as his or her notions of the Victorian era. In the first place, this disruption of one's expectations draws toward a realisation of actually having expectations. Secondly, it inspires the readers to ponder the reality of the Victorian people by making them dwell on the effect of factuality of this fictional story.

More often than not, in Victorian fictional and visual representations, a Victorian woman is seen as passive, the one who only reacts and does not take action herself.<sup>7</sup> However, using the analogy of bees, it is Adamson, the male, who is a drone in "Morpho Eugenia," passively awaiting his turn to come to the Queen, and because of her scheming ways he is in a way rendered *impotent*. Eugenia has her way with him, manipulating him and using him for her own purposes. He comes to understand his position, seeing "his own life in terms of a diminishing analogy with the tiny creatures" (the male ants) (Byatt, 1995:100). However, he is not able to break the spell, for he is still blind to the vanity of his own and his civilisation's biases: namely, that Eugenia's beauty, nobility, race, money and shapeliness suggest innocence and uprightness.

It takes a detective's work to unravel the mystery of Bredely Hall and we naturally ascribe the role of a detective to Adamson, a shrewd scientist. Even so, it turns out that he fails miserably at his task. No clues are obvious enough to make him see through the veil of his wife's deception: he is seen as a passive bystander, and it takes a *deus ex machina* to make him aware of the situation. The true detective mind in the story belongs to Matty. Her swift movements, her understated appearance, her sharp thinking, her ability to memorise whatever she has read and quote it at will, her business-like shrewdness and the ability to correctly assess the situation – all qualify her for the job. As June Sturrock observes, the clues in the final anagram – insect, incest, sphinx, phoenix – are the solutions for William's situation, and they are served to him by Matty. First he must understand the relation between incest and insect—that is, he must see that Bredely Hall is, like the ant-hills, essentially an incestuous society, must become conscious of what Sally Shuttleworth calls "the incestuous dynamics that lay at the heart of the Victorian family" ("Writing Natural History" 153). Only then is he enabled to see Matty as the sphinx who set him this liberating riddle—"the asker of riddles and the answer too" (*Angels and Insects* 134). After this, he can liberate himself and become like the phoenix, reborn out of his own ashes (Sturrock, 2002-3:100).

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<sup>7</sup> This can clearly be seen in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings, such as in Burne-Jones' *The Rock of Doom*, Arthur Hughes's *Overthrowing of the Rusty Knight*, and in their many paintings of the Annunciation (Mary being the receiver of the news), or in many a dreaming and sleeping girl of Albert Moore.

The myth of Psyche and Amor, told by Miss Meade, perfectly illustrates the point of William's feminine role. In the Greek myth, Psyche is being made love to by Amor without even seeing him. Actually, she was instructed, above all, "*never to try to see him*" (Byatt, 1995:42, author's emphasis). The same thing happens in the Adamsons' marital bed. William is allowed to enter under the covers, but it is only in that damp darkness that he makes love to his wife, only hearing and touching, but not seeing: "When he found his way inside she held out her invisible arms to him and he reached for her softness, discovering it by touch" (Byatt, 1995:68). Their nuptial dances are completely initiated and led by Eugenia (the most beautiful Amor). Also, the same way William is given the task of creating order in Harald Alabaster's collection, Psyche is given many "impossible tasks," such as the sorting of seeds: "wheat, barley, millet, lentils, beans and the seeds of poppy" (Byatt, 1995:43).

William's character is constantly moving inside the frame that is conventionally reserved for the female. On the other hand, the main females of "Morpho Eugenia" are actually two women who are both very much aware of their desires and who actively pursue their chosen male. Both Eugenia and Matty want Adamson for themselves, albeit for different reasons. His role is quite akin to that of the Victorian female in this respect: he is swept off his feet by the first woman he meets (Eugenia), and brought to reason by the second (Matty). All of his actions are reactions to the conscious, if not manipulative, guidance of these two women.

### **"Oh so white!"**

Eugenia, whose very name suggests breeding through its reference to eugenics,<sup>8</sup> is the eldest daughter in the Alabaster household, expected to get married first. From the very first pages, the only colours that are associated with her appearance are white, gold, pink and lilac, framed in ivy (a very English country/Arcadian style, a symbol of faithfulness often found in Pre-Raphaelite paintings). She is beautiful, yet "wholly untouchable," her eyelids "almost translucent," her tongue "pink" and gaze "liquid," her bust rising out of her clothes making her look like "Aphrodite rising from the foam" (Byatt, 1995:6). It seems Adamson is smitten by the sheer blinding whiteness of her appearance, her seeming innocence and purity. He feels her to be superior to himself and to every other not-so-white women he ever knew (especially with regard to the women of the Amazon he had been involved with). She is both his angel and his *femme fatale*, his vision of beauty, the virtuous and shapely Eugenia, the most beautiful of butterflies.

However, these first pages also contain some dark forebodings, as Adamson says that the most poisonous among the butterflies are those who are "the brightest, and

8 Eugenics, a social philosophy that focused on the study of selective breeding, originated in the – quite suitably for the plot – late Victorian period: its field and term were coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883.

sail about slowly and proudly, flaunting their colours as a kind of warning” (Byatt, 1995:7). We, as readers, never fall for Eugenia and Byatt makes sure that we keep our distance from her, examining her. She is what Sturrock calls “the reproductive woman,” as opposed to “the intellectual woman Matty/Matilda” (2002-3:103).<sup>9</sup> “The reproductive woman,” Eugenia, stands for all that is Victorian, in the sense that on the outside she epitomizes beauty, duty, gracefulness and handiwork – everything that is expected from a woman in Victorian England. After her hurried marriage to Adamson, Eugenia physically changes and turns into an Ant Queen herself (like her mother before her), allowing her male approach her only when needed. However, on the outside, she continues to be everything (and more) she was supposed to be, that she was made for – essentially, a child bearer. Eugenia and William’s nuptial dances usually end abruptly and result in a number of children (five in three years!) all of which had “bred to stock” (Byatt, 1995:71), looking like perfect little Alabasters. In this sense, she fulfills all society’s expectations, (again) just like her mother before her. They are both portrayed as Ant Queens. For example, the temperature of Lady Alabaster’s room was constantly maintained, as if to preserve the larvae (“There was always a fire lit in the hearth” [Byatt, 1995:26]). Her eyes were “weak,” she appeared “immobilised,” she “waddled,” with knees and ankles “painfully swollen”. That room was “a nest of cushions,” and she spent her days drinking. “She was hugely fat...” and “swaddled” (Byatt, 1995:26). This comparison to ants also serves to invite us to see the “Angels in the House” in a completely different light – as Prisoners of Love<sup>10</sup>: “They become egg-laying machines, gross and glistening, endlessly licked, caressed, soothed and smoothed – veritable Prisoners of Love. *This* is the true nature of the Venus under the Mountain, in this miniature world a creature immobilised by her function of breeding, by the blind violence of her passions” (Byatt, 1995:102).

In the end Eugenia’s secret is revealed: Adamson finds her in bed with her half-brother Edgar, and discovers that they had been having an incestuous affair ever since childhood. In an uncanny turn of events, the angelic Eugenia becomes the “disgusting” amoral Eugenia that we all turn our eyes away from. In a playful rewriting of what feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have identified as a Victorian woman writer’s narrative staple, Eugenia loses the role of the female protagonist to Matty

9 Sturrock finds several examples of such an opposition in A. S. Byatt’s novels: “The narrative of *Possession* springs from some of the same concerns: for Christabel Lamotte conflicting reproductive and intellectual imperatives tear her life apart, while her great-great-great-great-granddaughter, Maude Bailey, can (though not without difficulty) learn how to combine them. Such concerns recur through the tetralogy, set in the 1950s and 60s. *The Virgin in the Garden* begins with two brilliant sisters, Stephanie and Frederica. Stephanie will be literally killed by domesticity; in *Babel Tower* Frederica’s marriage nearly extinguishes her, so that her escape appears like the re-emergence of Persephone” (2002-3:103).

10 See, for example, Shires’ reading of a poem by Dora Greenwell (2002) in “The Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel: Form, Subjectivity, Ideology” in *The Victorian Novel* edited by Deirdre David (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, page 69).

and instead becomes her “dark double” (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000:79): a “mad woman in the attic” whose terrible secret everyone has been trying to conceal. Although she is constantly favourably compared to the racially “other” women by Adamson (who scolds himself for wanting her and even believes he is sullyng her because of his previous sensual experiences in the Amazon), she turns out to be much more morally loose, sexually promiscuous and knowing than the women of the Amazon forest. Therefore, there is a death sentence pronounced on the “Old” world and its ways through Eugenia and the Alabasters. That world is seen as white, beautiful and morally upright on the outside, but dark, sick and amoral on the inside, ready to be swept aside and overcome.

### “The hungry Matilda”

On the other hand, the role of the progressive, intellectual New Woman is played by the not so matte Matty/Matilda<sup>11</sup> – the governess and live-in companion of the family. Matty does not wait for William to come to his senses and realise she is the better of the two. She takes the initiative, unlike Jane Eyre or the other Brontë governesses who, even though independent-spirited, play the passive role of a Victorian female. Through Matty, Byatt uses the Victorian stock character of a governess and rewrites it thoroughly by turning the stereotype upside down.

Matty is “matte” just like the “matt workers” and unlike the “swollen and glossy” Queen of the Nest (Byatt, 1995: 39). Her appearance is similar to other servants’ in the house although her position is not as dependant upon the Hall as theirs. Even the sound of her voice sometimes blends in the overall presence of neutral colours that she is usually clothed in: “Her [Matty’s] tone was neutral, so extraordinarily neutral that it would have been impossible to detect whether she spoke with irony or with conventional complacency, even if William had been giving her his complete attention, which he was not” (Byatt, 1995:38).

Although not shiny and glossy, Matty is the person who repeatedly draws Adamson out of his “dronish” musings and prompts him to action. Adamson does say that “analogy is a slippery tool,” but it is she who practically shows him that analogous thinking is a sort of a prison, and that it can be overcome: he does not have to be a drone. In her didactic fable “Things Are Not What They Seem,” she puts Adamson in the role of Seth, the biblical son of Adam, the first one “to call on the name of the Lord” (*New King James Version*, Gen. 4.26), which, translated into this story, might mean the first one with the right perspective. The fable also has strong female characters and we believe that the one called Mrs. Mouffet is supposed to represent Matty. Mrs. Mouffet arrives on the scene flying (like Mary Poppins, the quintessential

11 “Matty” suggests Miss Matty, the quintessential ‘old maid’ in Gaskell’s *Cranford*, while Matilda was the Queen of William the Conqueror” (Sturrock, 2002-3:102).

nanny/governess) on a silk thread: “A four limbed creature, which resolved itself into a human shape, female, with a long black skirt and a white bonnet, shading a little white face with large horn-rimmed glasses on a sharp nose” (Byatt, 1995:129). Mrs. Mouffet/Matty is Seth/Adamson’s guide, the one who helps him out of the enchanted Pigsties/Bredely Hall and who sends him down a path of understanding. Adamson, the Sleeping Beauty, is woken up to a new reality by his Prince Charming, Matilda.

One might say that Matty is Adamson’s friend. However, she is his friend as long as she remains sexless, neutral and matte. He compares her to worker ants (Byatt, 1995:105). But, what Matty essentially wants is recognition, for William to “see” her (in the same way that Austen’s Fanny Price thought that Edmund Bertram did not see her<sup>12</sup>). “Seeing” her does not only mean accepting her as a sexual being, but also as a person, and not a type. At Bredely Hall, Matty/Matilda gets called Matty but she insists that in her room she is Matilda. And this Matilda is not only after Adamson’s body, but his mind and soul as well.

Matilda is a new force, the intellectual New Woman who is neither tied down by her position in society, nor her gender. More than anything else, she is Adamson’s guide, his Socrates engaged in the delivery/deliverance of his thoughts which then disintegrate his prison/pigsty of settled analogies, making him see the light. While Eugenia delivers children that are not even Adamson’s, making the whole “delivery situation” therefore “false,” Matilda – making the birthing metaphor literal – *delivers* Adamson’s thoughts in both meanings of that word: in a true maieutic fashion, she awakens the latent truth in him which gives birth to the fact that he does not have to be the slave of the instinct of the nest, but can choose his own way.

## Conclusion

Under the heavily layered intertextuality of “Morpho Eugenia” one finds an amazingly simple romantic plot involving one man and two women. Although this might prompt some to call it a work modest in its postmodernity, “Morpho Eugenia” bears all the hallmarks of a very complex exercise in a particular postmodern phenomenon usually referred to as Victoriana. “Re-cycling and subverting” seems to be the best description of the narrative methods in this work where things are not what they seem. Assuming our familiarity with nineteenth-century prose – particularly the novel, its narrative styles, its themes and its protagonists – A. S. Byatt plays with our expectations of Victorian characters, gender roles and plot resolution, thus both “rewriting” and – in a sense – “re-’right’ing” (Shastri, 2001:98) our views of literary

12 In *Mansfield Park*, while Edmund and Mary Crawford rehearse a scene from the play *Lovers’ Vows*, Fanny easily becomes “too nearly nothing” (Austen, 1992:123) in Edmund’s eyes (which can also be seen at their visit to Sotherton when Edmund wanders off with Mary, forgetting Fanny entirely [Austen, 1992:73]).

history. Byatt places one William Adamson in the role most Victorian novels reserved for a woman. This can be seen in his dependant position at Bredely Hall (being a professional without prospects), his passivity, his comparison to Psyche and not Amor when that legend is being told, and in his own repeated thoughts in which he compares himself to a drone. All these characteristics contribute to a subversion of the gender role a Victorian male character was (and is) expected to play. Byatt also gives her women, most notably Matty, certain streaks of character stereotypically perceived as masculine: being down to earth, taking the initiative, the possession of a spirit of entrepreneurship and an overall sense of activity. In the process, she also subverts that most common of narrative arcs in the Victorian novel closely connected to Victorian assumptions about gender – the marriage plot – by putting William and Eugenia’s marriage squarely at the beginning of the novella, at the same time questioning the fairy-tale ring to it and its Victorian uses as narrative (and, implicitly, social) panacea.

By playing with our expectations of Victorian gender roles, Byatt creates a gap between our assumptions and the reality we are faced with in “Morpho Eugenia.” This new reality and textuality of “Morpho Eugenia” blows up (pun intended) many entrenched prejudices about Victorians and the Victorian era, highlighting “the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality... as well as challeng[ing] ... the conventional understandings of the historical itself” (Kaplan, 2007:3). In the process, Byatt employs every trick of the trade at her literary disposal in order to emphasise, illuminate and teach, taking as her starting point our assumptions about the Victorian period (most notably, our ideas about Victorian courtship, gender relations, sex and marriage) and Victorian fiction (our expectations of heroes and heroines in a Victorian setting, our anticipation of a narrative’s development). Out of it all comes a provocative gender reversal tale that questions, rewrites and changes our attitudes toward the Victorian era and its inhabitants – both men and women – making them very much alive and kicking. By subverting the readers’ expectations, Byatt’s narrative makes us ponder not only the extent to which our views of Victorians rely on readily accepted clichés and stereotypes, but it also nudges us to question the received ideas we have about ourselves and our own time.

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## **SUBVERZIJA RODA I VIKTORIJANA U NOVELI "MORPHO EUGENIA" A. S. BYATT**

### **Sažetak**

*Rad istražuje koncept viktorijane i njegov odnos prema „viktorijanskim” elementima prikazanim u noveli A. S. Byatt „Morpho Eugenia” iz zbirke *Angels and Insects* (1992). Rad analizira različite narativne strategije koje Byatt koristi kako bi svoj tekst učinila „viktorijanskim” te otkriva, istražuje i opisuje one aspekte viktorijane u „Morpho Eugeniji” koji se odnose na rodne uloge i veze njezinih središnjih likova: Williama Adamsona, Eugenije Alabaster i Matty Crompton. Teza se temelji na pretpostavci da je Byatt upotrijebila lik Adamsona kako bi čitatelj/ic/e naizmjenice otuđila od teksta i privukla tekstu zamjenjujući rodne uloge i iznevjerujući naša očekivanja od „viktorijanske” novele. Birajući Matty, „ženu novog kova/doba” umjesto Eugenije, „žene starog kova/doba”, lik Adamsona potvrđuje i promiče progresivne svjetonazore, ostavljajući iza sebe stari svijet i njegovu logiku zajedno s čitateljskim predrasudama o viktorijanskom razdoblju.*

**Ključne riječi:** rodne uloge, Intertekstualnost, postmodernizam, subverzija, tekst, viktorijanski/viktorijana