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# The Metamorphosis and Mirroring in Three Stories of A. S. Byatt

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Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. [...] They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable. (Grosz, xi)

Metamorphosis is the principle of organic vitality as well as the pulse in the body of art. (Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, 2)

The body is “the very stuff of subjectivity,” states Elizabeth Grosz, insisting upon the need to reconsider the corporeal aspect of human subjectivity, overcoming the dualist conception which splits the body and the mind (ix). However, the body does not always embody a desirable identity for the person, especially when “it has lost its primitive innocence and has instead been discovered as a prime site of representation” (Hertel, 16). In particular, female bodies are chronically stripped of material and corporeal reality and are turned into “a text, a sign, not just a piece of flesh matter,” a surface inscribed with ideological notions about gender and femininity (Dallery, 54).

This process of immaterialisation and textualisation actively operates in fairy tales — “sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires” —, where the heroines’ subjectivities are typically absent, and while their bodies are shaped and sexualised under the patriarchal gaze, there is no trace

of their corporeality and sensuality (Bacchilega, 28). Feminist critics have noted that the mirror has served as a particularly powerful device in this process.<sup>1</sup> Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of the story of Snow White in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1976) has illustrated how the mirror manipulates the Queen and Snow White into "a life of death, a death-in-life" (17). More recently, Bacchilega explains "a special effect" of the mirror as "a naturalizing technology that [...] re-product[es] 'Woman' as the mirror image of masculine desire" (10).

Fairy tale narratives also contain subversive potential, however, and so does the mirror. Bacchilega argues that postmodern fairy tales aspire to transform how the magic of the mirror works: "the tale of magic's controlling metaphor is the *magic mirror*, because it conflates mimesis (reflection), refraction (varying desires), and framing (artifice)" (17). Elizabeth Wanning Harries goes further to insist that the idea of unified subjectivity is no longer compelling and proposes "the *broken mirror*, the mirror that does not pretend to reflect subjectivities or lives as unified wholes" (147).

Like other contemporary women writers, A. S. Byatt has engaged herself with rewriting traditional fairy tales and challenging the gender assumptions that underpin them. She does this, however, without breaking the mirror. In her essay "Ice, Snow, Glass," Byatt discusses the mirror and ice in the stories of Snow Queen and Snow White, emphasising their positive impact on women.

The queen in *Snow White* is entranced by a black frame round a window, making a beautiful image with red and white, warm blood and cold snow. Snow White [...] becomes an object of aesthetic perception, framed in her glass coffin [...]. The wicked stepmother is also obsessed with beauty [...] her own beauty, contemplated in the self-referring gaze

of the mirror. There appears to be no glass between the first queen's ebony frame and the snow on to which she bleeds — she lives without glass between her and the world, and she dies as a result. It is the wicked wizard's mirror that has entered Kay's heart, making him cold, but the Snow Queen has a truth, an interest [...] which is not self-reflecting. (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, 156)

For Byatt, the mirror is not “self-reflecting.” It is not a sign of female vanity or narcissism; neither does it project a male fantasy of woman. It is a medium which enables women to engage with the world. Byatt says of the Lady of Shalott: “she is enclosed in her tower, and sees the world not even through the window, but in a mirror, which reflects the outside life, which she, the artist, then weaves into ‘a magic web with colours gay.’ She is not the Wicked Queen; she does not reflect herself. She is ‘half-sick of shadows’” (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, 157). Glass does not destroy but can empower women.

Looking at three texts of Byatt's fantastic stories — “The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye” (1994), “Cold” (1998) and “A Stone Woman” (2003), this paper aims to demonstrate how Byatt transforms the power of glass and enables her heroines to gain their subjectivities. I will highlight, in particular, the important motif of metamorphosis and matter in this process. Jessica Tiffin explains that the attraction of glass to Byatt is its paradox of being “simultaneously transparent and containing, invisible yet entrapping,” which offers a “multiplicity of meaning within their apparently simple stasis” (52–53).<sup>2</sup> As I will show, Byatt extends the meaning of such ambivalence of the glass to the paradox of death and life and recognises this paradox in other matters — ice, fire and stone. Furthermore, in the three stories to be discussed, transformations of these matters are linked to the transformations

of her heroines' lives from a state of "death-in-life" to that of "life-in-death," transformations which are not only psychological but also and importantly, corporeal.

This paper will explore how such corporeal metamorphoses contribute to the formations of Byatt's heroines' identities and what this implies for the modern discourse of the female, or human, subjectivity. Shape-shifting is prevalent in myth and classical literature and often plays a key role in their themes and narratives. Marina Warner argues that what underlies the motif of metamorphoses is the opposition between body and mind, or, "human production and personal uniqueness," for the body is subservient to and an encasement of soul and mind, which are the higher, spiritual essences of a human being (Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, 27). I shall argue that Byatt's metamorphosis ultimately reveals "one's own otherness," providing a glimpse of the materiality of the human body as well as another world which exists in close proximity with the world of humans (Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 415). In fact, it is by restoring the heroines' bodies as matter that Byatt reclaims their bodies from social and cultural dictates and ultimately liberates them from the dualism between body and mind. In Byatt's three stories, giving life to both body and mind, metamorphosis transforms the heroines' lives.

### **The Metamorphosis of the Gendered Body and the Power of Story-Telling**

"The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" is a story about Gillian Perholt, a narratologist, and her transformation by the magic of the djinn she releases from a flask by chance. "[A]n essay in feminist narratology," the story explores the unchanging power of the magic spell of the fairy tale, which, despite the intervention of female narratology, still dominates women's lives (Campbell, 139). The narrative of Gillian's life as a modern, independent

and working woman is juxtaposed with various narratives from myth and ancient tales, which recount “stopped energies” of women. The interplay between Gillian’s narrative and the embedded narratives makes it clear that, although Gillian appears to be fully content with her free and independent life, in fact, she is “story-less” (Sellers, 38). The opening of the story, which frames Gillian’s story with the language of ancient story-telling, tells us that she is “merely a narratologist, a being of secondary order” (95). Gillian is a “secondary order” not only because she is a narratologist “telling stories about stories” (96), but also because she is “redundant as a woman, being neither wife, mother nor mistress” (103). Angela Carter suggests that fairy tales “are structured around the relations between men and women [...]. The common, unspoken goal is fertility and continuance” (xviii). Gillian has “outlived” such a conventional plot, however (Campbell, 139). The narrator gives a cynically succinct account of her life: “she was a woman in her fifties, past childbearing, whose two children were adults now, had left home [...]. Dr Perholt’s husband also, had left home, had left Dr Perholt [...].” (102). The narrator ruefully adds: “she [the husband’s mistress] was twenty-six, that is all you need to know, and more or less what you supposed, probably, anyway” (102).

As Susan Seller observes, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” “explores a personalised dilemma,” for Gillian is aware, as a scholar of narratology, of the working of the magic spell of the romantic plot but at the same time she fears the lack of it in her life (48). Gillian imagines herself as a “floating redundancy,” flying and travelling widely and freely for her work. The word “redundant” alludes to Milton’s phrase “floating redundant” which describes the smooth exuberant movement of the coiled snake in *Paradise Lost*. Now Gillian applies to herself its modern meaning “superfluous, unwanted, unnecessary” (100).

Gillian sees her fate in the images of her body: her body is an objective correlative for the state of her life, which is now, as she sees it, without a story and close to an end. In this respect “The Djinn” dramatises her struggle to “recover a self-image she is happy with” (Sellers, 48). Throughout the story Byatt employs the image of the snake, as we have seen above the use of the word “redundant” taken from *Paradise Lost*, in order to signify the state of Gillian’s life. Gillian remembers that Milton’s image of the snake, “the beauty of the primordial coils of the insinuating serpent,” fascinated her, “unsuspecting as Eve,” who as a sixteen-year-old was a “golden-haired white virgin with vague blue eyes (she pictured herself so)” (99). She also recounts to the djinn the incident which made her realise the desirability and vulnerability of the female sex, an episode which suggests her ambivalent relationship with her sexual and physical body (Sellers, 153 (footnote 70)). During her stay with a university friend’s family, the friend’s father brought breakfast to her bed, and touched and buried his face between her breasts. She “felt sick, and felt my body was to blame” (243). She remembers her body — “small, beautifully rising breasts, her warm, flat, tight belly, her long slender legs and ankles” and she was “perfect” (241). The sexual value that her body represented scared Gillian, who was “a creature of the mind, not body” (242). Although she knew that the bodily blossom “wouldn’t stay” and deserved “some sort of adequate act” she “wasn’t going to live up to it” (242).

Now Gillian feels saddened to see her aging body, a sign of decay and death as well as fading femininity. Just before her transformation by the magic of the Djinn, she looks “ruefully down at what it was better not to look at, the rolls of her midriff, the sagging muscles of her stomach” (189). Her agonising scrutiny shows her difficulty in accepting her body and her inevitable end.

She remembered [...] how perhaps ten years ago she had looked complacently at her skin on her throat, at her solid enough breast [...]. [...]. It was her skin, it was herself, and there was no visible reason why it should not persist. She had known intellectually that it must, it must give way, but its liveliness then had given her the life. And now it was all going. (189)

During her conference trip to Turkey, she encounters an embodiment of the history of women's lives in the small statues of women in a museum, who are "only the essential, a head, and arms, and legs and lovely fat belly, breasts to feed, no need even for hands or feet, [...] face" (139). Gillian is haunted by apparitions of "a cavernous form, a huge female form" whose "withered skin was exposed above the emptiness, the windy hole that was its belly and womb" (118). In this grey image Gillian sees her immanent death and her "Fate" (172).

The narrative presents Gillian's ageing body in the double state of "death-in-life" and "life-in-death." In a swimming pool in the hotel where she stays, her body is seen to literally become a "floating redundancy," a mount of flesh:

Flying distorts the human body — the middle-aged female body perhaps particularly [...]. Gillian had learned never to look in the mirror on arrival, for what stared out at her was a fleshy monster. [...]. Oh the bliss, said Gillian to herself as she extended her sad body along the green rolls of swaying liquid and felt it vanish, felt her blood and nerves become pure energy, moved forward with a ripple like a swimming serpent. [...]. The nerves unknotted, the heart and lungs settled and pumped, the body was alive and joyful. (169–70)



What penetrates the description of her enlivened body is the image of the snake in Paradise. The image of Milton's snake sharply juxtaposes Gillian's voluminous body in her fifties with the image of her at sixteen that I cited earlier. If the earlier image associates Gillian with Eve's fragile freshness, her present body is now seen in close affinity with the serpent, quietly and slowly alive like Milton's curvaceous snake.

The transformation of Gillian's life without a story, a life in a "death-in-life," begins with the physical transformation of her body and is strongly associated with the transforming power of glass. Gillian buys a flask made of glass called nightingale's eye in a market in Istanbul. When she decides to "bring the glass to life" and washes it under the water, it "became blue, threaded with opaque white canes, cobalt-blue, darkly bright, gleaming and wonderful" and the Djinn appears from it (190). The Djinn allows Gillian to make three wishes and she first wishes for her body "to be as it was when I last really *liked* it" (201). The djinn's magic transforms her body in its fifties to that of her 35-year-old self. Gillian's gaze, as if it had internalised the gendered ideal image of woman, scrutinises the image of her "serviceable and agreeable body" in the mirror:

She studied her face in the mirror; it was not beautiful but it was healthy and lively and unexceptionable; her neck was a clean column and her teeth, she was happy to see and feel, more numerous, more securely planted. She undid the coiled towel and her hair sprang out, [...], long and unfaded. (202–3)

Gillian is under the spell of the mirror rather than the spell of the djinn. This wish suggests her ambivalent relation to her body and to her intellectual knowledge of the constructedness of femininity and illustrates the difficulty

of overcoming the magic spell of the mirror. Gillian says to herself “I can go in the streets, [...] and still be recognisably who I am, in my free and happy life; only I shall *feel* better, I shall like myself more. That was an *intelligent* wish, I shall not regret it” (203). She “feels” better because the bodily transformation has not destroyed her identity but brought back “who I am,” although she feels she needs to justify her “intelligent wish,” which seems to submit to the cultural and social ideology of femininity.

What truly transforms Gillian’s life from a “death-in-life” to a “life-in-death” is the recovery of her love of the story-telling and fairy tales she enjoyed as a child. While Gillian enjoys her young body and while the love between Gillian and the djinn deepens (Gillian makes her second wish to be loved by the djinn just after her transformation), Gillian sees the djinn losing his spirit in the modern world. Gillian prepares a conference paper entitled “Wish-fulfilment and Narrative Fate.” Into this paper, however, the djinn inserts the story called “the freedom of wishing-apes,” a story about an ape who resignedly accepts that it is his fate to die as it fulfils others’ wishes. Although upset at this alteration, Gillian explains the message of this tale; despite the irresistible temptation of granted and fulfilled wishes and a promise of an eternal life, they only offer “a kind of false stasis,” for the ultimate goal of human fate is death (267). Gillian realises that to keep her youth and retain the djinn in her world is against fate and is at the cost of the djinn’s own freedom. Gillian decides to liberate the djinn using her last wish. This act implies her overcoming the fear of death. Releasing the djinn, she has moved out of the world of fairy tale and her body begins to age again. Yet, the narrator comments, “Gillian Perholt was happy, for she had moved back into their world, or at least had access to it, as she had had as a child” (277).

“The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” proves the power of story-telling,

which enables humans to “briefly transcend their fate” (Sellers, 49). It can revise, break and metamorphose, as well as it records, reproduces and reinforces, the patterns and fates of human lives. Byatt uses the motif of glass to signify its metamorphosing power. The djinn gives Gillian a glass paperweight full of colours and describes them as “Full of forever possibilities. And impossibilities, of course” (272).<sup>3</sup> Gillian has transformed her story-less life as a middle-aged, professional woman to a life in the “forever possibilities and impossibilities” of story-telling. Gillian’s story is to her the only version, but it is also one of the uncountable stories and as a narratologist, she takes part in the imaginative continuity. This story ends with one of the “forever possibilities.” Two years after the djinn’s departure, when Gillian spots “a new dark age-stain” in “a pretty soft dried-leaf colour” on the hand, she is re-visited by him and receives another gift of glass paperweight. She interprets the glass as “a medium for seeing and a thing seen at once” and “what art is” (274–75). Gillian has repositioned the mirror and through story-telling transforms its magic so that she can see who she really is and what her story is. She has transformed the power of glass and consequently her life.

### **The Metamorphosis of the Elemental Body: The Power of Ice and Glass**

The heroine of “Cold” is Fiammarosa, a beautiful princess, whose element is cold. The story follows the shift of her existence from a “death-in-life” to a “life-in-death,” illuminating the life-preserving and life-enhancing energy of the element of cold in women. Significantly, the stages of her life, which are embedded in the typical plot of the fairy tale heroine, are portrayed in strong correlation with successive changes of her body. The opening of the story describes the birth of Fiammorosa, a stereotypically fragile and passive princess.

She had a fine, transparent skin, so the blush of blood was fiery and rosy; when her hair was washed, it sprang into a soft, black fur. She was pronounced – and was – beautiful. Her exhausted mother [...] said she should be named “Fiammarosa,” a name that just came into her head at that moment, as a perfect description. Her father came in, and picked her up in her new rosy shawl, holding the tiny creature clasped in his two huge hands [...]. [...] When he saw his daughter, he fell in love with her vulnerable fragility, as fathers do. (115)

The repeated emphasis on the red colour of her body is made in association with blood as a sign of strong vitality. At the same time, the pinkness of her body parts symbolises the softness and pureness of her body. The description of the physical features of Fiammorosa including her black hair makes an explicit allusion to Snow White, a delicate, beautiful and innocent princess. There is also a contrast made between Fiammorosa’s delicate body and the masculine strength of her father. The contrast predicts, as the law of the traditional fairy tale has it, that his love will possess his daughter, as he so easily holds her in his hands, and will keep her as a docile and fragile princess. Like Snow White, Fiammarosa is an object of love which does not have life in itself.

Fiammarosa soon grows into a lethargic state of “death-in-life” and her earlier features of red, pink and softness are now taken over by paleness, thinness and stillness. She becomes “milky,” and her skin turns “softly pale, like white rose petals” (117). She turns as white as cold and inanimate “fine bone china,” and her hair changes from black to blonde, signalling her submersion into the regime of the traditional fairy tale.<sup>4</sup> When she is intensively fed, she becomes plump but is overcome by “languor,” and “[h]er pale head dropped on its pale stalk” while “[t]he gold hair lay flat and

gleaming, unmoving like the surface of a still liquid” (118). The narrative of her growth shows that those who intend to protect her in fact confine her in a state of “death-in-life” and eventually, by the means of the programmed diet, put her life in a false state of “life-in-death.” Fiammarosa repeats yawning, showing the “involuntary grimace.” Only her mother suspects, but cannot help, the unvoiced “perfectly silent howl or cry” in her daughter’s “intense laziness.”<sup>5</sup>

The double state of “death-in-life” and “life-in-death” implicated in the representations of Fiammarosa’s body relates to the tradition of aestheticisation of the dead female body. Elisabeth Bronfen delineates the strong link drawn between femininity and death in different social, cultural and historical contexts. She argues that since “the feminine body is culturally constructed as the superlative site of alterity,” “culture uses art to dream the death of beautiful women” (xi). Feminine beauty is invested with “images of wholeness, purity and the immaculate” to conceal “our fear of dissolution and decay” (62). By placing dead feminine bodies as aesthetic objects to be observed, death can also be made Other, kept away from life, hidden and contained in an art form. Therefore, she argues, drawing on Freud’s example of the three caskets, that femininity and death are not antithetical; they are in fact identical. In “Cold,” while Fiammarosa’s white and soft body is represented as an ideal embodiment of warm-hearted femininity and a perfect work of art, her life is symbolically and also physically in a state of death.

The narrative tells us that Fiammarosa “became curiously attracted to a little silver hand-mirror, engraved with twining roses, from her eldest brother” (120). As we will see, however, Fiammarosa is not under the spell of the magic mirror as Snow White is. In fact, she is interested in the glass as matter and its paradoxical effect, and when she realises that her element

is ice, she gets out of her deadly stasis. One night, from her too warm room, she sees snow and goes out to touch it and lie down on the snowy ground:

The snow did not numb Fiammarosa; it pricked and hummed and brought her, intensely, to life. [...] She was, for the first time in her life, happy. This is who I am, the cold princess thought to herself, wriggling for sheer pleasure in the snow-dust, this is what I want. [...] She could feel the cold penetrating her surfaces, all over, insistent and relentless. She even thought that some people might have thought that this was painful. But for her, it was bliss. (125)

She has found her element and is now in her element as she thinks “This is who I am” and “this is what I want.” Her icy body is charged with lively sensations, without any sign of decay and composition. This is suggestive of the way in which Bronfen illustrates the latent identification of the female body as death.

“The new Fiammarosa was full of spiky life” (134). Her discovery of her cold element enlivens her. She begins to show interest in science and studies “ice formations under a magnifying glass.” Her artistic talent also blossoms. Despite the fact that all princesses are “compelled to be artists,” they only produce “good enough” artworks. Fiammarosa “hated ‘good enough’” and “produce[s] shimmering, intricate tapestries,” “mix[ing] the geometric forms of the snow-crystals with the delicate forms of the moss and rosettes of petals” (134). She thus becomes “an assiduous correspondent, writing to gardeners and natural philosophers, to spinners of threads and weavers all over the world” (135). On the other hand, she realises that her element contradicts what her guardians expect her to be and feels that there is “a little less love for this coldly shining, fiercely energetic, shaper being

than there had been for the milky girl in her rosy cushions” (134). Seeing her daughter’s interest is not in “fancy things,” her father pressures her to marry, wishing her “to be softened” and “melted smooth” (137). Although Fiammarosa knows the typical fates of princesses from her reading and feels “she was too happy alone to make a good bride” she accepts this proposal, only because she believes in her “power to reject and some power to choose” (136).

It turns out that love and marriage force Fiammarosa to go through another, and this time, painful, transformation of her body. Fiammarosa falls in love with one of her suitors, Sasan, a prince from a country of sand, and this proves fatal for her elemental body. Sasan is a glass-blower and presents her with beautiful glass objects that appear like ice. His glass palace looks as if it were “within the ice” and its complex and elaborate structure enchantingly projects itself “in the ice and snow of mountain peaks” (141). Fiammarosa then recognises that this is “a most cunningly wrought and regularly shaped transparent castle” with “the irregularities of the surface, the magnifications and the tunnels within the block” (141). Entranced by such artifice, she lays “her cool cheek against the cool glass dome” (144). Against her tutor’s advice that “glass is not ice” (148), she decides to marry and move to a desert, based on her confidence in “my intelligence, and my willpower” and her belief that “[h]uman beings are adaptable” (153).

Yet, in making this decision Fiammarosa overlooks how crucial her cold element is in keeping both her body and mind alive. She feels a flame of passion bursting within herself and for the first time recognises her body as a sexual body: “An ice woman’s sensations are different from those of other women [...]. Touching Sasan’s heat was like and unlike the thrill of ice. Ordinary women melt, or believe themselves to be melting [...] and this, too, Fiammarosa experienced with a difference, as though her whole being

was becoming liquid except for some central icicle, which was running with waterdrops that threatened to melt that too, to nothing” (156). Her love does not bring her back into “melted smooth” femininity as her father has wished for but causes the threatening reaction of her body, creating inside it “a little melted pool of water slopped [...] where she had been solid and shining” (157). When Fiammarosa moves to Sasan’s warm land of sand, the tragic incident of her miscarriage in the husband’s furnace of their first baby leaves her in a desperate state of “death-in-life” again.

Fiammarosa’s story is not simply a feminist cautionary tale about the dangers of romance and marriage for women. It is rather a warning about the harm of being out of one’s element and the failure to make use of that element, as it proves that even “intelligence and willpower” cannot change Fiammarosa’s cold element. In Byatt’s self-conscious and subversive narrative, it is Fiammarosa’s intelligence and curiosity and Sasan’s ingenuity and craftsmanship which achieve the symbolic and life-giving transformation of their opposite elements into glass.<sup>6</sup> Sasan gathers his expertise and builds a glass palace so that Fiammarosa “could live, and could breathe, and could be herself” (178). As fire transforms sand into glass, which resembles ice, glass symbolises the powerful union between Fiammarosa and Sasan. Their glass palace does not represent imposed confinement and isolation, which would mean “death-in-life.”<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, the protection of the glass palace made out of Sasan’s love allows Fiammarosa to preserve her cold element and pursue her various interests. Like the glass paperweights in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” the glass palace is “practical beauty” (179). Tiffin observes, “Art not only bonds the polar oppositions of gender but, more importantly, creates the medium in which sexual love can exist and be expressed” (56). Peter Davidson explains that ice and glass have long stimulated artistic imagination because they “share the quality of being



deceptive, of being able through refraction either to create images in their depths or to project them into empty space” (77). It is exactly such a paradox of glass which saves Fiammarosa. Protected by the glass, Fiammorosa is in touch with the world outside the palace as she looks through the glass. Although she is often separate from her husband, she is “resourceful and hopeful.” She studies vegetation, communicates with “authorities all over the world on these matters” and discovers that blueberries that grow in the snow, in fact, grow better in the glass garden (181). Fiammarosa’s cold element — her intellectual curiosity and her elemental body — is beautifully preserved through her contact with heat and passion.

**The Metamorphosis of the Matter of the Body:  
Life of Stone in the World beyond the Human**

The story of “A Stone Woman” revolves around the abrupt and inexplicable petrification of the body of Ines, the female protagonist. Although set in a similar fictive mode to that of “The Djinn,” in which an unrealistic event happens in a realistic setting in a matter-of-fact way, the world of this story is furnished with stronger mythical tones. Ines’s Ovidian metamorphosis takes place at the threshold of the border between the natural and the supernatural. It is distinguished from the transformations of Gillian’s gendered body and Fiammarosa’s purely elemental body. Ines’s body ceases to be a material encasement of mind — the essence of human subjectivity — and literally becomes the matter of metamorphosis. Seller cites critic Rosemary Jackson’s view of metamorphosis as being “metonymic rather than metaphoric” because “one object does not stand for another but rather slides into it” (29). Similarly, Ines’s body gradually slides into the matter of stone and her metamorphosis invalidates the distinction between the human and the non-human.

Although Ines's metamorphosis is an absurd event which happens for no explicable reason, the story prepares for her gradual sliding into stone by having her body undergo clinical changes first. "One morning pain struck her like a sudden beak. [...] She heard the creature moaning" (130) and Ines receives an emergency operation in a hospital when they find "her gut was twisted and gangrenous" (131). During her recovery, she has the surgeon "studying the sutures, prodding the walls of her belly with strong fingers" (131) and the anaesthetist "touch[ing] the sewed-up lips of the hole" (131). Pointing to "some sort of navel" that the surgeon "constructed" on her belly, the anaesthetist calls it a "work of art," explaining that "people feel odd, we've found, if they haven't got a navel" (132). Ines observes the change of her body: "where her navel had been, like a button caught in a seam at an angle, was an asymmetric whorl with a little sill on skin. Ines thought of her lost navel, of the umbilical cord that had been a part of her and of her mother. Her face creased into sorrow; her eyes were hot with tears" (132). "The umbilical cord" bears heavy symbolic meaning not only as a visceral matrilineal continuity but also as a cord that connects Ines to human kind. After her operation, there is a sign of the approaching transformation of her body into stone. In a bath, she hears that "the pumice chinked against her flesh. It was an odd little sound, like a knock on metal" (136).

In face of the absurdity of her metamorphosis, what saves Ines from insanity and despair is her primitive curiosity at absolute wonder. Ines becomes an assiduous observer of her body. Initially Ines "felt a kind of horror and shame in looking at herself spread with lumps and an artificial navel" (136). She looks at stone statues in the town park and sees them as symbols of "indefinite half-life" (151), thinking that "to become stone is a figure, however fantastic, for death" (156). Her horror is soon overtaken by her curiosity about her body's gradual change, however: "There were,

increasingly, days when *a new curiosity* jostled the horror” (139). Being an enthusiastic etymologist, Ines reads “the stony words in the geological handbooks” and looks for words to describe and record her metamorphosis (141): “One day, one of the blue veins on her inner thigh erupted into a line of rubious spinels, and she thought of jewels before she thought of pustules. They glittered as she moved. She saw that her stony casing was not static” (139).

Byatt highlights the paradoxical state of stone to suggest a new life which starts in parallel to Ines’s death as a human being. Observing the gradual petrification of her body, Ines wonders about its end only to realise that her “stoical expectation of final inertia was not being fulfilled” (143). Instead of rendering her stone body either as an aesthetic and decorative object or as a grotesque abnormality, Byatt’s narrative illuminates the potential life of apparently dead stones and suggest Ines’s potential rebirth. Ines speculates how she would die:

When would she be, so to speak, dead? When her plump flesh heart stopped pumping the blue blood along the veins and arteries of her shifting shape? When the grey and clammy matter of her brain became limestone or graphite? When her brainstem became a column of rutilated quartz? When her eyes became — what? (145)

Ines hopes that her “watching eyes” would be the part of her body that would stay until the last moment (145). She imagines them as turning into pearls, stones which, she thinks “were a substance where the organic met the inorganic” (146). Ines recognises that stones are in a state of “life-in-death”:

She had had the idea that the mineral world was a world of perfect,

inanimate forms, with an unchanging mathematical order of crystals and molecules beneath its sprouts and flows and branches. She had thought, when she had started thinking, about her own transfiguration as something profoundly unnatural, a move from a world of warm change and decay to a world of cold permanence. But as she became mineral, [...], she saw that there were reciprocities, both physical and figurative. There were whole ranges of rocks and stones which, like pearls, were formed from things which had once been living. [...] These were themselves once living stones — living marine organisms that spun and twirled around skeletons made of opal. (146–7)

Her curious observation contradicts her initial assumption that the mineral world is “inanimate,” “unchanging,” and dead, opposite to the human world of “warm change and decay.” For she realises that what underlies the “cold permanence” of minerals is the unimaginably long, almost mythic continuity of life, because rocks and stones “were formed from things which had once been living” and they “were themselves once living stones.” Her “profoundly unnatural” metamorphosis, in fact, is a beginning of her life in the mythic continuity of stone at the same time as it is the end of her human body.

Ines observes that “her metamorphosis obeyed no known laws of physics or chemistry,” and only the language of geology seems adequate to describe it (142). Indeed, her metamorphosis eludes the modern discourse which defines and regulates the human body, and reveals its inadequacy when faced with a phenomenon beyond reason. As we have seen, the story first introduces the medical and clinical discourse of the human body. Ines gives up on them, “with no real hesitation,” however, for she knows “she would be an object of horror and fascination, to be shut away and

experimented on” (140). In “The Djinn,” Gillian’s bodily transformation is essentially linked to the problem of how women establish subjectivity under the pressure of gender ideology, highlighting that the body is inscribed and read as a text. However, discourses of gender and society are no longer relevant to the state of Ines’s subjectivity. When the anaesthetist assures her that her new navel “would all look much less angry and lumpy” and could be “dealt with a good plastic surgeon” (132), Ines responds that “[t]here was no one to see her” and “it didn’t matter what she looked like” (132).

Ines’s transformation into primitive stones transcend human discourses of the female or rather human body altogether. It is a “unique transformation,” which defeats the anthropocentric perspective of the world.

She assumed it would end with the petrification of her vital functions. [...] She herself was about to observe its [death’s] approach in a new fantastic form. She thought of recording the transformations [...]. Then when “they” found her, “they” would have a record of how she had become what she was. She would observe, unflinching. (141)

The pronoun “they” suggests Ines’s sense that she is becoming an existence of alterity, an object of intrigue to the world of “them,” humans. Ines’s metamorphosis is ultimately a process in which the human body escapes the dichotomy between body and mind and human and non-human which underlies the modern critique of human subjectivity. Ines compares “human thoughts and stone thoughts” and observes that the latter “do not translate into the English language, or into any other language she knew: they were things that accumulated, solidly, knocked against each other, heaped and slipped” (164). We suffer “the poverty of language,” Lynda Birke argues, for the unfathomable dynamism of the human body exceeds any

systematic project to describe it (150). The lack of language to describe the transformation of Ines's body shows that it is gradually moving out of the realm of human knowledge. As she determines, "I need to find a place where I should stand, when I am completely solid, I should find a place *outside*, in the weather," her metamorphosis pushes her out of the realm of humans (145).

It is Thorsteinn, a stonecutter from Iceland, who finds Ines an appropriate place in Iceland for her end as a human and her new life as stone. Davidson explains that the idea of the North has inspired many artists and in particular, Iceland has been imagined as a land at the threshold of the human and magical worlds, "a place outside time, and perhaps unreal" (168).<sup>8</sup> In "A Stone Woman," the Icelandic landscape represents the end of the human world and the entry to the world beyond, to match Ines's paradoxical state of death and life. Thorsteinn describes that his home country is "a country where we are matter-of-fact about strange things. We know we live in a world of invisible beings that exists in and around our own" (158). Ines also recognises this: "His country appeared to her old, when she first saw it, a primal chaos of ice, stone silt, black sand, gold mud. [...] And yet, the striking thing, the decisive thing, about this landscape, was that it was geologically young. It was turbulent with the youth and energy of an unsettled crust of the earth" (166).

Just as the Icelandic landscape accepts Ines's stone body, an Icelander Thorsteinn becomes fascinated by her transformation, which he finds "beautiful" (157). He becomes a devoted observer of Ines's metamorphosis as he says "All my life I have made things about metamorphosis. [...] You are a walking metamorphosis. [...] I too [...] am utterly changed by your changing. I want to make a record of it" (174). As we have seen earlier, Elizabeth Bronfen argues that the aestheticisation of the female body

functions to distance and contain the immanent threat of death as the other in the object of art. When Thorsteinn sculptures Ines's stone statue, however, his art does not kill Ines. As he says "I look for the life in them [stones]," his statue emanates the life-giving effects of mirroring (154). Under the "fantastic crust" of the statue Ines recognises "the lineaments of a beautiful woman, a woman with a carved, attentive face, looking up and out" and feels that "he had *seen* her [...]. He saw that she existed, in there" (175). In fact, we can say, Ines's statue becomes like a mirror, a mirror which, significantly, is not self-reflecting but reflects, embodies and enlivens Ines's life.<sup>9</sup>

When the end of her human life comes, Ines leaves in a fantastic swirl of snow, ice and wind, to join trolls inviting her to come to their world.

Ines began to come with him [Thorsteinn], and then turned away, looking up the mountainside [...]. She lifted a monumental arm and gestured towards the fells and then to her eyes. [...] He looked up the mountain and saw [...] figures, spinning and bowing in a rapid dance on huge, lithe, stone legs, beckoning with expansive gestures, flinging their great arms wide in invitation. The woman in his stone-garden took a breath — he saw her sides quiver — and essayed a few awkward dance-steps, a sweep of an arm, of both arms. [...]. She jiggled a little, as though gathering momentum, and then began a dancing run, into the blizzard. He heard a stone voice, shouting and singing, "Trunt, trunt, og tröllin í fjöllumum."

He went in, and closed his door against the weather, and began to pack. (182)

As Thorsteinn closes his door, Ines enters into the mythic world, welcomed by aerial notes of dancing and singing. Thorsteinn explains to Ines that

“troll” is a word that humans use for mythic creatures, adding “always from a human perspective. Which is a bit of a precarious perspective, here, in this land” (178). In the same way, Ines’s mortal life has come to an end only in human eyes, for she has started a new life as matter in the fantastic and mythic realm.

In “A Stone Woman,” Byatt envisages the human body as leaving altogether the domain of the cultural, sociological and biological, and turns it into matter which is no longer a site for discursive inscription or a tangible embodiment of human identity. The story, in fact, begins with the death of Ines’s mother, a death from “a human perspective” and ends with Ines’s death, which marks the new life of stone in a state of both “death-in-life” and “life-in-death.” Although Ines has lost her navel, a visible sign of her physical and symbolic continuity with her mother, the past and human kind, “A Stone Woman” re-forges an imaginary umbilical cord between the human world and the world beyond it.

Byatt shows that the mirror, if positioned wisely, can produce life-giving power for heroines. Heroines in Byatt’s fairy tales are reading, intellectual and curious heroines, who are “not praised for their youth and beauty” but whose “riches derive from their resourcefulness and creativity” (Campbell, 144). It seems, therefore, that for them intellectual curiosity is a more important source of pleasure and vitality than sensuality. Tiffin argues “Intellectualism and sexuality are thus, to Byatt, separate rather than integrated” (55). However, I would argue, Byatt’s portrayals of the heroine ultimately reject the dichotomy between body and mind and assert that both are necessary constituents of the female subjectivity. As we have seen, she “materialises” the heroines’ bodies to produce a strong and subversive



energy which works against the discursive force of gender and transforms their lives. In “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” Gillian, “a naturally *solitary* creature” overcomes her fear of aging and death through the power of story-telling (232). In “Cold,” Fiammarosa, who believed “[t]here was more life in coldness. In Solitude,” finds an intelligent and creative solution to keep her essential element alive in her love with the prince of fire (133). “A Stone Woman” identifies the same transforming power of ice and cold in stone and in the landscape of Iceland. It presents the most powerful metamorphosis of matter, in this case, the human body. Deconstructing and re-connecting oppositions between fantasy and reality, innocence and knowledge, and body and mind, Byatt metamorphoses her heroines’ lives from a “death-in-life” to a “life-in-death.” Ultimately, metamorphosis breaks the spell of the mirror, without breaking the glass, and transforms fairy-tale narratives.

## Notes

- 1) Jacques Lacan first introduced the mirror-stage into the formulation of the developmental process of the subject. His model has subsequently and variously been criticised, developed or modified. In her study of women writers’ re-writing of myth and fairy tales, Susan Sellers usefully illustrates some outcomes from these developments, in particular, works of Hélèn Cixous and Julia Kristeva, who have revised Lacan’s model within a feminist framework (Chapter 1 “Contexts: Theories of Myth,” 1–50).
- 2) Her essay, which was published after I completed the original draft of this paper, also discusses Byatt’s reinterpretation of glass. However, she treats Byatt’s fairy tale narratives as her exploration of the metafictional form of art and focuses on the rich effect of embedding traditional fairy tale narratives at multiple levels. My readings will focus on the heroines’ metamorphoses, in particular, the significance of their corporeal and material aspect.
- 3) Looking at this story’s re-engagement with traditional fairy tales and myths,

- Campbell asserts that the story “demonstrate[s] openness and community” (144).
- 4) Warner explains the significance of blond hair as “a trophy” (*From the Beast to the Blonde*, 382): “Blondeness is less a descriptive term about hair pigmentation than a blazon in code, a piece of a value system” (364). She also notes that “among the heroines of fairy tales only Snow White is dark, because her story specifically opens with her mother’s wish” (365).
  - 5) Fiammarosa is typical of “the figure of the silent heroine who has not been enchanted, or taken a vow of silence, but just does not know how to speak or to laugh or to cry” (Warner, *From The Beast to the Blonde*, 405).
  - 6) Tiffin comments on the self-conscious aspect of this story: “Ultimately, this is yet another manifestation of Byatt’s interest in romance, the structured and self-consciously unrealistic narrative that insists on the artifact of the happy heterosexual resolution. However, both romance and feminist exploration are transcended, characteristically for Byatt, by the affirmation of fairy tale as metafiction, the validity of art itself” (56–7).
  - 7) Renk presents a feminist, but entirely opposite, view of this ending: “she is ultimately buried alive in the mountain in the middle of a desert that she cannot cross”; “Because she has ignored her icy nature, she must be satisfied to live in this contrived illusory world” (626). Tiffin’s interpretation focuses on the power of art that enables Fiammarosa to sustain her love with Sasan. I am in agreement with Tiffin on the interpretation of the ending of “Cold.”
  - 8) He notes that during his “pilgrimage” (166) to Iceland, William Morris finds the landscape “oddly lifeless,” a place where “nothing will ever happen again” (188).
  - 9) I thank Anita Mason for bringing to my attention the motif of the mirror in this scene.

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