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POSSESSION: A ROMANCE AS AN EXAMPLE OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze Antonia Susan Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* as an example of a postmodernist historical novel or of a historiographic metafiction. Historiographic metafiction attempts to concentrate on historical personages and past events which are not mentioned in history for political or moral reasons. Thus, the omitted events in history are brought to the forefront, and plurality of history is produced as alternative to the history with the retelling of the stories of the past in historiographic metafictions, which is resulted in creating a multiplicity of histories. *Possession: A Romance* can be studied as a good example of historiographic metafiction as it has different voices and, thus, plurality of history through questioning the line between fiction and history. It also defies the monology and problematizes the objectivity of historical representations of two Victorian poets whose histories are silenced as they are found to be incompatible with the official history for moral reasons. Therefore, in contrast to the monology, the novel creates multivocality allowing different voices to be heard through subverting the historical documents and events it refers to. Thus, historiographic metafiction becomes a liberating force as it allows other histories to be told. Lastly, the novel employs other metafictional elements such as making use of non-linear narrative and emphasizing self-reflexivity through creating an untraditional third person omniscient narrator with a parodic intention.

Keywords: Antonia Susan Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*, historiographic metafiction, multivocality, history and fiction.

POSSESSION: A ROMANCE: BİR TARİHSEL ÜSTKURMACA ROMANI

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı Antonia Susan Byatt'ın *Possession: A Romance* adlı romanını tarihsel bir üstkurmaca veya postmodernist bir tarih romanı örneği olarak analiz etmektir. Tarihsel üstkurmaca siyasi veya ahlaki nedenlerden dolayı tarih yazımında bahsi edilmeyen tarihi şahsiyetler ve olaylar üzerinde yoğunlaşır. Bu sayede tarihte göz ardı edilen olaylar ön plana çıkarılmış olur ve tarihsel üstkurmada tekrar anlatılan tarihi olaylar yoluyla çoğaltılan tarih yazımı ile tarih yazımına alternatif bir tarih çoğulluğu üretilmiş olur. İçinde barındırdığı değişik seslerden dolayı tarihsel üstkurmaca araştırması için güzel bir örnek teşkil eden *Possession: A Romance*, kurgu ile tarih yazımı arasındaki sınırı sorguladığı için tarihin çoğulluğuna da güzel bir örnektir. Bu roman tekilleşmeye karşı çıkarak, ahlaki nedenlerden dolayı resmi tarih yazımına uyum sağlamadıkları için kendilerine söz hakkı tanınmayan,

Viktorya döneminin iki şairinin tarih yazımında temsil edilişlerindeki nesneliliği hususunu tartışmaya açar. Bu yüzden tek sesliliğin aksine, tarihsel belgeler ve bu belgelerde bahsedilen olaylar ters yüz edilerek ve farklı seslerin duyulmasına imkan verilerek bu romanda çok seslilik meydana gelir. Böylece tarihsel üstkurmaca diğer tarih yazımlarının da anlatılmasına fırsat vererek özgürleştirici bir güç haline gelir. Son olarak, bu romanda doğrusal olmayan öyküleme ve parodi niyetiyle, olağan dışı bir tanrısal üçüncü kişi anlatıcısıyla insanın kendisi hakkındaki tefekkürünü vurgulama gibi diğer üstkurmaca özelliklerini de görmek mümkündür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Antonia Susan Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*, tarihsel üstkurmaca, çok seslilik, tarih ve kurgu.

POSSESSION: A ROMANCE AS AN EXAMPLE OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

Linda Hutcheon writes: “All past ‘events’ are potential historical ‘facts,’ but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated...This distinction between brute event and meaning-granted fact is one with which postmodern fiction seems obsessed” (75). It can be claimed that historiographic metafiction attempts to concentrate on historical personages and past events which are not mentioned in history for political or moral reasons. The omitted events in history are brought to the forefront and plurality of history is produced as alternatives to the mentioned history with the retelling of the stories of past in historiographic metafiction, which is resulted in creating a multiplicity of histories. *Possession: A Romance* can be studied as a good example of historiographic metafiction as it has different voices and, thus, plural histories through questioning the line between fiction and history. It also defies the monology and problematizes the objectivity of historical representations of two Victorian poets whose histories are silenced as they are found to be incompatible with the official history for moral reasons. Therefore, in contrast to the monology, the novel creates multivocality allowing different voices to be heard through subverting the historical documents and events it refers to. Thus, historiographic metafiction becomes a liberating force as it allows other histories to be told. Although historiography constructs historical facts rather than representing them as they actually happened, postmodern understanding of history claims that past is achieved in a textualized form, thus, it is constructed. Lastly, the novel employs other metafictional elements such as making use of non-linear narrative and emphasizing self-reflexivity through creating an untraditional third person omniscient narrator with a parodic intention.

The protagonist of the novel, Roland Michell, is a postgraduate searching for a famous Victorian poet named Randolph Henry Ash. Ash is based on Robert Browning. Michell discovers two mysterious letters written by Ash to an unnamed woman. As far as he knows, Ash was loyal to his wife. Therefore, he has a desire to know who she was and steals the letters from the London library. After making some research, he has a clue and wants to learn about another less famous Victorian poet Christabel LaMotte. She has some common features with nineteenth century writers such as Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti and Emily Bronte. LaMotte was regarded as a lesbian feminist and lived with a painter named Blanche Glover. Roland asks about LaMotte to Professor Leonora Stern and Dr. Maud Bailey who studies LaMotte and is also a descendant of her. Then, Roland and Maud decide to visit LaMotte’s graveyard and they meet George and Joana Bailey by chance. Roland and Maud get some information about LaMotte from George and Joana Bailey and they are allowed to visit LaMotte’s house where they find the letters revealing that the two poets met in Yorkshire in 1859.

Then, Roland and Maud, too, go to York and recognize that there are references of landscapes and folklore of York in the works of the two poets. When they are in York, Fergus suspects that they may find something important so he starts to search for them with Mortimer Cropper who is Ash's American biographer. We are informed with the diary of Sabina, who is the daughter of a cousin of LaMotte, that LaMotte goes to France after York and that she is pregnant. Beatrice Nest gives this diary to Leonara Stern who is a close friend of Maud. In addition, Beatrice Nest gives the diaries of Ellen Ash, who was the wife of Randolph Ash, to Maud. Maud learns from the diaries that Ellen already knows his husband's infidelity to her. As far as we know out of the documents that she commits suicide after LaMotte runs with Ash to York. When Maud and Randolph go to France they are followed by Leonora, Blackadder, who studies on Ash, and Cropper. After Maud and Randolph read Sabina's diary they learn about LaMotte's pregnancy; however, they cannot learn what happened to the child after birth. They think that the child may have died. Roland and Maud decide to open the grave of Ash because Ash was buried with a box in which Ellen Ash put some letters from Christabel. There is a blue envelope with a pale hair and a letter from Christabel to Ash in the box. However, Ash could not read it because Ellen did not give it to him. The characters learn from the letter that Ash's daughter, Maia Thomasine, did not die but was given to Christabel's sister. At the end of the novel, Maud learns that she is descendant of both Ash and LaMotte. Roland has three job interviews and he starts a relationship with Maud.

Although it is thought that everything is solved there is a *Postscript* at the end of the novel which informs us that Ash already knew about his daughter and met her and that the hair in the box belonged to her. Although the characters in the twentieth century think that Ash does not know anything about his daughter we are informed that they met. This is a quite ironic end, which makes the readers suspicious about the rest of the novel, too, because it falsifies what the historical fact claims. This is explained as "the most salient feature of postmodernist historical fiction, namely, its overt falsification of history, is regarded as a strategy for unmasking the fictional construction of the past. In other words, the blatant transgressions of historical facts are recuperated as a device for making a metafictional statement" (Wesseling 5). Similarly, Himmelfarb writes about the postmodernist view of history that "a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past" (Himmelfarb 72). In short, past can be obtained only in a textualized form; therefore, we can know only the things chosen to be told by the historians and cannot be sure whether stories are real or fiction made up for political or moral reasons.

Postscript can also be important in echoing the circularity of history as the novel does not have a chronological order in its narration of the events. That is, with the *Postscript*, we return to the beginning, that is, to search in a sense, and cannot have a definite end when the novel ends. This can be observed in the development of Maud and Roland relationship just like that of Ash and LaMotte. That is, there are similarities in terms of events taking place in Victorian age and twentieth century. For example, both the Victorian couple and twentieth century couple go to York. Both Randolph and Roland see the hair of their lovers. Both of the couples go to the Boggle Hole as they are attracted by the name. In addition, there are similarities in terms of characteristics of Maud and Christabel. Maud refuses Roland and Christabel refuses Ash at the beginning of their relationships. For instance, when Roland meets Maud the narrator says that "Roland meditated strategies of evasion of his own. He had vaguely imagined, before meeting her, that he might be able to show her Xeroxes of the purloined letters. Now, he knew he could not. Her voice lacked warmth" (Byatt 40). However, Roland and Maud

start a relationship when the novel ends. Christabel also refuses to write Ash at the beginning. For example, she writes in one of her letters to Ash,

It was a chosen way of life—in which, you must believe, I have been wondrously happy—and not alone in being so... I have chosen a Way—dear Friend—/ must hold to it. Think of me if you will as the Lady of Shalott—with a Narrower Wisdom—who chooses not the Gulp of outside Air and the chilly river-journey deathwards—but

who chooses to watch diligently the bright colours of her Web—to ply an industrious shuttle—to make—something—to close the Shutters and the Peephole too— You will say, you are no threat to That. You will argue—rationally. There are things we have not said to each other beyond the—One—you so starkly—Defined.

I know in my Intrinsic Self.—the Threat is there.

Be patient. Be generous. Forgive

Your friend

Christabel LaMotte. (Byatt 187)

Afterwards, we are told that they consummated a relationship and even had a baby. Thus, the narration of similar events taking place at different times, and of the characters having similar features in different periods blur the boundaries between past and present. The narration has a fluid-like characteristic. That is to say, it does not have clear-cut borders between time and space, and does not have a chronological order, either. This narrative discontinuity is one of the features of historiographic metafiction. For instance, in *Postscript*, it is written that:

There are things that happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been. Two people met, on a hot May day, and never later mentioned their meeting. This is how it was... "Tell your aunt," he said, "that you met a poet, who was looking for the Belle Dame Sans Merci, and who met you instead, and who sends her his compliments, and will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new..." And on the way home, she met her brothers, and there was a rough-and-tumble, and the lovely crown was broken, and she forgot the message, which was never delivered. (Byatt 59)

As indicated, what we know about the characters of Victorian time comes from the twentieth century scholars' interpretations of the letters, diaries, and poems or of other works of Ash, Christabel, Sabina and Ellen. However, the characters living in the twentieth century are limited with the information they have found in these documents. If the documents are telling lies intentionally, these characters are wrong in their interpretations about Victorian times and about the characters. In addition, even if the letters, diaries or other documents are telling the truth they are still not reliable as they have subjectivity in themselves. We take the information as interpreted by other characters, which makes the information we have even less reliable. The case can be taken as an exemplification of what Linda Hutcheon says about historiographic metafiction: "Historiographic metafiction acknowledges... the past's *textualized accessibility* to us today" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 114). In other words, past existed but we can only obtain it from its textualized version.

Textualizing something means to write it, which leads us to another important thing, that is, the function of the language. As Patricia Waugh states, "the simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and 'objective' world is no longer tenable" (Waugh 3). When something is textualized it becomes fictionalized; therefore, the boundary between history and fiction is problematized because both history and fiction are discourses. They have their own systems of giving sense to the past. That is to say, the events are shaped with the systems of history and fiction. They

do not have an inherent meaning in themselves. Thus, when we read a historiographic metafiction we have both a sense of fictionality and a sense of real at the same time. Hutcheon notes:

That border between past event and present praxis is where historiographic metafiction self-consciously locates itself. As we have seen at length, that past *was* real, but it *is* lost or at least displaced, only to be reinstated as the referent of language, the relic or trace of the real...Historiographic metafiction, while teasing us with the existence of the past as real, also suggests that there is no direct access to that real which would be unmediated by the structures of our various discourses about it. (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 146)

There are lots of examples in the novel which prove the validity of what Hutcheon states. For example, at the beginning of the novel, we learn that LaMotte was a lesbian feminist writer living with a painter named Blanche Glover. Thus, we do not think the possibility of whether she has a love affair with a man because of the texts written about on her. Nonetheless, the texts found recently by Roland and Maud refute all the truths about both Ash and Christabel, which is important in considering the novel as an example of historiographic metafiction because history, according to the postmodernist view of history, “rejects the idea of ‘History’ as a directly accessible, unitary past and substitutes for it the conception of ‘histories,’ an ongoing series of human constructions” (Cox and Reynolds 4). That is, there is a plurality of history with the new findings about the characters. There are lots of letters demonstrating the affair between LaMotte and Ash. In one of the letters between Ash and LaMotte, she writes:

Dear Sir,

.....

I am sad, sir, today—low and sad—sad that we went walking, yet sad too, that we are not walking still. And that is all I can write, for the Muse has forsaken me—as she may mockingly forsake all Women, who dally with Her—and,then—Love—

Your Christabel. (Byatt 98)

From the letter, it is understood that she believes that she should not be involved in this relationship because he is married and this is not an acceptable situation in Victorian time. However, she somehow starts a relationship with him. After seeing these letters, the twentieth century scholars feel that they find the truth and write the literary history again. Actually, this is one of the reasons why history is included in fiction; it subverts supposedly historical facts and rewrites them from a different perspective as a counterword to the existent interpretation. As a result of this, instead of having a historical unique truth we have alternative histories. Byatt uses the letters and other documents in the service of this aim.

It is shown that reaching a unique truth in history is impossible because “past can be known only from its texts, its traces—be they literary or historical” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 125). With every new finding by means of letters or other documents we have a new representation of history, in other words, new truths because of the fact that new documents make the old truths of history invalid. For instance, Mortimer, who is a biographer of Ash, thinks that he knows everything about Ash but he is shocked with the newly found documents, which falsify all the things he has claimed so far about Ash. It is interesting to know that these newly found documents also can be falsified in future if new documents that contradict the olds ones are found. Another question also arises about to what extent the biographies of the authors are reliable like other documents. Another example in this respect is the biography of Ellen. Maud asks that

“Why do you think she wrote the journal, Dr Nest? In order to have someone to talk to? As an examination of conscience? Out of a sense of duty? Why?”

“I think she wrote it to baffle. Yes. To baffle.”

They stared at each other. Maud said, “To baffle whom? His biographers?”

“Just to baffle.” (Byatt 220)

Then, they want to focus the omitted things. They are not sure about to what extent these letters and journals represent the historical reality anymore. Maud says that “maybe what you find baffling is a systematic omission” (Byatt 221). Hutcheon notes that “storytellers can certainly silence, exclude, and absent certain past events—and people—but it also suggests that historians have done the same: where are the women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century?” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 107). Hence, we can only have different histories of people, which is a good thing. Thanks to modern historiographic theory, we have a chance to look at different histories of people instead of accepting what is given to us as historical facts. For instance, Hutcheon writes in her essay:

If the discipline of history has lost its privileged status as the purveyor of truth, then so much the better, according to this kind of modern historiographic theory: the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing is a step toward intellectual self-awareness that is matched by metafiction's challenges to the presumed transparency of the language of realist texts” (Hutcheon, *Historiographic Metafiction* 8).

Apart from helping us to question the past, the italicized letters and the other documents have another function in the novel. Byatt employs the intertextuality with them. By employing intertextuality, she removes the monology and gives a new historical representation of history. For example, La Motte does not talk about herself and we see her firstly through the impressions Ash gets as follows:

She had been distant and closed away, a princess in a tower, and his imagination's work had been all to make her present, all of her, to his mind and senses, the quickness of her and the mystery, the whiteness of her, which was part of her extreme magnetism, and the green look of those piercing or occluded eyes. Her presence had been unimaginable, or more strictly, *only* to be imagined. Yet here she was, and he was engaged in observing the ways in which she resembled, or differed from, the woman he dreamed, or reached for in sleep, or would fight for. (Byatt 226)

Beside Ash's views about her, we get to know LaMotte through her letters and works in a deeper sense. As another example, we see Val through Roland's eyes as to be a breadwinner. He describes her as “one sat silently at home in old jeans and unevenly hanging long creepy shirts, splashed with murky black and purple flowers...This mournfully bright menial Val wore high heels and a black beret” (Byatt 14). We also hear the voice of Val about herself instead of only relying on what Roland has said about her. In addition, we know Blanche from the writings of LaMotte, the paintings of Blanche or other secondary sources until we have access to her journal. In her journal, she writes how happy she is with LaMotte by saying that “we played and sang together, and read aloud a little of the *Faerie Queene*. Our days weave together the simple pleasures of daily life, which we should never take for granted, and the higher pleasures of Art and Thought which we may now taste as we please, with none to forbid or criticize” (Byatt 45). In short, instead of relying on what each character says about one another or on a third person narrator, we can hear their voices by means of journals, letters, diaries, poems, etc. This, in turn, allows multivocality in the novel instead of monology.

Apart from letters, journals and other documents, epigraphs are used to employ intertextuality in the novel. Except for four chapters, the rest of the novel (twenty four chapters) starts with an epigraph, that is, a poem or a story with special reasons. For example, chapter five starts with an

excerpt from Ash's poem called *The Incarcerated Sorceress* which mentions a hidden treasure and, Maud and Roland find the letters written by Ash and LaMotte in this chapter. Chapter six starts with Ash's another poem called *Great Collector* which mentions a man who is obsessed with collecting antiquities. Then, Mortimer who collects everything related to Ash is introduced in this chapter. Chapter fourteen starts with *Ask to Embla* which is a love poem of Ash. It has a connection with Roland and Maud's discovering that Ash and LaMotte have been to York together. Chapter eighteen starts with LaMotte's poem about gloves. We hear the voice of Blanche Glover from her testament by reading of Maud at the first time in this chapter. That is, glove is used by both LaMotte and Ash as a metaphor and it is related to Blanche Glover somehow. There are things hidden about her. For example, we do not know exactly why and how she commits suicide. We suppose that she commits suicide because LaMotte has an affair with Ash. As indicated, Byatt turns the narration from Victorian to modern times using many other texts. Therefore, it can be claimed that the novel heavily relies on intertextuality.

Lastly, we can see the historiographic metafictionality of the novel with Byatt's using an omniscient third person narrator ironically. This third person narrator is different from the traditional ones who are employed especially in nineteenth century novels. For example, when Roland and Maud are in York Roland says that, "There's a place on the map called the Boggle Hole. It's a nice word—I wondered—perhaps we could take a day off from *them*, get out of their story, go and look at something for ourselves. There's no Boggle Hole in Cropper or the Ash Letters— Just not to be caught up in anything?" (Byatt 268). Roland and Maud do not know whether Ash and LaMotte have been there because they do not have any proof showing this. However, the narrator tells to the readers that Ash and LaMotte couple have been there because they like the word, Boggle Hole. Roland and Maud couple also visited Boggle Hole as they liked the word. The narrator tells us that "Ash remembered most, when it was over, when time had run out, a day they had spent in a place called the Boggle Hole, where they had gone because they liked the word" (Byatt 280). Waugh notes that "metafiction represents a response to a crisis within the novel- to a need for self-conscious parodic undermining in order to 'defamiliarize' fictional conventions that have become both automatized and inauthentic, and to release new and more authentic forms. Parody, as a literary strategy, deliberately sets itself up to break norms that have become conventionalized" (65).

In conclusion, *Possession: A Romance* has been argued as a historiographic metafictional novel both because it problematizes any clear-cut division between fact and fiction and because it questions the objectivity of historical representation by challenging assumed realities about two Victorian poets. The novel achieves these by creating a self-conscious construction in the novel rather than relying upon historiography as the only source to reach the truth about history. Thus, both in terms of content, that is, to give a new perspective on a period of time in history and on historical figures, and in terms of technique such as employing intertextuality, irony and metafiction, the novel can be considered as a good example of historiographic metafiction.

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