

“Doomed to a kind of double consciousness”: treacherous hospitality and the inversion of tradition in A.S. Byatt’s “Morpho Eugenia”

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ABSTRACT

A.S. Byatt’s “Morpho Eugenia” marks a significant moment in the consideration of (narrative) hospitality in neo-Victorian fiction. It expands on the concerns of neo-Victorianism by foregrounding the theme of hospitality in discourses that are central to the Victorian novel and to contemporary re-interpretations of Victorian culture. Among these are the trope of the visit to the family house in the English novel, in which guests are often then assimilated into the family, and the perils and threats to personal identity that come with the crossing of the threshold of hospitality. A third is the relationship with the ‘other’ in the un/conditional hospitality that is experienced by the protagonist. All of these sub-themes are contained in an epistemological dimension defined by science and religion, problematically interrelated at the time. This article thus considers the conceptual standpoint and the narrative strategies with which Byatt engages with the literary tradition of hospitality, from Homeric parallels through the nineteenth-century novel’s interest in self-identity, to the implications of the limits of knowledge and recognition of otherness. It also assesses the novel’s neo-Victorianism as a literary reimagining of the nineteenth-century world and examines its receptiveness to a post-structuralist questioning of traditional notions of hospitality.

KEYWORDS

A.S. Byatt; “Morpho Eugenia”; hospitality; hostility; intimacy; house in fiction

A.S. Byatt’s “Morpho Eugenia” (1992) appears to be a remarkably significant text in the consideration of (narrative) hospitality in neo-Victorian fiction in several respects. Published shortly after the seminal and ambitious *Possession*, it pursues and furthers the concerns and scopes of neo-Victorianism in the phase of its definitive affirmation, the early 1990s. It does so by foregrounding the theme of hospitality as connoted by discourses and tropes which are central to the Victorian novel and which are thereby persuasively introduced in the imagination of contemporary revisiting and re-interpretation of Victorian literary culture. Foremost among these is the trope of visitation – or, rather, what Emily Ridge calls “the tradition of visitation in the English novel as centred on the longstanding model and metaphor of the fictional house” (2016, 486) which includes several “examples of vulnerable guest figures” in Victorian fiction (Ridge 2016, 485), who are often assimilated in the family. Other important tropes/motives that

Byatt engages with are the perils and threats to personal identity that come with the crossing of the threshold of hospitality; the question of the relationship with the other in un/conditional hospitality experienced by the protagonist, and, finally, the placing of this theme in an epistemological dimension, framed in the discourses of science and religion, which were joined in a “dramatic interplay at that period” (Sturrock 2002–2003, 97).

My intent is to consider the narrative strategies and conceptual standpoint with which Byatt engages with the literary tradition of hospitality. This intertextual dialogue embraces the Homeric parallel, the nineteenth-century novel’s interest in self-identity and sympathy, as well as the implications of the limits of knowledge and recognition of otherness. In this analysis, I will try to assess whether the novella’s neo-Victorian self-consciousness as a literary reimagining of the nineteenth-century world is receptive to the post-structuralist ethics’ “break with both the sceptical *and* the idealised traditions of hospitality” (Hollander 2013, 16), which is so crucial to the present critical investigation of hospitality, while creatively entertaining the Derridean idea of absolute hospitality as an aporia.

Hospitality as a structuring theme: the engagement with literary tradition

“Morpho Eugenia” is to a large degree narratively structured around the experience of hospitality. The protagonist, a young naturalist and anthropologist, William Adamson, has survived a shipwreck on his way to England while returning from an expedition to the Amazon. Disinherited by his father on account of his abandoning his faith, Adamson is welcomed to Bredely Hall by the Reverend Sir Harald Alabaster, who offers to have him assist in his project of writing a book to prove the existence of a divine creator. During his stay, he falls in love with Alabaster’s beautiful daughter Eugenia, whom he marries and who bears him five children. Near the end of the story, William discovers Eugenia’s incestuous relationship with her half-brother, the actual father of the children. He leaves her, embarking on a new expedition to South America with the children’s young teacher, the intelligent and determined Matty Crompton, who, he realises, is his true soulmate.

The structuring theme of hospitality appears all the more significant in light of its rich intertextual allusions to the Western and in particular the English literary imagination. The text’s engagement with the English canon is signposted by quotations from the “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner,” (such as “He prayeth well, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast”), which William thinks of appending to his book on ant society, THE SWARMING CITY. Another is from Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” when Matty addresses William with “O what can ail thee knight-at-arms,/Alone and palely loitering” (ME 174), after he has discovered his wife’s incestuous activities. “La Belle Dame,” itself a poem about the encounter with alterity through hospitality, is also evoked in relation to Maud in the conclusion of *Possession*, and is clearly a powerful intertext, which evokes the tropes of metamorphosis, anthropomorphism, and alterity. The references to Coleridge’s and Keats’s poems (in which, respectively, the mariner kills the albatross, a symbol of innocence who guards the navigation and the knight is undone by the belle dame after accepting her hospitality and held in thrall by her in her grotto), foreground the idea of violation, captivity, and what James Heffernan calls “the sanctity and vulnerability of the spirit of place,” as a central figure in the imaginary of hospitality at large (2014, 169). They also aptly connect the social, the domestic, and the animal realms by way of the hermeneutic figure of analogy and transformation that structures the novella. In

"Morpho Eugenia," Byatt renews her mastery of pastiche and intertextuality, so that the whole narrative is interspersed with references and quotes ranging from Feuerbach to Tennyson, Darwin, and Browning. The most significant allusions, however, are those to the *Odyssey*, both in the master plot and in the embedded pastiche of Matty Crompton's fairy tale "Things are Not What They Seem." Adamson's arrival at Bredely Hall casts him in the role of the castaway hero, who, Odysseus-like, is metaphorically washed ashore after his perilous journey at sea, and is "almost cadaverous" (ME 4). He is then immediately plunged into the social event of a ball, which, as a rite of hospitality also belongs to rituals of mating. It is on this occasion that he is first overcome by his desire for Eugenia, and thinks "I shall die if I cannot have her" (ME 15).

As to the literary convention of representing the male hero as guest, Adamson also figures as the shipwrecked hero, who, coming from a foreign land, is shrouded in mystery as well as human piety. In Lady Alabaster's words, he is "possessed of immense resources of strength and courage" (ME 5), qualities that evoke the archetype of Robinson Crusoe, amongst others, and which will enable him to overcome his unexpected ordeal and start anew. Eugenia herself tells him that he has "courage, intelligence and kindness" and that "all families stand in need of these qualities if they are to survive" (ME 65). Adamson is thus the chosen male specimen for the mating strategy pursued by the Alabasters, and his role is clearly framed in the evolutionary discourse of the novella. This initial characterisation of the protagonist as an adventurous survivor has implications for another important sub-theme in the novella, that domestication of heroism as a result of social assimilation, which, according to Heffernan, "lays the groundwork for the representation of hospitality in nineteenth-century literature" (2014, 208). However, this assimilation is ultimately refused by the protagonist, as he does not acquiesce to the treachery of his wife's incestuous relationship. Embarking on another naturalistic expedition, he pursues his heroic vocation, now scientific and existential, thanks to his elective affinity with Matty Crompton, thus reversing the assimilating pattern, which is also central to the ideology of the nineteenth-century novel.

The domestication of heroism, moreover, is also inscribed in another aspect of the narrative which combines the main plot to the narrative *mise en abyme*: Adamson is offered the kind of hospitality Heffernan calls "seductive" (2014, 22, *passim*), which is traditionally ascribed to supernatural women such as Circe and Calypso. These figures are directly alluded to in Matty Crompton's pastiche fairy tale. In a certain way, Adamson's case also indirectly recalls Odysseus' offer of benevolence from Alcinous, King of the Phaiakians, who offers him a house and wealth in exchange for his marrying his daughter. In Matty's fairy tale, the allusion to Greek mythology becomes overt when two creatures named Elpenor and Vinula appear to Seth, and in the benevolent character of Mistress Muffet. This use of names recalls not only the homonymy of the former with the Greek sailor in the Circe myth, Elpenor, but also the ancestral bond of the fairy with Circe, who is said to be an ancestor of Mistress Cottitoe Pan Demos. Still, other names bear reference to the Greek mythological figures of Persephone and Proserpine, and to the myth of Psyche, thus recalling the complex subtext of mythological intertextuality and metaliterariness that is so central to *Possession*. Clearly, the embedded fairytale foregrounds the question of hospitality as related to metamorphosis, acceptance, and gender, and projects a metafictional and metacritical dimension within the narrative, to which the reader is alerted by Matty's fear that it might contain "too much message" (ME 141). This dimension both invites and resists interpretation, as Alfer and Byatt

(2011, 461), and fits the interplay of allegory and metaphor and the cultural critique that characterise this complex narrative.

“Hostipitality” and the inversion of tradition

“Morpho Eugenia” dramatises the “perils of intimacy” intrinsic to hospitality (Heffernan 1 and passim), and subtly explores that “troubling analogy” between hospitality and hostility. Theorised as “Hostipitality” by Derrida (2000), who drew on Emil Benveniste’s research on the hospes/hostis proximity and the ensuing contiguity and ambivalence of the linguistic construction of the term ‘hospitality’ in the main European languages, this is an essential aspect of the semantics of hospitality, etymologically as much as philosophically. Foremost among these perils is the figure of the stranger as representative of an erotic threat to the stability and harmony of the family and the household, and as central to the adultery plot. However, the novella reverses this trope and makes the visitor himself the recipient of violence, treachery, and adultery. William Adamson is not the stranger who brings emotional and erotic mayhem to the house and disrupts its domestic and social order. Rather, he becomes the object of a progressive assimilation, which would entail his final dispossession. This reversed perspective and reworking of the traditional trope is in keeping with neo-Victorian literary and cultural politics and is woven into the numerous cultural discourses that the text includes, such as the Darwinian vision of humankind as driven by biological forces. Adamson’s admission to the Alabaster family is, in effect, defined as conditional from the start, despite the pathos and piety inspired by his initial predicament. As he tells Eugenia, “I feel privileged to be allowed to be a temporary part of your happy family” (ME 9). The term “temporary” marks not only his social insecurity and temporally limited inclusion in the house, but also a form of reverence to the Alabasters’ happiness which Eugenia herself ironically proclaims. At the same time, the fairy tale subtext which runs throughout the novella is also expressed by Adamson’s perception of himself as “a fairytale prince trapped by invisible gates and silken bonds in an enchanted castle” (ME 21).

“Morpho Eugenia” also develops the theme of hospitality in relation to the protagonist’s knowledge and freedom, positing it in the context of the novella’s epistemological framework. This comprises both that “conflict of ideas triggered by Darwin’s theory,” which “is often treated as a dual confrontation” between two characters who embody creationism and evolutionism (Letissier 2010, 79), and the Levinasian and Derridean idea of hospitality as a recognition of otherness that is associated with the limits of knowledge and resistance to mastery. While Harald Alabaster is essentially a collector and an ontologist, who seeks knowledge through faith in an all-knowing Designer, Adamson remains open to alterity and finds ultimate freedom in the loss of his supposed domestic bliss and through his allegiance to a character who embodies otherness, namely, the young, ineffable, and dark-haired and complexioned Matty Crompton. The semantic importance of collecting in the novella relates to the period’s epistemological anxieties and the attending taxonomic impulses to control, possess, and hold captivity. All of these elements enter into the dynamics of hospitality, but are antithetical to the idea of unconditional hospitality to and openness in the encounter with the other. As a man of faith and a collector of *naturalia*, Sir Alabaster is presented as practising the laws of hospitality while behaving as alien to unconditional hospitality. Overall, then, in “Morpho-Eugenia,” Byatt broadens the scope of the domestic romance by encompassing it in contemporary scientific and religious debates. More

specifically, as Georges Letissier remarks, in “Morpho Eugenia” and in Swift’s *Ever After* “the clash of ideas between the creationist and the evolutionist is brought within the family sphere” (2010, 84). Domesticity is in fact superseded in the dénouement both in terms of social conventions and spatial negotiations, as William and his ‘other,’ Matty Crompton, leave for a new scientific expedition to the Americas in quest of fulfilment.

Furthermore, Byatt not only treats the mid-Victorian religious debate as one of the main epistemological drives in the novella, but also unravels it by treating the religious implications of hospitality. The conventional identification of the guest with a manifestation of God in ancient culture is somehow complicated by the fact that it is the host who is in touch with the divine, as he is an ordained reverend. Moreover, this encounter with the guest as emissary of god strikes a prosaic note when Harald Alabaster, as *potis*, the family patriarch, accepts and welcomes William, offering him his daughter’s hand and financial security in exchange for his intellectual assistance. Sir Harald’s identity as a man of the Church qualifies his role as a host with a spiritual and religious dimension that is troubled by deep anxieties. He is pictured as a Victorian sage tormented by doubt in his attempt to combine faith with the unsettling impact of Darwinism. Moreover, while he is seemingly a god-like figure (“At times he had the look of God the father himself” [ME 27]), his authority proves ineffectual in controlling the sexual and moral codes of his family. He is perceived by William himself as a “*deus absconditus*,” who is partly shadowed by the bustling, and then shady, activities of the people of Bredely Hall, his semi-Gothic mansion: “Harald Alabaster was master, but he was, as far as the whirring of domestic clocks and wheels went, a *deus absconditus*, who set all in motion, and might at pinch stop it, but had little to do with its use of energy” (ME 88). The traditional trope of the guest as an emissary of the divine is thus inverted and relocated in a narrative scenario that is unsettled by the impact of Darwin’s theories. As such, the trope of the guest as god turned into a guest ‘retributed’ for his services testifies to the idea that hospitality cannot be unconditional in Derrida’s sense, since it is bound by the fear of divine punishment or desire for a reward. Adamson, in fact, does not ask for help and shelter, but, once he accepts hospitality at Bredely Hall, he knows that Sir Harald will ask him for something in exchange for this gift. As a man who has lost his faith, Adamson is thus divested of the divine aura of the ancient guest and is confronted by a semi-divine host who, in his turn, is progressively weakened and unable to rule an unruly family.

The “double vision” social inequality and conditional hospitality

When he arrives at Bredely Hall, Adamson comes from another world where he has experienced both unconditional hospitality, its dangers and rewards, and has discovered free and unrestrained sexuality. This exposure to the otherness of a different civilisation awakens a “double vision, of things seen and done otherwise, in another world” (ME 7). This marks him as ‘other’ in the endogamic world of Bredely Hall, the pervasive beauty of which he can hardly see, troubled as he is by the filter of a memory fed by the luxuriant force of the Amazonian nature (ME 7): “Understanding life in Bredely Hall was not easy. William found himself at once detached anthropologist and fairytale prince” (ME 25). As an explorer, an anthropologist and the subject/object of desire, William is cast in the role of someone who is bound to ‘arrive’ as a displaced subject. The duality of the protagonist’s role strengthens the subtheme of the “double vision” of things of which he is aware. This vision orientates the reader in the novella’s reading of the cultural discourses with which it engages. Matty, too, is

aware of the vastness of knowledge that is concealed to those who live in Bredely Hall; she tells William "We should not live in ignorance of the rest of the world" (ME 94).

However, the protagonist's hybridity – William is "doomed to a kind of double consciousness," as "everything he experienced brought up its contrary image from out there" [ME 28]) – and his awareness of other cultures have a counterpart in his unstable social position. This instability renders the hospitality he receives a necessary condition to his remaining integrated in a gentlemanly environment without having to downgrade his status altogether. His relationship with Harald Alabaster, thus, inevitably implies a form of dependency and subalternity, of which the young man seems to be aware: "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" (ME 51). It is precisely this infra-familial position, this "kind of between-world" which, in the narrative, functions as a sort of fertile humus where the inherent ambivalence of hospitality thrives. It is this 'narrative hospitality' that provides the ethical orientation of the text. Rachel Hollander considers this concept as determined by an "emphasis on uncertainty," which "explores a relation to otherness that exchanges the ideals of understanding and sympathy for the risks and potential transformation of encountering the other *as* absolutely other" (2013, 63). This focus on social uncertainty, or "unequal" "stations" (ME 13), also allows for a reversal of the conventional marriage plot in the first part of the novella. The plot revisits the gender balance of the Victorian novel, where the subject of limited means who achieves social integration and personal fulfilment through marriage is generally a young woman.

On the other hand, the protagonist impersonates an all-round condition of hospitality. He has been the recipient of unconditional hospitality in his past explorations in the Amazon. There, he came into contact with radical otherness, and was both chased as an enemy by local people, and welcomed by them, including coming into sexual contact with women. Adamson is, therefore, already a bearer of the mark of hospitality in the Kantian sense when he crosses the threshold of Alabaster's mansion. He is an Englishman 'othered' by his voyages to faraway countries, who is bound to undergo the trials of hospitality in the course of his progress as a voluntary outcast, disowned by his father on account of his proclaimed atheism. Overtly allegorical, his telling name Adamson announces his self-begotten identity as the son of Adam, the first man, a detail which recalls Derrida's distinction between the foreigner and the absolute other, as having no name or family name, as "the anonymous other." Derrida and Anne Dufourmentelle locate the subtle, sometimes "ungraspable" difference between the foreigner and the absolute other in the latter's lack of a name or a family name (2000, 25). Moreover, the loss of faith and the rejection of the father, with the ensuing social downgrading, is essential to Adamson's definition as guest-hero figure, as a man capable of renewal, who will begin anew at the end of the narrative. Significantly, the implicit metaphor he uses to refer to the process is that of Christening ("I felt cleansed when I rejected that God, Sir, I felt free" [ME 41]). This marks a kind of rebirth, which forces him to open up to the unknown and to a different attitude in the encounter with the 'other' in his experiences as an explorer. The relinquishment of faith entails the loss of financial security and social prestige, which turn him into a man in need of the support of hospitality in order to pursue his intellectual commitment. The loss of contingent social freedom thus leads to a kind of unconditional intellectual liberty, complemented also by the moral freedom Adamson achieves after reacting to the incestuous relationship between his wife and her step-brother, both of which he ultimately decides to use as a form of liberation from his condition of captivity:

I find that - my most powerful feeling - is that I am free, I ought to feel - shocked or vengeful, or - or humiliated - and from time to time, I do feel all those things - but mostly, I feel - I can go now, I can leave this house, I can return to my true work [...].(ME 177)

The unequal social status of the protagonists thus accounts for the position Adamson takes as a host at Bredely Hall. “[D]oomed to a kind of double consciousness” (ME 24) bred by his experience in the Amazon, Adamson’s changed cultural and moral awareness signals both what was bound to become a broadened and complicated construction of hospitality in the context of European and British expansionism over the course of the nineteenth century, as well as the challenge to that idealisation of hospitality bred by the “Victorian ethics of sympathy, in which others are presumed to be essentially similar to oneself” (Hollander 2013, 16). Byatt draws here from the more complicated sense of hospitality and questioning of the marriage plot that troubles the late Victorian novel, with an implication of the element of secrecy and sexual deviance derived from sensation fiction.

“Morpho Eugenia” thus confutes the idealised vision of hospitality as benign in dramatising William’s progressive awakening to the dark secrets harboured within the Alabasters’ comfortable and luxurious “nest,” when he discovers the incestuous relationship between his ethereal enigmatic wife and her despicable half-brother Edgar. Foreshadowed by Edgar’s violent attack against William before the marriage, his is ultimately a failed attempt at assimilation through hospitality: William’s resistance and final refusal to comply with the family’s endogamic, ‘sensational’ secret challenge the principle whereby hospitality aims to domesticate the stranger. These acts also confirm the late Victorian novels’ “disturbance of the marriage plot and disruption of the domestic sphere” (Hollander 2013, 5–6), which is so often triggered by the act of hospitality. While this disruption in the late Victorian fiction, however, is generally caused by an act of adultery, which coincides with the arrival of the stranger in the house, Byatt’s novella clearly thrives on the inversion of this pattern.

Ultimately, Byatt foregrounds hospitality as a condition necessary for the existential transformation that is central to the master plot as well as to the embedded pastiche fairy tale, in both the entomological and the imaginary sense. The title of this fairy tale about captivity and liberation, “Things are not what they seem,” foregrounds the rhetorical figure of analogy “as a mode of enquiry” (Sturrock 2002–2003), a form of intellectual probing, and highlights the construction of the novella as both allegorical and metaphorical. It is precisely the fairy tale, in fact, which provides the only case of unconditional hospitality, as reflected in the Fairy Cottitoe Pan Demos’ name and words: “I am for all the people. I keep open house for everyone who comes” (ME 140). The bond between hospitality and the paradigm of transformation is also pervasive in the representation of the home as an un-homely space. The inhospitable home, in turn, problematises the idea of sympathy and foregrounds the potential treacherousness of intimacy.

The female hostesses and Bredely Hall: the treacherous intimacy of the mating space

The potential of threat, tension and disruptiveness harboured in the household is very subtly deployed in Byatt’s novella, as she creates an effective trope of the family residence as a place of treacherous intimacy. The treatment of the domestic space as invalidating the dynamics of hospitality thus negatively bonds the two elements in a rather

oxymoronic way, recalling how the relation between hosts and guests becomes familiar in the dimension of intimacy but also in its potential for disloyalty. Hence hospitality responds to the identification as both a prelude to mating, a threat to marriage and to the break-up of marriage, as identified by Heffernan in nineteenth-century authors such as Hardy and James (2014, 213). The idea of betrayal in this case relates to the text's exploration of gender politics, which in its turn underscores the representation of domesticity. These politics are significantly complicated by the theme of incest. Interestingly, with the exception of Sir Harald, the family is strongly gendered as female. This is both in relation to the structuring analogy with the entomological realm, and also in connection to the supposedly feminine passivity in the central theme of deviant incestuous sexuality. The narrative mentions how after Edgar's rape of the little servant Amy, "the family indoors had been even more sedentary and female than in the summer" (ME 168), as if the state of acquiescence had a distinctly feminine nature. The family as a provider of hospitality is depicted as passive rather than active in the text, and the house itself could be analysed as a gendered space in relation to this.

Bredely Hall, the allegorically named mansion where a hierarchical apparatus of people maintains order, activity, and apparent harmony, is thus presented as a space in which intimacy is unsafe, disturbing, and even perilous. It is a fake-Gothic house, "built like a medieval manor house, but with new money" (ME 25) and purchased with the money of the women of the family, mainly coming from the spoils of the empire. Both the female lineage and the imperialist national identity are – through money – implicated in the 'true' nature of the house as a space where passivity and sensuality allow for the perversion of the mating impulse. Significantly, in the analogical parallel with the insect world, Bredely Hall is an ant-heap, and its inhabitants are the subjects, and Eugenia a possible ant-Queen (Cheira 2017, 133). This naturalistic analogy underscores both the complex treatment of female sexuality and the representation of the household as an uncanny space. The privileged sanctuary where Adamson finds hospitality appears at the height of his romantic feelings to be an enchanted chamber: "this glittering palace where his two worlds met" [ME 59]). It is revealed to be a functional space where 'selection' occurs for mating purposes. As a typical Victorian hybrid, a compound of medievalism, gothic and the entrepreneurial grandeur, Bredely Hall recalls the ambiguities of the great house as a cultural signifier and literary myth in British literature. The social and cultural practices of hospitality and patronage, which were fundamental components of the great house tradition, however, are progressively distorted in the novella, as the house becomes a space of captivity and betrayal. Bearing the traits of a microcosm and a sheltered place, in its richness and its profusion of contiguities between the human and the natural worlds, Bredely Hall appears (spuriously) Edenic, while, as observed by Heidi Hansson, the very name of Adam seems to evoke the Fall (1999, 463–4). With a host of bustling servants who keep it functioning, Bredely Hall's hierarchical organisation ranks fittingly in the gallery of domestic interiors which, in the history of nineteenth-century British literature, stage the progressive decline of the 'adventurous' representation of the perils of hospitality, while dramatising the more disturbing quality of the interaction and tensions between hosts and guests, and their complex power struggles.

Bredely Hall thus establishes the home as a space that, in Mc Nulty's words, "can also become unhomely, *unheimlich*, estranged by the introduction of something foreign that threatens to dispossess it of its self-identity; whence the continuum between hospitality and hostility" (2007, xiv). In her sophisticated revision of the traditional and Victorian

visitation trope, Byatt renders the Alabasters' endogamic self-identity the *Unheimlich* of the story, and Adamson the visitor/guest who exposes the inherent hostility of the seeming hospitality in a perilous domestic space of seclusion and elusive harmony. Moreover, the representation of the domestic realm in the novella, and of the hostess trope, is also tightly connected to the treatment of the incest theme. In "Morpho Eugenia," incest is not only central to Byatt's neo-Victorian engagement with the sexual politics of Victorian culture, particularly with evolution and the anxiety over human nature with regards to morality and sexuality (Cheira 2017, 128). It is also topical to the exploration of what Dufourmantelle calls the "unresolved tension between unconditional hospitality and the conditions imposed upon the act of hospitality," which formed the objects of Derrida's reflection (2013, 12). Dufourmantelle rightly posits the taboo incest as directly linked to an openness to unconditional hospitality, in so far as it entails the lack of future of an endogamic society. The danger of hospitality is thus also fostering the possibility of perpetuating the species:

The acceptance of the other to the point of the dissolution of self-enclosed tribes or groups - of which the hospitality to a stranger is an integral part - is in that sense the condition of the survival of all human societies. (2013, 14)

The threat of incest to the preservation of self-identity is, in fact, made explicit by William's reply to Edgar: "'Breeders know,' said William curtly, 'that even first-cousin marriages produce inherited defects – increase the likelihood'" (ME 181). The incestuous relationship between Edgar and Eugenia is thus a crucial deviance in the dynamics of hospitality of the narrative, and a highly problematic one. Eugenia admits that the illicit sexual relationship with Edgar began as a game and went on ever since she was very little (ME 172). The dysfunctionality of William and Eugenia's marriage and parental function is further complicated by the fact that, interestingly, William's emotional distance from his children does not seem to trouble him. Yet, he displays a strong reaction only when he learns that his newborn son is to be named Edgar, as Eugenia denies the relevance of the Adamson family to the lineage of the Alabasters: "We are your family, and I think you must own we have been good to you" (ME 83). Evidently, Eugenia's words assert the family's will to assimilate William as the guest who was invited to become a member of the family in order to mate and breed, while at the same time it defends the endogamic lineage. The limitation of hospitality is here an example of what Derrida calls the "perversion and pervertibility" of the law of hospitality (2000, 53). This is not a xenophobic act but a means to preserve the community against the stranger. Byatt's exploration of the deviance of incest and adultery in the novella demonstrates the complexity of the neo-Victorian reconsideration of Victorian sexualities in relation to the transactions between the public and the private sphere. It also re-interprets the incest taboo, staging it at a time when the legal and institutional prohibitions against incest were becoming codified (Llewellyn 2010, 151), and "explor[ing] its moral confines" within the specific framework of psychiatric and anthropological discourses (Cheira 2017, 148). Eugenia's incestuous behaviour has thus been seen as an "act of rebellion" against the "constrictions of her society" (Hansson 1999, 458), and needs to be considered in relation to the context of Byatt's complex "aesthetic and ethical reconsideration of the nature of families within the clash of tradition and modernity, fantasy and reality" (Llewellyn 2010, 151). The theme of incest thus proves to be consonant with Byatt's neo-Victorian 'narrative hospitality' as a textualization of the ambivalence of hospitality in domestic and familial contexts.

To complete the reflection on the connection between deviant sexuality and the violation of hospitality, the female figures of hospitality in the novella also need to be considered. Initially, they appear to be cast in secondary roles, thus confirming the religious connotations of Sir Alabaster as *hostis*, lord of the house and *deus absconditus*, since “[i]n religious traditions hospitality is always male, [and] women are rarely hostesses in their own right” (McNulty 2007, XXVi). This is evident in Lady Alabaster’s diminished part. She is constantly ailing, suffering from headaches and the effects of obesity, and is an invalid before she dies after discovering her daughter’s incest. Yet, Adamson perceives her secret, indirect agency: “William felt that this immobile, vacantly amiable presence was a source of power in the household.” (ME 31). On the other hand, Eugenia’s role as a hostess is central but more ambivalent. She clearly appears to be both a passive and a manipulative character, both a deviant and a subversive woman who eventually discloses her complexity to William when she tells him “I do not think you know what kind of woman I am” (ME 181). Her role as hostess is doubly bound to the representation of her sexuality, which, in a way, displaces the contemporary conventional sexualisation of the Victorians by subverting both Victorian codes and our projections of the present on them.

Being both passive and transgressive, divergent and acquiescent, Eugenia’s ambivalent sexuality pairs up with her untrustworthiness as a hostess, and challenges not only Victorian conventional mores, but, more interestingly, the often clichéd ‘sensational’ sexualisation of the Victorians practised by most contemporary fiction, TV and cinema. It achieves this effect by furthering the ultimately disturbing complexity of a sexuality which is bounded by the moral and ideological struggles of the time. When, at the beginning, Eugenia learns that Adamson will stay at Bredely Hall, she comments: “Good. Then I shall be able to command him, as he suggests” (ME 25). She also reveals that she made sure not to know who the father of her children is, thus revealing her consciously deviant agenda. As a hostess, Eugenia proclaims her rootedness in the house and happiness in being part of the family: “I suppose it must seem a very *bounded* existence to you, with your experience of the world. But my roots go so deep . . .” (ME 34, original emphasis). By italicising the word *bounded*, Byatt evokes the theme of female seclusion that runs through British novels about women written by women, from Jane Austen to the Brontë sisters, but adds to it Eugenia’s ambivalence as “both victim and perpetrator, sexploited and sexploiter” (Cheira 2017, 128). This ambivalence recalls a vision of the hostess as associated with the question of alterity. According to Tracy McNulty:

the feminine does not just model an alternate approach to hospitality, one that is more open to and inviting of the other. Instead, it marks the insistence of the Other *within* the self. [. . .] the feminine has long embodied the alterity internal to the *chez soi* of identity, the insistence of the Other within and against the autonomy of the self. (2007, xxvi-xxvii)

In this light, despite the traditional association between the feminine and acceptance and nurturing, the hostess is also represented as potentially destructive, cunning and dissimulating, as she cannot be fathomed in her ultimate aims. As argued by McNulty, “If Western literature is full of tragic hosts, it is equally replete with nefarious or conniving hostesses” (2007, xvii).

Finally, Eugenia’s untrustworthiness as a hostess is also revealed by her inability to envision unconditional love as a consequence of unconditional hospitality, or, rather, the bond between these experiences. This is made apparent when William announces to her his decision to leave her and embark on an expedition to explore the further reaches of the Rio Negro, with no intention to return. Her reply is only that he should expect

a financial support from her. For Eugenia, the treachery of hospitality, like the betrayal of love, can be reckoned with through a transaction of sorts. Already a very complex neo-Victorian sexualised woman, Eugenia is essentially indifferent to William's abandonment of her, and hence to his relinquishment of his marital role and duties. She thereby subverts the Victorian model of the loyal wife, who, Jane Eyre-like, would never resign herself to abandonment by the beloved. Clearly, she has never experienced love for her husband, as in the end she is ready to "resume her self-nurture and self-communion" (ME 181–2). This attitude seems to stave off any residual sympathy for her on Adamson's part. It also triggers his refusal to recognise the nature of endogamic and incestuous desire, thus definitively ending his failed assimilation by the family.

Conclusion

Byatt's treatment of hospitality in "Morpho Eugenia" subtly responds to neo-Victorianism as a cultural project that is "self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re) discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 4). The novella encompasses the ethical and intellectual engagements of neo-Victorianism in a revisioning of hospitality that proves to be quite thought-provoking. This is accomplished in accordance to contemporary philosophy's probing of the aporetic nature of hospitality, and the duty to both integrate and respect the foreigner who is hosted. The narrative, in fact, dramatises how the 'ethics of hospitality' is in conflict with those "'laws of hospitality' that have for so long dominated the mores of Western civilization" (McNulty 2007, xiv). It does so by exploring some of the defining literary tropes of hospitality, which entail the violation of social, familial, ethical and sexual rules. By staging the disruption of the domestic sphere through the reversal of the marriage plot in a story set in 1862, Byatt also projects some of the anxieties of the following decades on this plot. In doing so, she articulates her neo-Victorian standpoint in a metacritical perspective, which embraces the whole nineteenth century. The mid-Victorian setting thus becomes a stage for a long-haul reimagining of the perils of intimacy that would haunt, for example, the pivotal trope of the great house and the exploration of the deviances attached to the family plot inaugurated by the sensation novel and widely exploited by Edwardian and great house fiction.

The theme of hospitality is valorised by Byatt through the presentation of its essential ambivalence. The protagonist of "Morpho Eugenia" straddles two worlds in his experience of hospitality as an individual who does not infringe on its laws, but is betrayed by the same actors who have hosted him. Yet he retains a disruptive power to his hosts as a stranger whose admission into the intimacy of the master's home alters it irreparably (McNulty 2007, xiv). Furthermore, by creating a hostess who is both victim and passive manipulator, and who ranks among the "nefarious or conniving hostesses" (XIV) of Western literature, Byatt creates a nuanced representation of the centrality of hospitality to the neo-/Victorian mind. Paradoxically, hospitality is almost represented in the terms of a metaphor of neo-Victorianism itself: as an exploration of the boundaries of empathy, fascination and openness but also of distance and distrust on the basis of which the late twentieth century established a new engagement with Victorianism. Hospitality is thus central to neo-Victorianism, in so far as it reflects the essential ambivalence in the Victorians' representations of the 'other,' which they attempt to both domesticate *and* estrange. Moreover, hospitality is posited as a condition for the transformation of the master plot as well as the embedded fairy tale,

a pastiche story of captivity and liberation. The novella's sophisticated dialogue with tradition, as well as its allusions to Victorian epistemological and religious contexts and the critique of gender and sexuality politics, offer an innovative perspective on hospitality as a core theme in neo-Victorian literature. Through its (meta)literary and metafictional accomplishment and its intellectual and ethical probing, "Morpho Eugenia" constitutes a neo-Victorian model for an idea of 'narrative hospitality' which creatively and ingeniously blends western literary tradition and contemporary scepticism.

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