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Research Article

Medusa and Matisse: Myth and Art in A.S. Byatt's "Medusa's Ankles"

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ABSTRACT

In "Medusa's Ankles", English novelist and writer A.S. Byatt syncretizes a marginal female mythical figure, Medusa from Greek mythology, with a modern work of art by the French artist Henri Matisse, *Pink Nude* (1935). In the story, the protagonist Susannah's visit to a hairdresser upon seeing an image of that painting culminates in an act of smashing the salon mirror. Such Medusean rage becomes symbolic as it represents a disengagement from dominant ideologies and stereotypical notions concerning a woman's body, gender and sexuality. Extremely conscious of her aging body, classics professor Susannah interiorizes the cultural demand that women be young and beautiful; hence the fragments of the mirror reflecting distorted images point to the whole concept of ill or misrepresented women in society. Employing myth and art as key intertextual elements, Byatt presents confounding models to interpret Susannah's struggle for identity offering innovative perspectives on body/mind dilemma and mirror/gaze argument. While the mythopoeia of Medusa, generally associated with fear and rage, could also connote creative energy and empowerment, the unusual and unattractive depiction of a female body represented by Matisse's *Pink Nude* could offer a novel way of exploring the representation of women against sexually charged images in a society defined by certain assumptions.

Keywords: Medusa, Matisse, myth, art, Byatt

In *The Matisse Stories (*1993) A.S. Byatt preludes each story with a Henri Matisse painting, yet the first story of the book, "Medusa's Ankles" also conflates mythological references diversifying the invocations of Medusa in a narrative interlaced with the verbal representation of a modern work of art by Henri Matisse. Byatt's cruxes of reference are *Pink Nude* and Medusa, as indicated in the title, and she constructs her story around the protagonist Susannah's struggle with aging and fading beauty. Through Susannah, the essential need to re-examine the mythopoeia of Medusa, which is encoded in culture as a symbol of female anger and fear, elicits reconsideration of what is perceived as monstrosity to be a force of insurgence. Identification with *Pink Nude*, which is very representational of Matisse's art of simplified linear drawings of human forms, renders an intuitively voluptuous, monumental, anomalous figure despite detachment from classical beauty norms.

The juxtaposition of verbal with visual modes occupies a privileged place in Byatt's writing. From the focus on paintings and portraits in *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Frederica Quartet*, to her non-fictional works such as *Passions of the Mind* and *Portraits in Fiction*, Byatt "has contemplated issues like the 'real', perception, language and transformation into shapes, colors and into the verbal equivalents" (Uçar, 2020, p. 187). Accordingly, in "Medusa's Ankles" Byatt's fondness of using visually rich language and her fascination with words and images earns an ekphrastic aspect. Ekphrasis, "*verbal representation of visual representation*" (Heffernan, 1993, p. 3), is about perceiving, visualizing and conveying and such a process provides a territory of investigation where insights into how artists paint and writers write become amplified and potentially accessible. In a similar way, Matisse's visual experiments on the canvas find verbal equivalence in Byatt's narrative and the primary use of Matisse emphasizes Byatt's strategy of representation of women that enact a critique of patriarchal conceptualizations of femininity. Both Matisse and Byatt have a representational approach to women. Byatt also often dwells upon a traditional perception of women, and what attracts her to Matisse's female nudes with their large, reclining, monumental, voluptuous bodies is that which endorses a sense of complacency to "the purity of the means" represented by Matisse and "the assertion of expression through colour" (Elderfield, 1984, p. 12) which appears to be a creation of pictorial sign language. As the images become signs for what they represent for Matisse, Byatt correlatively lends a critical eye with symbolic contradictions incorporated through the utilization of art works that underlie the basic crisis from which women suffer.

Among her works, art forms a recurring theme, yet Byatt is also interested in ancient forms, not just fairy tales but also classical myths. Byatt acknowledges her impulse for the intertextual representations of both fairy tale and myth by saying: "One passion that runs right across Europe is for primitive narrative forms like classical myths and fairy tales, of which I feel myself to be a part" (as cited in Franken, 2001, p. xiv). One major idea that is particularly significant to Byatt in rewriting myths and fairy tales is the contention that a "myth derives force from its endless repeatability" (2000a, p. 132). In "Ancient Forms: Myth, Fairy Tale and Narrative in A.S. Byatt's Fiction", Elizabeth Wanning Harries (2008) points out that Byatt is interested in myths still alive and working, myths that still inform our ways of thinking and of understanding the world (p. 80). For Harries such integration of myths or fairy tales into narrative "link us to a living past and help us see the present more clearly" (p. 90). Myths are alive and resonate with our hopes, desires and fears. In her attempt to conceptualize the relevance of myths to culture, Byatt questions the use of mythical material in contemporary fiction and how "a preoccupation with ancestors has always been part of human make-up" (2000b, p. 93) as a strong sense of adherence to past is bound up with identity for her. From *Possession* to "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", it is possible to find the combination of ancient forms with modern stories with the insertion of myths like Medusa, Melusine or re-imaginings of fairy tales like *Rapunzel, Snow White* and *The Little Mermaid* in her narrative. The appeal of such stories for Byatt does not just come from the nature of infinity that is being told by different individuals time and time again. It also comes from the discussion of female identity through myths which has always been very "metamorphic, endlessly reconstituted and reformed" (Byatt, 2000a, p.135) for her as the female perspective draws attention to the misrepresentation of women by the male characters in the stories. By revisiting them, Byatt commences multifarious possibilities and frameworks in her writing.

> Byatt seems to adopt a double attitude in her rewriting of traditional myths and fairy tales: the first, a celebration of powerful mythic female figures advocating female assertive sexuality and creative ability; the second, a revisionist attitude that aims at revealing negative social myths inherent in traditional mythic and fairy-tale narratives, offering alternative possibilities. (Al-Hadi, 2010, p. 103)

In that sense, Byatt does not just assign new meanings by putting traditional mythical and fairy tale motifs in new contexts, she also successfully manages to disclose and confront certain gender paradigms restricting female potentialities.

The protagonist of "Medusa's Ankles", Susannah, is a linguist and university lecturer. "Extremely conscious of an aging body, Susannah's subjectivity is formed by dominant cultural images of female beauty. She becomes very nostalgic about her youthful looks and long, lustrous black hair" (Pokhrel, 2015, p. 399). Her pursuit of an unrealized female desire and complication of body and mind begins upon seeing a print of Matisse's *Rosy Nude* or *Pink Nude*[1] from the window of a hairdresser's shop.

> She had walked in one day because she had seen the Rosy Nude through the plate glass. That was odd, she thought, to have that lavish and complex creature stretched voluptuously above the coat rack, where one might have expected the stare, silver and supercilious or jetty and frenzied, of the model girl. They were all girls now, not women. The rosy nude was pure flat color, but suggested mass. She had huge haunches and a monumental knee, lazily propped high. She had round breasts, contemplations of the circle, reflections on flesh and its fall. (Byatt, 1995, p. 3)

Pic. 1: Henri Matisse, *Pink Nude*. Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA), Baltimore, 1935[2].

1 The painting is also known as *Large Reclining Nude.*

2 The image of the painting has been used in accordance with the permission contract sent by Baltimore Museum of Art, The Image Services & Rights Department.

In the ekphrastic description of the painting, Byatt puts emphasis on the structurally complex nature of the woman's body, how massy it looks with "huge haunches" and "monumental knee" despite having flatness in color. Matisse subverts traditional interpretations of women as the beauty of models comes from those abstract lines in Matisse's aesthetic style. Best known for his Fauvist style, Matisse was generally characterized by bold colors, textured brushwork and non-naturalistic depiction. "The creation of pictorial space on a flat surface by means of line and color, the pure process of painting, adherence to the basic means of expression" (Flam, 1978, p. 9) were the essentials in defining Matisse's formulations of art. *Pink Nude* is an important work with its bold and original compositional effects which are achieved by exaltation of color and emphasis on vertical, horizontal axis. Placed against geometric lines, the painting tenders the portrait of a reclining woman whose body is composed of a series of curves. Matisse is known for populating his canvases with nude women who offer a novel way of exploring the female body against the stereotypes of dominant male gaze, and most of his works from 1935 and 1936 are of reclining monumental nudes. What is captivating and apparent in Matisse's nudes is the body stretching over the whole canvas. While the creative genius is generally associated with the male artist, the models are expected to be female, young, beautiful and voluptuous, and in Matisse's works careful attention to the structure of the body with unusual brushwork, experimental use of color and playing with angles is observed. The artist was always immersed in trying out new ideas and concepts, thus his geometric shapes and patterns hinge upon essential lines in order to condense meaning instead of transcribing what is so apparent. Matisse's disfigured models are abstracted, simplified figures that are devoid of certain forms or precise boundaries, thus making the concepts of nudity or the female body far more complicated against the sexually charged images of classical culture and male perception of women. What is on display is generally postulated to appeal to the male viewer's pleasure, yet Matisse's unattractive women reverse the feminine configurations that elucidate more than what is perceptible to everyone at first glance and play decisive roles in celebrating the female body through Susannah's eyes. Byatt's painterly approach to writing bears analogy as she admits in *Passion of the Mind* that she sees "any projected piece of writing or work as geometric structure of various colors and patterns" (1991, p. 13). The pictorial details are ramified through a profusion of adjectives denoting color and shape as modes of expression in Byatt's story as well. Deploying *Pink Nude* as the pictorial referent, Byatt follows hallmarks of Matisse's aesthetics in her evocations of colors and lines which are an index to Susannah's self-image in the changing ideals of female beauty.

"I like your Matisse" are the first words Susannah utters in the story (Byatt, 1995, p. 4). What attracts her most to a copy of Matisse's depiction, which is unlike the photo-shopped posters usually covering the walls of such a place, is probably finding an image she can identify with as a woman in her forties. According to Sarah Gardam (2013), "Matisse's women do not directly resemble real women -in that they are usually oddly proportioned, remarkably featureless, and flat in colour and dimension" (p. 120). She additionally maintains that "these distortions matter in an ethical sense because they imply what real women mean to real men" (p. 120). Using Matisse as an interpretive device in her fiction, Byatt channels Matisse's visual depiction of women in his canvases into her verbal compositions. In that sense, in "Medusa's Ankles" Byatt subverts the paradigm of passive, silent, beautiful women who are generally the objects of male gaze by bringing Matisse's representations of women into prominence. The hair salon has a symbolic significance in sharpening the contrast between the dilemmas of youth and aging, of body and mind. At the beginning she feels comfortable in the salon because:

> In those days the salon was like the interior of a rosy cloud, all pinks and creams, with creamy muslin curtains here and there, and ivory brushes and combs, and here and there—the mirror-frames, the little trollies—a kind of sky blue, a dark sky blue, the colour of the couch or bed on which the rosy nude spread herself. (Byatt, 1995, p. 5)

The color scheme presented in Matisse's nude is reproduced in almost everything in the hair salon. *Pink Nude* does not just embody the beautiful, young, sensual female body, but also hints at the objectification and marginalization of women. In the story, "the salon's decor also serves as a barometer for the state of mind of its central female protagonist" (Fishwick, 2004, p. 56). This interior decor of the salon ensures a sense of pleasure and confidence for Susannah who already suffers from certain values society imposes upon women. Despite her intellectual awareness, Susannah cannot escape the fear of an aging body. She feels that Lucian, the hairdresser "soothe[s] her middle-aged hair" (Byatt, 1995, p. 5). and "[comes] to trust him with her disintegration" (Byatt, 1995, p. 7). Nevertheless, Lucian does not just confess that he only bought *Pink Nude* as a complement to the décor rather than a conscious effort to redeem and celebrate the female body, but he also admits that he is weary of his wife and is having an affair with a young girl. With a dramatic turn of events, Lucian closes the shop to go on a vacation to Greek islands with his mistress. Once the shop reopens, Susannah finds

the *Pink Nude* removed and the whole atmosphere remodeled. The previous pink and rosy colors are substituted for darker, grey, colors; now "her face in the mirror was grey, had lost the deceptive rosy haze of the earlier lighting" (Byatt, 1995, p. 15). Susannah is surprised to see this vital and sudden change in the salon and the redecorated new grey color scheme which almost accords with her "*greying* skin" (Byatt, 1995, p. 19).

In *Portraits in Fiction,* Byatt remarks that the textual equivalent of a painting in a fictional narrative could also operate as an important tool in discovering one's identity or even act as "temporary mirrors to see themselves with a difference" (2002, p. 5). What unites *The Matisse Stories* is the protagonists' engagement with the artistic vision of the French painter and how it becomes a point of reference in shedding light on their characters' desires and disintegrations. In full anxiety and dismay of the inevitability of physical decay, Susannah remembered "with sudden total clarity a day when, Suzie then, not Susannah, she had made love all day to an Italian student on a course in Perugia" (Byatt, 1995, p. 22). It seems that it makes her "[remember] her own little round rosy breasts, her long legs stretched over the side of the single bed, the hot, the wet, his shoulders" (Byatt, 1995, p. 22). Susannah's nostalgia for her younger body alludes to stereotypical values of beauty in society and paints a stark and real picture of the insecurities and fears she feels about her body's vulnerabilities and limitations.

Strikingly, Susannah visits the newly decorated salon on the same day she has to appear on television to accept a prize she has won, "A Translator's Medal". She tells Lucian that "[she] needs to look particularly good this time" (Byatt, 1995, p. 16). It is apparent that she no longer feels comfortable and is "in a panic of fear about the television, which had come too late, when she had lost the desire to be seen or looked at" (Byatt, 1995, p. 19). Susannah has interiorized the social and cultural requisition that women be young, beautiful, demure and comforting which has become more and more distressing as she gets older. As the narrator claims:

> The cameras search jowl and eye pocket, expose brush-stroke and cracks in shadow and gloss. So interesting are their revelations that words, mere words, go for nothing, fly by whilst the memory of a chipped tooth, a strayed red dot, an inappropriate hair, persists and persists. (Byatt, 1995, p. 19)

The camera is another means of framing, restricting, freezing and misrepresenting women. Susannah already feels uncomfortable in her aging body but even more, she

is egregiously shocked by Lucian's impertinent remarks on his wife's ugly, fat ankles: "She's let herself go. It's her own fault. She's let herself go altogether. She's let her ankles get fat, they swell over her shoes, it disgusts me, it's impossible for me" (Byatt, 1995, p. 21). Upon that "Susannah stared stony, thinking about Lucian's wife's ankles. Because her own ankles rubbed her shoes, her sympathies had to be with this unknown and ill-presented woman" (Byatt, 1995, p. 22). Matisse's conscious misrepresentations of women without perfect body proportions correspond to the ill presentation of Lucian's wife with fat ankles. The cultural demand that women be beautiful, passive, silent and Byatt's efforts to deconstruct that paradigm through Matisse, are concretized through the reference made to Lucian's wife, with whom Susannah also identifies herself. This unknown and ill-presented woman could be another model for Matisse whose visual representations of women with haunches and monumental bodies are against the stereotypes of beauty.

On the other hand, Susannah's stony staring recalls Medusa's stony gaze. Medusa is a remarkable figure from Greek mythology with hair made of snakes and the ability to turn anyone who looked at her to stone. According to the myth, Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, is transformed into a monster by Athena as punishment for being raped by Poseidon.

> Unfortunately, this mortal enchantress caught the attention of Poseidon, the god who ruled the sea. He raped her in the temple of Athena, the goddess of war. The virgin goddess did not take kindly to this desecration of her sacred home, and she made certain that men would not court Medusa again by transforming her into a repulsive Gorgon with snakes for hair and a gaze that would turn men to stone. (Peterson & Dunworth, 2004, p. 108)

From Hesiod's *Theogony* to Apollodorus' accounts and most eminently, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there are differences between the early and later accounts of the story, yet one major consistent element is her gaze which has the great power of evoking both terror and fascination. Within contemporary fiction there are different aspects of the Medusa archetype. From poetic examples like Percy Bysshe Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" to artworks like *Perseus with the Head of Medusa,* a bronze sculpture made by Benvenuto Cellini or celebrated paintings of her fearsome head by Caravaggio and Rubens, Medusa has persisted in many modern

reflections. In addition, Lacan's Ego-Forming Mirror theory, and Helena Cixous' 1975 essay putting emphasis on Medusa's laughter, the Medusa myth has been allusively used as an allegorical construction in many composite narratives. However, the contemporary views of the Medusa myth offer an iconic figure who symbolizes power and ultimate creative freedom as she "transcends the ordinary and allows through women's identification with her for the indulgence and gratifications of a variety of unconscious or semiconscious desires in women" (Silverman, 2016, p. 124). Due to being pertinent to women, this mythical and artistic figure has served as a mirror having been used as a means of oppression in a patriarchal culture while also connoting creative energy and empowerment. Byatt, who has made Medusa known through representations of her both in art and myth, highlights the difficulty of reconciling identity with intellectual aspirations, especially for women, as she provides complex and essentially symbolist aspects to her story in appropriating the form of myth with art in order to challenge stereotyped provisions regarding the female identity and potential. The title Byatt chooses for her story is ironic in the sense that this mythic figure, while having rehabilitating power and energy, is known for her decapitated head and is also endowed with 'ankles'. In her deconstructive task, Byatt commences the story with a rough sketch of Matisse's *La chevelure* which features a woman with flowing hair. The French title equates to the English 'hairdo' evoking the mythological reference to Medusa, famous for her snaky hair, and also alludes to the central tension in the story which begins with Susannah's visit to a hairdresser and ends with a 'hairdo' that infuriates and emancipates her. "Compelled to remember her younger self, now replaced, like the painting, by the harsh colours of age, she sees her grey face in the mirror and feels rage…" (Campbell, 2004, p. 170). In addition, in order to finish off, Lucian entrusts Susannah's hair to Deirdre, one of his employers, which adds another layer to Susannah's already shaken confidence. When Susannah sees herself in the mirror, she exclaims, "It's horrible… I look like a middle-aged woman with a hair-do" (Byatt, 1995, p. 23). She literally explodes and starts throwing things at the mirrors in front of her. "Susannah seized a small cylindrical pot and threw it at one of his emanations. It burst with a satisfying crash and one whole mirror became a spider-web of cracks…" (Byatt, 1995, p. 24) The way Susannah unleashes her body through a violent act of breaking the mirror carries parallelism with Hélène Cixous' Medusa whose laugh suggests a release from castration anxiety.

In "The Laugh of Medusa" Cixous says, "You only have to look at Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (1976, p. 885).

Although the associations of Medusa have generally been grotesque and demonic, the efforts to redeem her from such a dreadful status have yielded a more positive light. Elaborating on Cixous' ideas about myths, Staley notes how myths become "a tool through which women can escape the world which men have constructed for them, through myth, can attack it, can begin their own voyage of discovery" (2008, p. 219). Myths like Electra, Oedipus and Medusa have always been instrumental in psychoanalytic studies, and an increased perspective on the Medusa myth displays a focus encapsulating female power and freedom as well as destruction and monstrosity. In her challenge against the views that debilitate women, Cixous tries to liberate women from external judgements that do not just diminish their worth and self-perception but also lead them to despise their own bodies. In her words, a woman's body is "the uncanny stranger on display-the ailing or dead figure…" (1976, p. 880) The dilemma women suffer throughout their lives is invoked by Cixous in the monstrous Medusa with a suggestion of returning to the "body" from which the woman is already estranged. Susannah's own lack of confidence about her body and aging is very reminiscent of culturally, socially dominant ideologies that shape women's identity. In spite of being a well-educated academic and translator, as a middle aged woman, Susannah is caught in the grip of a loss of coalescence with her own body.

Byatt also places particular emphasis on 'mirrors'. As often in Byatt's work, mirror/glass represents both illusion and truth. Susannah first sees the *Pink Nude* through the glass of Lucian's shop window, and he himself describes the shop as "a great glass cage" that he is now leaving for the "real world" (Byatt, 1995, p. 27); "but it is her own image in the mirror that has shown Susannah the failure of her hopes of arresting physical decay" (Campbell, 2004, p. 171). Tiffin comments that the glass motif pervades Byatt's fairy tales: "Gillian Perholt's glass and paperweights, the glass bottle in which djinn is imprisoned, the glass key and box in Byatt's retelling of Grimms' "The Glass Coffin"" (2006, p. 52). For her, glass illumines Byatt's interest in "entrapment and empowerment" (p. 55), glass both encloses and reveals in that it is "transparent and containing, invisible yet entrapping" (p. 52).

In the story, the setting is also a hairdresser's salon which is a place full of mirrors. Susannah points to the odd relationship between a hairdresser and the customer as Susannah can only see Lucian's face in the mirror. When it comes to visual arts, and the art of painting in particular, mirrors are interpreted as the instruments which reflect the invisible or distort what is visible. The mirror metaphor suggests a reflection of reality, yet this reflection or the image presented in the reflection also raises questions

on the need to have an unbiased, objective view of itself. In that sense it is possible to correlate the use of mirrors in art with the mirroring gaze of Medusa in mythical narrative.

According to the myth, Perseus, son of Zeus, is assigned the task of killing Medusa. The gods order him not to look into Medusa's eyes, and Athena even gives him her mirrored shield to use. Perseus is only able to kill Medusa by looking at the back of his mirror polished shield which does not directly reflect Medusa's petrifying gaze. Both Perseus and Athena exploit the decapitated head of Medusa as a means of protection either by killing their enemies or using the symbol of Medusa's visage as a way of petrifying enemies by putting it on an aegis, or shield, thus reinforcing the associations of Medusa with fear, rage, villainy but also of protection. In her work, "Medusa and the Female Gaze," Susan Bowers summarizes that "Medusa's mythical image has functioned like a magnifying mirror to reflect and focus Western thought as it relates to women, including how women think about themselves" (1990, p. 217). Generally, societies subordinate women beneath a slighting gaze, and in order to return that gaze or take control of their own self and independence, women need to break the mirror which metaphorically represents the constraints and ascribed roles. Psychoanalytically speaking, such a quest also recalls Jacques Lacan's famous essay "Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function" which centrally expounds a child's development that first begins with an encounter with an image in a mirror. The reflected body in the mirror is impossible to be achieved for the baby in terms of wholeness thus resulting in an alienation and fragmentation. The baby's fascination with its own image is a spectacle, the subject exists as an image for the other. The subject's desire for wholeness and un-fragmented self might present another confounding model to interpret Susannah's struggle for identity which is enacted through representations like Medusa, *Rosy Nude* or mirror image in a society defined by certain assumptions. When Susannah looks in the mirror, she confronts the harsh reality of her aging body and the impossibility of a young, lustrous look. The alienation she feels culminates in her smashing the mirror which symbolizes a rebellion against the dominant ideologies that engrave a woman's body and sexuality. Thus Medusa is seen as an emblem of female dynamics and power against the male gaze, a symbol of both protection and aggression. What Susannah sees in the mirror is rather a montage of broken images composed of fundamentally ingrained stereotypes, prejudgments and misbeliefs.

Throughout history, within the most common patriarchal narrative, Medusa's punishment has been interpreted as her demonization. Yet her petrifying ability also

meant inverting the objectifying male gaze and dominance as it allowed her to look rather than being looked at. According to Gillian Alban, "The archetypal Medusa is an expression of the gaze that passes from subject to object in an interplay of mirrored views" (2017, p. 16). While society places women under a patronizing, domineering patriarchal gaze, the Medusa gaze could turn into a tool of inspiration and empowerment by projecting out that gaze from the subject herself. Susannah is also very susceptible to the perceptions of others. Her anxiety regarding how she would look on television because of the physical standards assigned to females or the insistence that women should look natural stems from the menacing and controlling gaze of others. Her act of smashing the mirror or illusory release through violence also marks a breakout from the external view of the self. The reflected image in the mirror is also the image created by a society which objectifies and limits one's freedom. With Byatt's narrative, the female monstrosity implicit in the myth of Medusa transforms into revelation, and thus subversion, of certain myths that entrap and restrict female creative energy. In the end, when Susannah "pulled herself together, she would go and have a shower and soak out the fatal coils, reduce them to streaming rat-tails" (Byatt, 1995, p. 27). In a broader sense, the cathartic release is indicative of Susannah's refusal to accept certain ascribed images.

Consequently, the configurations of myth and art are central to "Medusa's Ankles" which problematizes representations of the female body in culture and shows the effect they can have on women who cannot live up to the perfect image imposed on them by patriarchy. "Medusa's Ankles" yields a valuable insight in exploring Byatt's harmonization of ancient, old forms and myths with Matisse's modern art. Susannah's resentment and rage culminates in the act of crashing a mirror in the salon which results in various fragments reflecting distorted images pointing to the whole concept of ill or misrepresented women. With a Matissean imagery at the background epitomized by *Pink Nude* and allegorical use of the Medusa myth, the story addresses the inescapability of ageism and the loss of a sense of identity with one's body. Entwining descriptions of art reminiscent of Matisse and his portrayal of disproportioned women with mythic allusions to distraught Medusa through her hair and stony gaze, Byatt goes beyond aesthetic enrichment or imaginative reading as such embodiments transform into important narrative tools and represent innovative and alternative perspectives against the dictates of social order favoring patriarchy on the perception of women.

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