

Romancing the text

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

The complicated novel *Possession* by A. S. Byatt is a double-tiered romance and a literary brainteaser. Like John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, the two works it most resembles, the novel seesaws across two centuries. Roland Michell and Maud Bailey are late 20th-century British literary scholars. Following clues that have eluded generations of biographers and critics, they discover a romantic link between the subject of his research, Randolph Ash, and the subject of hers, Christabel LaMotte, a pair of mid-19th-century poets. As Roland and Maud immerse themselves in this discovery, they too begin to fall in love. It's an ingenious story, although a reader can get bogged down in Byatt's too-clever literary parodies. Those who prefer their 19th-century novels to be written by Austen or Eliot may feel the urge to skim the lengthy correspondence between the poets; those who feel that, as a literary gamesman, Byatt falls short of, say, Nabokov may grow restive during the long pages devoted to Ash's and LaMotte's poetry.

The movie *Possession* pares down Byatt's 550-plus pages down to a neat hour and three-quarters by eliminating all the literary self-consciousness. Otherwise, it makes only minor alterations, such as changing Roland from a Brit to an American so that filmmaker Neil LaBute could cast his favorite actor, Aaron Eckhart, as Roland. Eckhart starred in LaBute's first two pictures, *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, though most viewers will recognize him as Julia Roberts's long-suffering biker beau in *Erin Brockovich*. Eckhart works hard to repay LaBute's confidence, but you can feel the strain in his performance: he simply isn't convincing as a young man for whom scholarship has a sensual appeal.

The real case of miscasting here, though, is LaBute himself. If you've seen his other films, such as *Nurse Betty*, you're justified in fearing the worst--LaBute movies made before *Possession* lack the smallest impulse of generosity toward the characters. It's a huge relief to find that he hasn't projected his trademark smugness and mean-spiritedness onto Byatt's novel, but a lack of nastiness is a negative virtue, and that and his technical proficiency are the only positives in *Possession*.

The two Victorian poets violate the sanctity of their respective homes to give in to a passion so tempestuous that it infects another man and woman a century and a half later. Yet there is no romantic conviction on screen. You don't feel the force of Ash and LaMotte's love in the camerawork or in the editing rhythms (although Claire Simpson's editing is often witty in its juxtaposition of the two eras). You don't feel it in the designs, which you might expect to be lush rather than handsomely spare. And although normally I admire the work of costume designer Jenny Beavan, the heavy, hooded cloaks she's created for Christabel are *antiromantic*. The flashback sequences prevent you from feeling romantic conviction in the performances of Jeremy Northam and Jennifer Ehle, who play the poets. The two actors have good moments, but most of the time they're restricted to looking soulful as they read each other's missives or pen replies.

Eckhart and Gwyneth Paltrow (Maud) get more screen time but struggle with a more opaque courtship. These two performers don't have much chemistry; if they did, they might have transcended the stop-and-start, go-nowhere nature of their scenes together. They flirt, they kiss, but then they back away. Their tone with each other turns snippy and offended. We're meant to think that their exasperated failure to fan into flame the sparks between them is due partly to her dispirited affair with another scholar (Toby Stephens), and partly to his bad romantic history. But these obstacles aren't dramatized, and we don't feel the force that's bigger than both of them pushing against those obstacles.

Moreover, the arc of their relationship doesn't scan. Each time they squabble, they come together again in the next scene with an intimacy that suggests they've been sleeping together for months. We know about romantic neurosis from dozens of satisfying movies, but the interaction between Roland and Maud in *Possession* is something else again, though it isn't clear what. A romantic drama is in serious trouble when the power of its central courtship eludes us.