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Fabulous Bodies: The Fiction of Jeannette Winterson

by

Jane Aikins Haslett

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

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Jane A. Haslett

9658 86 Avenue

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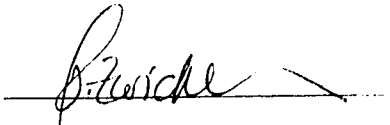

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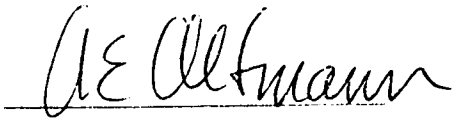

Dr. Anna Altmann

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Abstract

We all need a subjective imagination, even to lead our daily lives; our imaginings reflect our politics, and determine how we interpret the books we read. The "we" who read and interpret are both subject and object, for we read the words of a language which incorporates politics within its structures, written by an author holding political views, and contained in a volume presented according to other political views--not least, those of publishers and the marketplace. Furthermore, the "we" who are reading, writing, or written, as well as the words and the books in which the words appear, are all material; all are embodied. Thus, an interaction takes place between the body of the reader, the body of the author, bodies written by the author, the body of language, the body of the text, and the body of the book, and all of these bodies convey political meaning. In this thesis, I focus specifically on interactions between the bodies of female readers and three representations of bodies written by Jeannette Winterson, to explore connections between them from a materialist feminist perspective.

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Introduction

> Still, hers is the only account there is, written on air, written with imagination's invisible ink.
>
> Carol Shields

Who do you think you are? The question is a common one, usually employed to point out someone's inflated notion of her or his importance or capabilities. It is, however, a critical question, particularly for women, for it portrays a person as a subject, imagining herself or himself an actor, rather than an object, acted upon.[1] We need a subjective imagination even to lead our daily lives. We imagine the tasks necessary for physical survival, and we imagine activities which might give us pleasure, and plan our days accordingly. Our imaginings reflect our politics, for the choices we make reflect the values we hold. These choices also extend to what books we read and how we interpret them. Reading and interpreting books, however, is not just a one-way interaction. We are acted upon as well as acting, for we are reading words written in language which incorporates politics within its structures, by an author holding political views, and contained in a volume presented according to other political views--not least, those of publishers and the marketplace. Furthermore, the "we" who are reading, writing, or written, as well as the words and the books in which the words appear, are all material; all

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[1] For an in-depth discussion of women as object rather than subject, see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex.*

are embodied. Thus, an interaction takes place between the body of the reader, the body of the author, bodies written by the author, the body of language, the body of the text, and the body of the book, and all of these bodies convey political meaning. In this thesis, I will focus specifically on interactions between the bodies of female readers and three representations of bodies written by Jeannette Winterson, to explore connections between them from a materialist feminist perspective.

Rita Felski calls for a feminist literary analysis that seeks to establish links between literature and the broader realm of social practice, with feminist literature being understood as a form of meaning production, a construction of gendered identity which draws upon intersubjective cultural and ideological frameworks, rather than a more or less truthful representation of an unproblematically given female reality (8-9). Felski notes that the relationship between language and the subject is a key issue for theories such as feminism, which seeks to establish a connection between literary texts and an emancipatory politics by relating the semantic dimension of the text to potential social agents, and also seeks to address individual women, emphasizing the importance of personal change and the transformation of consciousness (53). From this point of view, the telling of stories has both emotional and material consequences: stories can affect and change our everyday lives. Jeannette Winterson points this out humorously in her novel *Oranges are not the only fruit*:

> . . . that is the way with stories, we make them what we will. It's a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained. Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently. . . . I

> can put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own. . . . Here is some advice. If you want to keep your own teeth, make your own sandwiches. (93-95)

Winterson mentions the preceding quote in an interview with Mark Marvel, and follows it with comments which elaborate her point:

> JW: For me, in the rewriting of stories, of history, of myths, I'm not saying, "Look, here's the definitive version." I'm saying, "Here's another story about that story, so what do you think?"
>
> MM: In that sense it's a very political act.
>
> JW: Yes, it is. Because I'm hoping all the time that it will challenge people, both into looking more closely at these things they thought were cut and dried and also, perhaps, into inventing their own stories. (168)

Winterson also comments to Marvel: "it's part of my philosophy about life--that it's just a series of stories that we tell to one another" (168). Again, in an introduction to her play, *Great Moments in Aviation,* Winterson states: "Only by imagining what we might be can we become more than we are" (1994 vii). I strongly agree with Winterson's comments, and believe that inventing and reinventing ourselves, telling ourselves and each other the stories of our lives as we live them, is what creates our subjectivities.

This process of imagining the self is something we all experience; we construct our lives in our imaginations in order to be able to function on an everyday basis. Consequently, what we read and hear has a profound impact on our lives, whether it be newspapers, television, academic theory, conversations with friends, personal letters,

messages on e-mail, or novels. Imagining our lives, however, is not a question of imagining them in a vacuum, but imagining them against a backdrop of what we know: what we have seen, touched, heard, smelled. In other words, imagining them against what our body knows and what sensations our body has transmitted to our minds. How our bodies and minds interact is a topic far beyond the scope of this thesis, but I do want to make the point that our bodies are as much a part of our imaginings as our minds.

This point is addressed by Elizabeth Grosz in her book *Volatile Bodies*, where she comments that the body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory, and argues for the displacement of the centrality of the mind, the psyche, interior, or consciousness (and even the unconscious) in conceptions of the subject through a reconfiguration of the body, leading to conceiving of subjectivity in different terms than those provided by traditional philosophical and feminist understandings (3, vii). Her book is, according to Grosz herself, "a refiguring of the body so that it moves from the periphery to the centre of analysis, so that it can now be understood as the very 'stuff' of subjectivity" (ix). Grosz seeks to examine "the complex intertwining relations of mutual production and feedback of materially different bodies, substances, forms of matter, and materially different inscriptions, tracings, transformations, the interchanging between writing and bodies, bodies as the blank or already encoded surfaces of inscription" (189-90).

Grosz's delineation of her project foregrounds the complexities of the dynamic interactions between bodies, and returns us to considering the interactions between the bodies of readers, authors, texts and bodies within texts. For example, the act of reading

is a physical act--seeing printed words on a page--but it has repercussions on how we think, just as any information given us by our various senses causes us to imagine differently. The words on the page cause us to imagine, and scenes, actions, and bodies are conjured up before us as we read. Further, because we live in our bodies, when we read of other bodies looking, feeling, smelling, hearing, in certain ways--or being seen, being felt, being smelled, being heard--we can imagine ourselves in relation to the bodies on the page. We ask questions of the bodies in books: is this being like me, unlike me, a being I admire and identify with, a being I despise but still identify with, a being that bores me to tears, a being that I could love, a being that I could kill? And why? We tell ourselves and each other many stories as a result of reading. The members of countless reading groups in our culture discuss how they feel about the characters in books they read--for example, this thesis emerges from a reading group discussion of Dogwoman, in Jeannette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*. Readers do not just uncritically assimilate the ideologies in the texts they read. They may agree with or resist them in whole or in part, but their reactions can reshape their own ideologies and in turn those of others. Because I cannot understand Jeannette Winterson's ideologies the way she does, lacking her life experiences, I interact with them in light of my own experiences, and tell stories to myself and others about that interaction.

I believe that Jeannette Winterson writes novels which strongly engage a reader, and particularly a female reader, because they reflect a passionate commitment to women and to feminism. Rather than simply retelling the malestream stories that have been until recently the sole basis of our literary heritage, Winterson subverts and recounts them in

her own fashion, giving a reader very different messages. Laura Doan comments: "Eschewing realism, Winterson constructs her narrative by exploiting the techniques of postmodern historiographic metafiction . . . as well as its ideology . . . in order to challenge and subvert patriarchal and heterosexist discourses and, ultimately, to facilitate a forceful and positive radical oppositional critique" (138). Further, Doan believes that Winterson sees fiction as a site to interrogate, trouble, subvert, and tamper with gender, identity, and sexuality, seriously inviting a reader to imagine the emancipation of "normal" and "natural" from the exclusive and totalizing domain of patriarchal and heterosexual authority (154). I believe that Winterson's representations of bodies, the sites where gender, identity and sexuality are expressed, are critically important in accomplishing these interrogations and subversions and effecting a critique of white Western culture.

Winterson is well aware of the importance of bodies, particularly to women, for the connection between inhabiting a female body and the construction of a female subjectivity is emphasized in one of her earliest books, *Fit for the Future: The Guide for Women Who Want to Live Well* (1986). In contrast to Winterson's novels, which in postmodern fashion interweave various genres such as Biblical stories, fairy-tales and myths, and describe events occurring in non-linear time, *Fit for the Future* is a self-help book containing concrete step-by-step advice on how a woman can have a healthier body and consequently a healthier self-esteem. This book can be seen as antifeminist or even arrogant in its patronizing tone and its underlying conviction that women have low self-esteem only because they have no idea how to take care of and develop their bodies effectively. Furthermore, Winterson's advice to women on how to remake their bodies is

rather utopian in its disregard of material obstacles to fitness, such as poor health, poverty, injury, and physical disabilities, as well as cultural constraints. Nevertheless, Winterson does address the strong connection between physicality and self-esteem, even suggesting that (re)constructing one's own body is (re)constructing one's subjectivity, when she states:

> The future is built upon the present which is why you cannot hope for a better time - you can only create one. This book offers no miracles, it demands that you concentrate on yourself and fulfil your own extraordinary potential; there are no solutions that you don't already possess.
>
> Wild beauty is about reaching and maintaining that potential. It's physical freedom, mental sharpness and self respect. . . . [Y]ou're unique, and any fitness programme you choose, any results you want are up to you, what counts is a lively, irrepressible and highly personal relationship with your own body. (1)

Winterson ends her fitness book with the comment, ". . . every time you give priority to a body you used to ignore, you are altering your life" (124). The book makes the important point that while doing major caretaking of the bodies of others, women often ignore or downplay the importance of taking care of their own bodies, and also gives women practical advice for specifically female bodies. In making a strong connection between how we think of and treat our bodies and how we imagine ourselves, Winterson attempts to influence women to empower themselves subjectively by empowering themselves physically.

Like Winterson, Iris Marion Young addresses the important connection between

physical and subjective empowerment, when she states, ". . . it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole towards things and its environment that initially defines the relation of a subject to its world. Thus a focus upon ways in which the feminine body frequently or typically conducts itself in such comportment or movement may be particularly revelatory of the structures of feminine existence" (143). Furthermore, Young wonders,

> . . . to what degree we can develop a theoretical account of the connection between the modalities of the bodily existence of women and other aspects of our existence and experience. For example, I have an intuition that the general lack of confidence that we frequently have about our cognitive or leadership abilities is traceable in part to an original doubt of our body's capacity. (156)

Young makes a strong connection between bodies and subjectivity in remarking: "However alienated male-dominated culture makes us from our bodies, however much it gives us instruments of self-hatred and oppression, still our bodies are ourselves. We move and act in this flesh and these sinews, and live our pleasure and pains in our bodies" (192).

Winterson addresses this connection in her novels by writing bodies which invite women to reimagine themselves differently both physically and subjectively, projecting female body images that run counter to the traditional body images of women and femininity in white Western culture. In doing so, Winterson "creates a space not just for lesbians but for productive, dynamic, and fluid gender pluralities and sexual positionings" (Doan 153). Since Winterson's bodies foreground these gender pluralities and sexual

positionings. Winterson can be seen as participating in the political struggles over sexuality actively carried on in the emerging field of queer studies and queer theory. Michael Warner states:

> Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body . . . . The dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are. (xiii)

The newly emerging body of queer theory does not present us with a coherent theoretical stance at the moment, and, like feminism, may never do so. Further, there are just as many questions around the category "queer" as there are around the categories "lesbian" and "feminist." However, queer theory does challenge the normativity of heterosexuality by asserting queer identity to be positive, as Rosemary Hennessy elaborates:

> Claiming a queer identity is an effort to speak from and to the differences and silences that have been suppressed by the homo-hetero binary, an effort to unpack the monolithic identities "lesbian" and "gay," including the intricate ways lesbian and gay sexualities are inflected by heterosexuality, race, gender, and ethnicity. Embracing the category used to shame and cast out sexual deviants, queer theory

> and politics defiantly refuse the terms of the dominant discourse. Their "in your face" rejections of proper sexual identities are both anti-assimilationist and antiseparatist. Touting queerness is a gesture of rebellion against compulsory heterosexuality's pressure to be hetero or invisible, either confidently normal or apologetically, shamefully, quietly queer. ("Queer Theory, Left Politics" 86-87).

Michael Warner points out a desired goal of the queer movement: "heteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world" (xvi). I believe that Winterson does imagine such a world, and that her representations of bodies "embody" her imaginings. In addition, I believe that the bodies in her novels engage a reader in such a way as to cause the reader to imagine this world along with her.

The process of engaging a reader works at various levels, as Arnold Berleant explains in his book *Art and Engagement*. Berleant claims that a notion of aesthetic engagement challenges the tradition of aesthetic theory which holds that art consists of objects that possess a distinctive kind of value, aesthetic value, and asks that we assume a stance toward art objects that removes all practical interests, allowing us to contemplate the work of art for its own sake, with a disengagement that excludes every other consideration (xii-xiii). This tradition of aesthetic theory, according to Berleant, is rooted in a larger philosophical structure containing convictions such as an array of tendentious and obstructive dualisms (especially that of subject and object), the cognitive primacy of science, the universality and exclusivity of truth, the objectivity of knowledge, and the hierarchy of being, all of which are widely accepted as fundamental truths and together form the foundation of modern Western culture (xiii). Berleant posits that theorizing art

as engagement challenges this tradition by claiming continuity rather than separation, contextual relevance rather than objectivity, historical pluralism rather than certainty, ontological parity rather than priority. In a chapter devoted to a study of literary experience, Berleant states:

> Whether literature be an experience of sounds, syntactic orders, images, personal associations, responses to verbal stimuli, or psychodynamic processes, any account of how these incorporate, display, present, or transmit meaning is quite distinct from how we experience meaning and, more generally, from how we experience literature. For literature is more than a vehicle for embodying and transmitting meanings. It has sensuous dimensions; it requires somatic involvement; it stimulates psychological processes of imaging, of imagination, of association, and of the abandonment to memory, which are distinct from the cognitive one of locating meaning . . . . Our engagement with literature comes first, and how we interpret it or otherwise explain that experience is, in the final analysis, derivative. (119-120)

From this point of view, the place of the body in literature, whether it is the body of the author, the reader, or even bodies in the text, is an important one. Berleant believes that the author becomes not only a persona but also a personality, a consciousness, a mentality inseparable from the text, which embodies the author's characteristics and with whom the reader joins in a kind of experiential identity: what happens in the experience of literature is not first and foremost a cognitive act, but an ontological event (122). Thus the novel, according to Berleant, is "an experience of awareness in which the reader joins

the author in the creation of his own life" (124). Berleant sees the senses as the site of responsive emotions to which language must strive, because of their direct channel to consciousness, to feeling, to the responsive action of the body: "Here is the true region of metaphor, of language" (126). "Literature as experience," according to Berleant, "is the language of meaning. It is meaning embodied, not the path by which it is attained" (129). Berleant's view of art as engagement enlarges upon Winterson's observation quoted above, that it is best to make your own sandwiches if you want to keep your own teeth. This comment indicates that telling stories has material effects, and Berleant's theorizing indicates how these material effects can extend to the bodies of readers. Although Berleant mentions that his ideas have an affinity with the newly developing perspective of feminist aesthetics (xiii-xiv), he does not specifically address gender politics. Because Winterson incorporates gender politics consistently throughout her novels, we must look to feminist theory to explain why gender politics are important in considering the construction of female subjectivity that occurs when an engagement with literature presupposes a somatic involvement.

Writings on bodies currently proliferate, as sociologist Arthur Frank states: "Bodies are in, in academia as well as in popular culture" (131). Frank goes on to point out that "The first influence on body interest is feminism . . . Feminism as a praxis has taught us to look first for the politics in what is done to bodies" and he stresses the importance of the feminist establishment of the self/body/politics/violence nexus (131-32). Despite the insights of feminism, however, feminists are concerned over how women still view their bodies negatively, both in popular culture and academe. In her book

Reasonable Creatures, reviewed in The Globe and Mail, Katha Pollitt discusses women's bodies in popular culture:

> I would say that if you were to tell my daughter and her friends that girls can't do something boys can do, they would challenge you completely . . .
>
> The downside is the body image stuff. It's really appalling. My daughter is 7 years old and 40 pounds, skinny as a rail, and it's not like she's dieting, but she already has this idea of fat as a thing you don't want to be. I think it's a real problem. But the culture is obsessed with women's bodies."

In academic research, the same concerns about women's bodies surface.[2] One of the most influential twentieth century writers to focus on the female body is Simone de Beauvoir, whose book *The Second Sex* displays a curious contradictory attitude towards bodies and subjectivity. Beauvoir states: "The body is never the cause of subjective experiences, since it is the subject himself in his objective aspect: the subject lives out his attitudes in the unity of his experience" (*The Second Sex*, 1953, 673). At the same time, however, Beauvoir contradictorily represents women as doomed and mutilated because of their anatomy and physiology, with statements such as the following: "circulatory difficulties and certain autointoxications make the body seem a screen interposed between the woman and the world" (329); "Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home - that is to say, to immanence" (429-30); "Shut up in her flesh, her home, she sees herself as passive before these gods with human faces who set goals

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[2] For an excellent discussion of the issues Katha Pollitt raises, see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.

and establish values" (598); "a being doomed to immanence cannot find self-realization in acts" (643); "love represents in its most touching form the curse that lies heavily upon woman confined in the feminine universe, woman mutilated, insufficient unto herself" (669); "Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the actions of others than herself" (725). Beauvoir clearly does see women's bodies as the cause of their subjective experiences in ways men's bodies are not, and just as clearly indicates that this occurs because "the peculiarities that identify her as specifically a woman get their importance from the significance placed upon them. They can be surmounted, in the future, when they are regarded in new perspectives" (727).

Luce Irigaray lauds Beauvoir for giving an account of her own life while backing it up scientifically, and helping women to be more free sexually, "especially by offering them a role model, acceptable at that time, of a woman's life, a teacher's life, a writer's life, and the life of a couple" (9). She notes that there were differences between herself and Beauvoir which, disappointingly to Irigaray, were never overcome, even though they were compatriots. In Irigaray's view, Beauvoir and Sartre were wary of her training in psychoanalysis, but her training, according to Irigaray, along with her background in philosophy, have enabled her own research to go beyond the quest for equality between the sexes sought by Beauvoir: "Equality between men and women cannot be achieved without a <u>theory of gender as sexed</u> and a rewriting of the rights and obligations of each sex, <u>qua different</u>, in social rights and obligations" (11-13). Irigaray states that her work

> criticizes the exclusive right of the use(s), exchange(s), representations(s) of one sex by the other. This critique is accompanied by the beginnings of a woman's auto-representation of her body. Luce Irigary, signatory to the book. What this implies is that the female body is not to remain the object of men's discourse or their various arts, but that it become the object of a female subjectivity experiencing and identifying itself. Such research attempts to suggest to women a morpho-logic that is appropriate to their bodies. It's aimed at the male subject, too, inviting him to redefine himself as a body with a view to exchanges between sexed subjects. (59)

Irigaray's research carries on the work begun by Beauvoir, but it also reflects a deep commitment to a heterosexual, dualistic view of the world. In the face of the emergence of gays, lesbians and the transgendered community from the closet over recent years, and the development of queer theory as an academic discipline addressing the limitations of a heterosexual dualistic notion of sex and gender arrangements, we need to look further for a view of the female body than research that positions it as one of two sexed bodies: female as opposed to male. Irigaray's insights are important, however, in linking the female body to female subjectivity, and insisting that for women, "sexual liberation means to demand access to a status of individual and collective subjectivity that is valid for them as women" (73).

Throughout her work, Monique Wittig strongly critiques heterosexual models of sex and gender such as Irigaray's. In her article "Homo Sum," she argues that although we have an abstract idea of what being human means, what we mean by human is still

potential and virtual. "For indeed, for all its pretensions to being universal, what has been until now considered as 'human' in our Western philosophy concerns only a small fringe of people: white men, proprietors of the means of production, along with the philosophers who theorized their point of view as the only and exclusively possible one" (3). Wittig deplores "the symptoms of . . . the straight mind. Sexes, (gender), Difference between the sexes, man, woman, race, black, white, nature are at the core of its set of parameters. And they have shaped our concepts, our laws, our institutions, our history, our cultures" (10). She addresses the material effects of this Western philosophical stance on female bodies and subjectivities when she comments that even the discipline of psychoanalysis, which purports to treat the unconscious aspects of the human psyche, and considers itself beyond the realm of difference and domination, has a discourse that reinscribes male domination and female submission: "Alas for us, the symbolic order partakes of the same reality as the political and economic order. There is a continuum in their reality, as continuum where abstraction is imposed upon materiality and can shape the body as well as the mind of those it oppresses" (11).[3]

What does this mean in terms of reading representations of bodies in works of fiction? Writing a work of fiction is, as previously noted, a political practice, and the person writing the book is a lived body, creating representations of lived bodies in ways that promote political views. Reading is also a political practice. In her book *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, Rosemary Hennessy reminds us that, "Drawing

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[3] For a discussion of the Lacanian psychoanalytic term "symbolic order," see "Symbolic" in Elizabeth Wright ed., *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: a Critical Dictionary*, or in J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*.

upon a theory of discourse as ideology, materialist feminists have extended the concept of 'reading' to include all of those meaning-making practices which enable one to act and which shape how one makes her way through the world" (91). Winterson appears to concur with Hennessy when she terms our making of stories "a way of explaining the universe" (*Oranges* 93).

Winterson can be seen to explain her own universe to herself in *Oranges*, which is her first novel, and generally considered by reviewers to be semi-autobiographical (Hinds 154). In this novel, the mother and the church pastor both deem the daughter Jeannette's preaching and her lesbianism equally inappropriate and subversive: ". . . the message belonged to the men. . . . [H]aving taken on a man's world in other ways I had flouted God's law and tried to do it sexually" (133-34). In other words, Jeannette's successful preaching and her sexual relations with women are both rightful prerogatives of the male sex, and in pursuing these activities Jeannette oversteps the limitations of her sex, according to her mother and her mother's male advisors. She is consequently called a demon by her mother and driven out of the church and her family home (135-36). Winterson's characters work to drive home, with biting humour, the same message as Beauvoir: women are doomed to immanence and cannot escape the situation of women, and the limitations that result from living in a female body. In *Oranges*, however, Jeannette resists her mother and the church, as Laura Doan points out:

> Jeannette . . . reveals an innate confidence in the rightness of her passion for women and dismisses as arbitrary and unfounded the rejection of her choice according to God's law. . . . [O]ne must recognize the cultural imperative before

> shame can operate effectively. Thus, for Jeannette (and Winterson), lesbianism cannot be regulated, contained, or controlled by heterosexual hegemony because the lesbian, in refusing to acknowledge its power, nullifies and renders it impotent. (145).

Another aspect of *Oranges* that works to effect a critique of the church, family life and heterosexuality is the form of the novel itself. Susan Rubin Suleiman observes that the Old Testament stories, fairytales, and Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail interwoven with the story of Jeannette fragment the text and give it something like the heterogeneity of collage, the hybrid, or carnival (164). The body of the text as a whole, then, is interspersed with aspects of fable. Winterson follows *Oranges* with several novels which reviewer Carol Anshaw characterizes as

> fables and fantasies which bend history, collapse time, coincide places, transpose gender, and show human endeavour to be both delightfully original and comfortingly self-replicating. For a writer with philosophical leanings and an antic imagination, being a fabulist makes sense. By setting the world on its side, Winterson's peculiar characters seem only slightly tilted. (16)

In agreement with Anshaw, I see *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) functioning as fables, and each contains one of the "fabulous" bodies I will discuss. A later novel, *Written on the Body* (1992), is a romance rather than a fable, but contains another "peculiar character" with an ungendered body. I consider these three bodies "fabulous" in the sense that two of them are characters in fables and none of them falls within the parameters of bodies considered "normal." Moreover, they demonstrate the

more colloquial sense of the word "fabulous" by performing extraordinary feats and following heroic quests. I will argue that Jeannette Winterson's representations of these three bodies in her novels are politically and strategically useful to women in constructing a white Western female subjectivity that looks elsewhere than to the white, Western, heterosexual, male gaze for affirmation.

The first of Winterson's bodies that I will discuss is that of Dogwoman, a character in *Sexing the Cherry*. Dogwoman is a mother, and her body is extraordinary in that it is larger than life. It is extremely present to the senses of others because of its size, its grotesqueness, and its strength. Further, Dogwoman's grotesque and uncontainable body contains a personality that is captivating. Her body performs acts that express her sense of humour, her love of humanity, her caring for children and the elderly and her intolerance for oppression and violence. Here, the reader sees a female body that is physically able to carry through some everyday rebellions against the oppression of the relatively helpless that many women long to effect, but cannot, because they lack both the requisite physical abilities and a vision of themselves as powerful. Although a female reader will never be as physically strong as Dogwoman, she can identify with Dogwoman's anger against oppression, and act against oppression herself, even if she must do it differently than Dogwoman. A female reader actually <u>can</u> see herself acting as Dogwoman does in mothering, and view Dogwoman as a role model. Although Dogwoman the mother may not always resist the institution of motherhood against which she can be seen to be written, she does resist to a degree which I believe enables a woman reader to imagine her own subjectivity in connection with mothering in new ways. These new ways of viewing

motherhood could alter notions of mothering and assist women to imagine, in Irigaray's terms, a morpho-logic that is appropriate to their bodies.

Villanelle, a character in *The Passion* who is the daughter of a Venetian boatman and his wife, will be the second of Winterson's bodies that I will discuss. According to local legend, Venetian boatmen all have webbed feet and can walk on water. Since Villanelle, a girl, is born with webbed feet and can walk on water, she is a misfit in her culture, deemed to have the body of a freak. In our current white Western culture, she is a misfit as well. Only Christ, a major religious figure in our culture, displays the ability to walk on water: the Biblical disciples "see Jesus walking on the sea, and drawing nigh unto the ship: and they were afraid" (John 6:19). Since Villanelle's body has the same divine capability of walking on water, her body implicitly questions the relationship between maleness and divinity more explicitly questioned by the song entitled "Did Jesus Have a Baby Sister"; both the song and Villanelle's body expose a cultural construction of the divine as male, and point out that within the parameters of institutionalized religion, women have no voice.[4] *The Passion*'s very title denotes Christ's crisis of faith in the Garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion, and the novel explores passion in connection not only with religion, but also with public idols, causes, love, games of chance, food, and sex. *The Passion* is about crises of religious faith, as well as crises of faith in fetishes, luck, and love, including lesbian love. Therefore, it stretches the parameters of spiritual faith to include categories which traditionally have been excluded vigorously by religious institutions. Further, through a connection with Villanelle's body,

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[4] "Did Jesus Have a Baby Sister," Dory Previn.

sexual passion is seen as holy, so that female flesh, usually viewed as either virginal and pure, or sexual and depraved, appears simultaneously sexual and holy. Villanelle's body is the body of a lesbian, a prostitute, a transvestite, a lover, a wife, a mother, a gambler, a hermaphrodite, and a Christ. Her body crosses boundaries and imperils definitions in ways that open the door to various model-breaking female subjectivities, since it is impossible to classify her body by means of the usual binary opposition of the male and female sexes. A woman reader is thus invited, or even required, to expand her notion of the category "woman" to include many bodily differences that are occluded by this binary, and currently are often viewed with considerable alarm or revulsion in our white Western culture.

The third representation of a body in Winterson's novels which I will discuss is a body of unknown gender: the body of the lover/narrator in Winterson's fifth novel, *Written on the Body*. Here, Winterson explores the nature of love by looking at the dynamics of intimate relationships, marriage, and transitory affairs, as well as the processes of falling in love and living with a loved one, all translated into metaphors of the body. The question of gender, which is usually deemed foundational to any inquiry about a body, is in this case unanswerable. Whatever discussions take place about this body cannot be based on determinable gender difference, for the lover could be female, male, hermaphroditic, transgendered--the complete lack of bodily descriptions renders the possibilities multiple. Further, the lover has had sexual relationships with both men and women, and therefore could be a lesbian, a gay man, or bisexual. This ambiguous body is set against the hyperfeminine body of the beloved, Louise, a married woman, setting the "unnatural" ungendered body against a "natural" one, causing a reader to ponder how the category

"natural" is constructed. Thus, a female reader of *Written on the Body* has the opportunity to explore the construction of female subjectivity from various perspectives which cover most arrangements of sex and gender available to anyone who is not a straight, heterosexual female or male. Moreover, since the lover has no declared gender, readers of this novel are given the opportunity to explore the notion that gender is socially constructed and "performed" in the sense that Judith Butler suggests in her book *Gender Trouble*. Dogwoman's body is that of a giantess, but she can become invisible at will; Villanelle has webbed feet, and can walk on water; the lover's body is like that of an angel, ungendered, indeed lacking any physical attributes, and does not fit into a heterosexual model of sex and gender. Taken together, these three fabulous bodies can all be seen as queer, challenging and subverting patriarchal discourse. They each raise important questions about the connection between writing, reading and written bodies and the construction of female subjectivity.

Dogwoman: mother's body as Apocalypse

The Puritans . . . forgot that we are born into flesh and in flesh must remain.

Jeannette Winterson

Dogwoman, one of the two narrative voices in Jeannette Winterson's novel *Sexing the Cherry*, is one of the most compelling female figures in literature. Although the novel is ostensibly about the journeys of Dogwoman's son, Jordan, to find his invisible inner life, and can even be seen as a Bildungsroman with Jordan as hero travelling from babyhood to middle age, the figure that captures the attention of the reader (or perhaps particularly the female reader) is that of Dogwoman. *Sexing* is a fable, containing characters that escape the bounds of reason and loom larger than life. Although other characters in *Sexing* do this in various ways --for example, travelling on journeys of the mind as Jordan does, or dancing until the dancing body becomes empty space and points of light as Fortunata does--it is Dogwoman, Jordan's mother, who is the central character of this novel: the sun around which Jordan, a planet, revolves.

A mother as a prominent character, through whom Winterson explores notions of mothering, appears in two of her earlier novels. The author's personal experiences of being mothered are described in part in her first novel *Oranges are not the only fruit*: the mother is obsessed with religion, and fanatically committed to dedicating her daughter's life to the service of the Lord (*Oranges* 10); she is convinced that there are only two sorts of people: friends and enemies (*Oranges* 3); she is frustrated in her own ambitions to be an artist (*Oranges* 9); she is convinced of the sinfulness of the world at large and determined

to keep her daughter in complete ignorance of sexuality (*Oranges* 10, 16, 21, 86-88). In accordance with her religion, "my mother" considered bodies and bodily functions as part of earthbound sinfulness, and her physical body is described only once in the entire novel in a short sentence narrated by her daughter: "She was plump and pretty and they called her the Jesus Belle" (*Oranges* 36). The mother in *Oranges*, then, can be seen as a mother who is controlling her daughter according to the dictates of men, specifically pastors and preachers connected to her evangelical fundamentalist church. She is thus specifically committed to controlling both her own body and the body of her child, sublimating her own and her child's bodily desires and functions to a religious institution. Another devoutly religious mother, Mrs. Munde, appears in *Boating for Beginners*, a humorous re-writing of the Biblical Noah's ark story and Winterson's second novel (sometimes described on the jacket as a comic book). Mrs. Munde can be seen as a humorous parody of "my mother" in *Oranges*.

Dogwoman, on the contrary, is a complete antithesis to these two mothers: a mothering figure that breaks boundaries and allows for difference. Where "my mother" exemplifies the mother in patriarchy for the female reader--the mother who socializes her child into an expected role and particularly attempts to replicate the heterosexual norm prevalent in white Western culture--Dogwoman, even though she can be seen as participating in patriarchal culture, attempts to facilitate her child's development according to the child's dreams and notions of the world, rather than her own. Further, where "my mother" socializes her child with strong support from a social institution, the evangelical church, and is determined to dedicate her child to the Lord, Dogwoman socializes her

child to rebel actively against the repressive religious views of the Puritans, which were the prevailing cultural norm during the Reformation when they lived, and encourages him in journeys which take him far from this culture. Winterson, having experienced mothering by a version of "my mother," can be seen to explore in Dogwoman an antithetical mother to her own, and one who encourages and facilitates her child's inner journeys, wherever they happen to lead. Jordan's journeys to foreign lands following the dancer Fortunata which Dogwoman facilitates in *Sexing* can be seen metaphorically as Jeannette's journeys to explore her lesbian sexuality in *Oranges*. Another extreme contrast between "my mother" and Dogwoman is that the former is almost completely disembodied, while Dogwoman's body dominates *Sexing*.

It is indeed Dogwoman's fabulous body that makes her such an empowering figure for the female reader. Because her body is the antithesis of the traditional heroine's body, as well as being the antithesis of the traditional mothering body, it invites a female reader to imagine a connection between female subjectivity and the body that is neither a traditional heroine's perfectly feminine body, nor the traditional mother's perfectly self-sacrificing body. Adrienne Rich, in her often-quoted study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, makes the point that not only women in general, but specifically mothers, must take control of their own bodies--bodies which have been verbally described and physically controlled by men through the institution of motherhood:

> Motherhood - unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism - has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism . . . . Throughout patriarchal mythology,

> dream-symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, "the devil's gateway." On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood - that same body with its bleedings and mysteries - is her single destiny and justification in life. These two ideas have become deeply internalized in women, even in the most independent of us, those who seem to lead the freest lives. (15)

To resist these representations of women's bodies found in the institution of motherhood, and replace them with more positive representations of women's bodies, seen from a female instead of a male standpoint, Rich advocates that:

> We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence - a new relationship to the universe. (*Of Woman Born*: 292)

Although Dogwoman's body does not always resist the representations of bodies found in the institution of motherhood, Dogwoman's body is not the traditional female body that is spoken of and never speaks itself. As Luce Irigaray also notes (see Chapter 1), whether a woman's body is discussed by the woman living in it, or another (historically male) observer, is an important question. Dogwoman thus appears, according to Irigaray and Rich, as the presiding genius of her own body, describing its strengths and weaknesses

herself. The postmodern fragmented style of *Sexing* could make it difficult for a reader to discern whose voice narrates which sections of the novel, but Winterson signposts which character is narrating by using pictographs. A banana precedes the sections narrated by Dogwoman, and a pineapple signals those narrated by Jordan. Both these fruits are presented in the text of the novel as strange and wondrous, never seen in England before the time of the Reformation. These pictographs can be seen to indicate that although Dogwoman is a mother going about daily life in her community, she is as adventurous as her son and pursues an inner journey of her own as he does. Winterson's strategy of having Dogwoman narrate her own sections of the novel is a powerful one, and differentiates Dogwoman sharply from the image of a traditional heroine. She is no beautiful damsel in distress, or prize for a hero successfully completing a quest, like the traditional heroine in a fable.

To construct a fable in which the hero is a son and the heroine is his mother is already a transgressive act from a traditional point of view. The usual fable ends with a heterosexual marriage, not a mother and son sailing off into the future. Such an ending could be read as incestuous, and resonates with Freud's notion of the Oedipus complex.[1] As Adrienne Rich points out, "it is mother-son incest which has been most consistently taboo in every culture and which has received the most obsessive attention in the literature

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[1] For the purposes of this thesis, the term "Oedipus complex" means the unconscious desire of a male to murder his father and marry his mother, which the character Oedipus does in Sophocles's play *Oedipus Rex*. This dynamic is the central complex around which Freudian psychoanalytic theory revolves. For a clinical description of "Oedipus complex," see Elizabeth Wright ed., *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: a Critical Dictionary*, or J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*.

men have written" (183-84). Furthermore, according to Rich, a mother traditionally appears as a figure whose relation with her son exemplifies the dynamics of the Oedipus complex:

> As her sons have seen her: the Mother in patriarchy: controlling, erotic, castrating, heart-suffering, guilt-ridden, and guilt-provoking; a marble brow, a huge breast, an avid cave; between her legs snakes, swamp-grass, or teeth; on her lap a helpless infant or a martyred son. She exists for one purpose: to bear and nourish the son. (183).

Dogwoman as a mother not only transgresses this Freudian notion of the mother-son relation, but also the present prevalent notion that male children learn to be men only from men. In psychoanalytic accounts of child development seen as valid in the United States today, according to Eve Sedgewick, masculinity can be conferred only by men: "Mothers, indeed, have nothing to contribute to this process of masculine validation, and women are reduced in the light of its urgency to a null set: any involvement in it by a woman is overinvolvement; any protectiveness is overprotectiveness" (75).

Another transgressive move in *Sexing* is Winterson's representation of a mother's body which exemplifies this most misogynistic patriarchal view of a female body, yet allies this body with a female character that evokes the reader's sympathy, admiration, and respect, for both the mother and the person. The body is grotesque, but the character is not. Furthermore, the standpoint of living in a body considered grotesque by those around her allows Dogwoman to observe her culture from a marginal viewpoint, producing an astringent critique of the culture despite the fact that her narrative is descriptive and

questioning, rather than polemical, in most cases.

Dogwoman's grotesque body, and specifically her breasts, can also be seen as transgressively threatening the border between motherhood and sexuality. Her breasts and nipples, are featured at the very beginning of *Sexing*, when Jordan describes his rescue from the slime of the riverbank by his mother: "She scooped me up, she tied me between her breasts whose nipples stood out like walnuts . . . " (10). The border between motherhood and sexuality is crossed at once, for Dogwoman is not Jordan's birth mother; therefore, her breasts cannot signify breastfeeding, the symbol of unconditional nurturing motherlove. The way that Dogwoman's breasts are foregrounded in this first section of the novel highlights the way that she presents her breasts to the world around her, and gives them meaning in way that exemplifies Iris Young's comments: "If the chest is a centre of a person's sense of being in the world, men and women have quite different experiences of being in the world. When a woman places her hand over her heart, it lies on and between her breasts" (189). Young sees breasts standing as a primary badge of sexual specificity, the irreducibility of sexual difference to a common measure, even though a phallocentric view of sexuality tries to orient the sexual around the erect penis, with active sexuality seen as the active male penis penetrating the passive female receptacle (194). From a phallocentric viewpoint, according to Young, intercourse is the true sex act and nonphallic pleasures are either deviant or preparatory; there is a scandal in a woman's experience of sexuality from this perspective, since a woman can derive the deepest pleasure, perhaps even greater pleasure than a man can provide through intercourse, from her breasts (194). Young believes that phallocentric heterosexist norms,

attempting to construct female sexuality as a complement to male sexuality even though a woman's sexual pleasure is different, deny and repress the sensitivity of breasts (194).

A patriarchal logic not only sees female sexuality as a complement to male sexuality, but, according to Young, "defines the exclusive border between motherhood and sexuality. The virgin or the whore, the pure or the impure, the nurturer or the seducer is either asexual mother or sexualized beauty, but one precludes the other" (196-97). Young goes on to build on Adrienne Rich's delineation of these contrary representations of mothers' bodies, quoted earlier in this chapter, by pointing out how breasts function to shatter the border between motherhood and sexuality. The separation of motherhood and sexuality enables the possibility of an ideal mother and a love that is all give and no take, who can be perceived as having a perfectly giving, selfless, nurturing, mothering body; patriarchy is founded on this border between motherhood and sexuality, which constructs a woman's body as both the flesh that a man desires and the nurturing source of his life and ego; the border is lived out in the way women experience their breasts and their breasts are culturally marked: to be understood as sexual, the feeding function of breasts must be suppressed, and when breasts are nursing they are seen as desexualized; breasts are a scandal, shattering the border between motherhood and sexuality, because mothers experience sexual pleasure nursing babies (198-99).

Nipples are even more scandalous than breasts, according to Young, for they clearly link the breasts to female sexuality: "Nipples are indecent. . . . Nipples are no-nos, for they show the breasts to be active and independent zones of sensitivity and eroticism" (195-96). Therefore, Young sees nipples as performing a useful political function for

feminism: "Nipples are taboo because they are, quite literally, physically, functionally undecidable in the split between motherhood and sexuality. One of the most subversive things feminism can do is affirm this undecidability of motherhood and sexuality" (199). Rather than romanticizing motherhood, or denying the dangers of eroticizing mothering, or even suggesting that all women should be mothers, Young strongly advocates the creation of a kind of love that will "insist that nurturers need, that love is partly selfish, and that a woman deserves her own irreducible pleasures" (200). Dogwoman's body can be seen as endorsing Young's political stance in several ways. Descriptions of Dogwoman's explorations of her sexuality are continually interspersed in the text with her descriptions of mothering Jordan, so that the boundaries between her motherhood and her sexuality are consistently and continually blurred. Jordan's initial description of her breasts and nipples portrays Dogwoman's breasts to be as active, independent and erotic as Young could imagine. Furthermore, she describes falling in love and washing her body to please her prospective lover (35), being accosted by a man and taking his penis in her mouth (40-41), mating with a man (106-07), listening through the wall to her parents copulating (107) and having philosophical thoughts on the nature of sexual love (34). These passages are all described by Dogwoman herself in graphic bodily terms, and through them Dogwoman's body is undeniably connected to sexual desire and practices. On another occasion, Dogwoman's breasts are seen as weapons when she becomes angry with a man who wishes to charge her money for a glimpse of the first banana ever seen in England: "I lifted Jordan up and I told Johnson that if he didn't throw back his cloth and let us see this wonder I'd cram his face so hard into my breasts that he'd wish he'd never been suckled by

a woman, so truly would I smother him" (12). Since her nipples have been likened to walnuts, this image is infinitely more hurtful than comforting. Here, symbols of motherhood become symbols of the war between the sexes and blur the boundaries of motherhood and sexuality further. Therefore, Dogwoman's breasts are deliberately detached from the notion of the nurturing and self-sacrificing mother, despite the fact that her role as Jordan's mother is a key factor in the novel. Instead, the attachment of her breasts to her own sexuality and to violence against men underline the notion of Dogwoman's body as grotesque.

The word grotesque, as Mary Russo comments, "evokes the cave - the grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral. As bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body (1). Russo goes on to delineate two currents of contemporary critical discourse on the grotesque, organized around the theory of carnival and the concept of the uncanny (6). According to Russo, the grotesque body in the first case is a social body; in opposition to the transcendental, monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek classical body, it is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing (8). In the second case, the image of the uncanny, grotesque body is never entirely locatable in or apart from the psyche, which depends upon the body image as a prop; subjectivity requires the image of the grotesque body (9). Elizabeth Grosz questions current notions of the female body in terms closely approximating Russo's description of the grotesque connected to the theory of carnival:

Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not

> only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment--not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order? (203)

Dogwoman's body connects with these notions of the grotesque and the female body posited by Russo and Grosz when Jordan invokes it in his first narrative sequence: "'Remember the rock from whence ye are hewn and the pit from whence ye are digged.' My mother carved this on a medallion and hung it around my neck the day she found me in the slime by the river." (10). Jordan's statement echoes the connections between slime and holes and female sexual organs found in malestream philosophical discourse.[2] Although Dogwoman is not Jordan's birth mother, it is she who produces him from the slime and it is she who carves the words on the medallion; therefore, it is to her that the notion of slime and holes attaches in Sexing. There is a very old saying, "Inter urinam et feces nascimur" (We are born between urine and feces) and the connection between dirt, the female sexual organs, birth and revulsion has been made by many critics. Northrop Frye remarks: "Dirt always has some psychological connection with excretion, and is linked to whatever we want to separate ourselves from" (262). Dogwoman's body, then, is strongly connected to notions of the grotesque and the abject (that which we are not,

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[2] For a discussion of the connections between slime and holes and female sexual organs in the existential philosophical writings of Sartre and de Beauvoir, see Toril Moi, "Existentialism and Feminism: the Rhetoric of Biology in the Second Sex."

that which we abject in order to construct the boundaries of our subjectivity).[3] Jordan himself verbalizes a need to abject his mother's body from his notion of himself, stating that, "I had myself to begin with, and that is what I lost. Lost it in my mother because she is bigger and stronger than me and that's not how it's supposed to be with sons" (101). This confusion concerning gender roles is connected to Dogwoman in another Biblical quote: "Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee" (Deuteronomy 32:18). Where Jordan's words cast Dogwoman's body as male, the Biblical quote casts it as both male and divine.

Notions of maleness and divinity in the carved words on the medallion, however, are dispelled rapidly by resonances of the word "pit," which not only connects Dogwoman's body to the abject and the grotesque -- "the female body (itself naturalized) and the `primal' elements, especially the earth" (Russo 1) -- but also echoes notions of the pit found in the Bible: "He [the Lord] brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings" (Psalms 40:2); "The mouth of strange women is a deep pit: he that is abhorred of the Lord shall fall therein" (Proverbs 22:14); "for a whore is a deep ditch; and a strange woman is a narrow pit. / She also lieth in wait as for a prey, and increaseth the transgressors among men" (Proverbs 23:27-28).

Further, Dogwoman's body is connected to a view of the grotesque that Mary Russo terms "the misogyny which identifies this hidden inner space with the visceral.

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[3] For further discussion of the abject, see Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection.*

Blood, tears, vomit, excrement - all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly, though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine - are down there in that cave of abjection" (2). Dogwoman states: "When Jordan was a baby he sat on top of me much as a fly rests on a hill of dung. And I nourished him as a hill of dung nourishes a fly, and when he had eaten his fill he left me" (11). Here she speaks of herself as a vast, unlimited supply of nourishment, but nourishment likened to excrement. Dogwoman makes other statements which relate her body to the abject. She describes herself as unclean when she relates how she grabs an offending man and pushes his face into her dress, whereupon he begins coughing and crying, for she has not had that dress off in five years and she hates to wash, believing that it exposes the skin to contamination (12, 35). When she is hot, she mentions that she sweats enough liquid to fill a bucket and it runs off her body in waterfalls carrying with it countless lice and other creatures (21). Dogwoman relates also how Jordan considers her his kin, even though she is as wide and muddy as the river that is his namesake, and she is grateful that he does not shudder in her company as others do (34, 64). Dogwoman's body here exemplifies the grotesque female body discussed by Russo, and Kristeva's maternal body which must be abjected to attain subjectivity.

The image of the pit contained in the words Dogwoman carves on the medallion she hangs around Jordan's neck thus suggests notions of the grotesque, as well as the connections between caves and female sexuality found in philosophical and religious texts. The image of the rock in these carved words also suggests bodies in other texts which combine the two notions of the grotesque discussed by Mary Russo: the carnival and the

uncanny. Both of these aspects of the grotesque can be found in bodies in Greek mythology and the Bible which can be read as the literary origins of Dogwoman's body, for her body is a direct parody of the body of Milton's Sin in *Paradise Lost* (Book II, lines 648-870). Sin's body exemplifies the carnivalesque grotesque body, blended with the world, with animals, with objects associated with degradation, filth, death and rebirth, described in images abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics (Russo 8). Sin is born from Satan's forehead, in the manner of the Greek goddess Athene, demonstrating the Christian notion that sin originates in the mind (*Paradise Lost* Book II lines 752-58). Sin's body, therefore, also exemplifies the uncanny grotesque body related to the psychic register and to the bodily as cultural projection of an inner state (Russo 9). Sin's body, as described by Milton, sits opposite Death at the gates of Hell: "a formidable shape," (Book II line 649). Milton has previously described Satan's body: "... in bulk as huge / As whom the Fables name of monstrous size . . . that Sea-beast / Leviathan, which God of all his works / Created hugest that swim th'Ocean stream" (Book I lines 196-97, 200-02). Like Leviathan, Satan's body has a "scaly rind," and lies on the burning lake in Hell "stretcht out huge in length" (Book I lines 206, 211). In words which echo Milton's description of Satan's body, Sin's body "ended foul in many a scaly fold / Voluminous and vast" (Book II lines 651-52).

In physical size and grotesqueness, Winterson's representation of Dogwoman's body replicates Milton's representation of Sin's body. Dogwoman describes an incident in which she imagines that she outweighs Samson, a circus elephant, and indeed when she throws herself into on a chair opposite him, he is projected so far into the sky that he

appears to be a black star (24-5). As Milton likens Sin to the largest mythical sea-beast Leviathan, Winterson likens Dogwoman to the largest mammal on earth. Dogwoman says that she knows people are afraid of her, since she stands taller than any of them; sitting on her father's knee as a child, she broke both his legs, and when Jordan was a baby, she sat him on the palm of her hand (25). Outlandish in size, Dogwoman also depicts herself as grotesquely ugly. She comments: "How hideous am I? My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas" (24).

The grotesque bodies of Milton's Sin and Winterson's Dogwoman both resonate with men's fears of women's bodies represented in mythology. Sin's womb, surrounded by the Hell Hounds barking incessantly and creeping in and out of it, and with barking and howling audible from within it, can be seen as representing a vagina dentata or "toothed vagina," prevalent in the mythologies of many cultures. Dogwoman bites off one man's penis, and her vagina swallows another man whole; therefore, her body can also be seen as deliberately acting out men's worst fears about women's sexual organs (*Sexing* 41, 106). She also embodies the notion of women as dangerous to men's lives and limbs. Dogwoman, a Royalist, punishes Puritan men for their crime of regicide by popping out their eyeballs and removing their teeth (85). Dissuaded from this practice by the finer sensibilities of those co-conspirators who find her zeal excessive, she helps the whores at the Spitalfields brothel to dismember and dispose of the bodies of the Puritan customers they are murdering, stating, "bodies mean nothing to me, dead or alive" (86). With her usual physical energy, Dogwoman dismembers dead bodies of Puritan men who have

supported the regicide, as well as the live bodies of Preacher Scroggs and Neighbour Firebrace. According to Dogwoman, Puritan men are hypocritical in carrying starched white handkerchiefs to spare them even the scent of pleasure, espousing personal and spiritual cleanliness and hating everything full of life on the one hand , while indulging in excessive sexual orgies of buggery, sodomy, and necrophilia on the other (26-7, 86-9). The bodies of Dogwoman's Puritan victims, on whom she performs all of these physical atrocities, are described in graphic detail. Dogwoman's physical actions are all similarly carefully detailed as she wields an axe sharp enough to slice a bed in half, to cut these men's bodies into pieces (87-9). At the end of this passionate orgy of physical dismemberment, matching in intensity the Puritans' sexual orgy with each other and various animals, Dogwoman purifies herself by stripping her body, washing it, going home naked and burning her clothes. Dogwoman's body here is likened to that of an angel, crossing and recrossing the borders between the visible and the invisible, seemingly at her will (89). Thus, rather than being an "angel in the house" a traditional image of the self-sacrificing mother, Dogwoman is an avenging angel out in the community at large, taking "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" with Old Testament zeal (84).

While the bodies of Dogwoman and Milton's Sin are similar in physical excess and grotesqueness, as well as in their embodiment of mythological fears of women's bodies, there is an enormous difference in how these bodies are treated by, and interact with, men. When Satan threatens to attack Death at Hell's gate, Sin tells him her story, reminding him that she was once his lovely daughter, born from his forehead in the manner of Athene from the head of Zeus, whom Satan himself has raped (*Paradise Lost* Book II lines 746-

814). During the course of her tale, Sin states that her present foul shape is the result of her agonizing labours to bring forth their son Death, the result of the incestuous rape. No sooner has Death been born, relates Sin, than he pursues his mother and rapes her as well, resulting in the yelling monsters that are continuously reconceived and reborn, creeping in and out of Sin's womb to howl and gnaw her bowels.

Milton's Sin speaks only to relate what her father, Satan, and their son, Death, have done to her body. Dogwoman speaks of her son Jordan and her own father in ways which foreground her own choices, decisions, and actions, and never abuse of her body. She is not Jordan's birth mother, but finds him, takes him home, and cares for him. He is portrayed as needing her care even into adulthood, never as displaying any violence toward her. Her own father, as already mentioned, was smaller than Dogwoman, even when she was a child. Because of her outlandish size, he attempted to sell her to a man who would have exhibited her, but "I burst the bounds of the barrel and came flying out at my father's throat. This was my first murder" (107). Her comments about her father clearly portray Dogwoman as physically overpowering him, rather than being overpowered. Thus Dogwoman's body, although it can be seen to emerge from the same misogynistic tradition as the body of Milton's Sin, wreaks revenge on men for the damage they do to women, rather than suffering abuse at the hands of men. For example, her anger against the practices of Puritans exists simultaneously with sympathy for Puritan women, evident in her comment when Preacher Scroggs's wife learns of her husband's death: "I watched her go with tears in my eyes to think what she had suffered and from what horrors she had been released" (129). Rather than "being" sin, a male view of a

female body used to portray the worst aspects of human behaviour and suffering the worst physical abuse males can inflict on a female, Dogwoman can be seen as punishing sin; instead of being used to represent all that is detestable in humankind, the same misogynistic view of a female body is used to embody the notion of violence against violence against women which has been advocated as a strategy by some twentieth century feminist political analysts (Dianne Chisholm 28).

The bodies of Milton's Sin and Winterson's Dogwoman are both depicted surrounded continually by dogs, but the connections between the dogs and the bodies of Sin and Dogwoman differ considerably. Describing Sin in *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes: "about her middle round / A cry of Hell Hounds never ceasing bark'd" (Book II: lines 653-4). Editor Merritt Hughes states in a footnote that, "the dogs around Sin's waist, and especially their Cerberean mouths -- a literally Ovidean phrase -- plainly match Ovid's description of Scylla, the lovely nymph whose body Circe transformed into a mass of yelping hounds from the waist down (Met.XIV, 40-74)" (247). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Circe poisons Scylla's bathing pool and casts a spell because she has been rejected by Scylla's rejected lover Glaucus. Scylla, wading in the water,

> sees her loins disfigured with barking monster-shapes. At the first, not believing that these are parts of her own body, she flees in fear and tries to drive away the boisterous , barking things. But what she flees she takes along with her; and, feeling for her thighs, her legs, her feet, she finds in place of these only gaping dogs'-heads, such as a Cerberus might have. She stands on ravening dogs, and her docked loins and her belly are enclosed in a circle of beastly forms. (XIV 305)

Ovid's Scylla is later changed into a rock which stands there to this day: "the dangerous reef between Sicily and the toe of the Italian boot" (Hughes 247). J.F. Gillam notes that, "Milton obviously had Scylla in mind in his description: the hounds that girdle Sin's waist would be enough to distinguish his model from similar monsters, even if he had not mentioned her by name" (345). Gillam also comments that the connection between Scylla and Sin appears in the writings of St. John Chrystosom, who states that if a painter drew *her* (emphasis mine), he would be correct in depicting Sin or hamartia as a woman, bestial in form, barbarous, breathing fire, hideous, and black, such as the pagan poets describe their Scyllas. According to Gillam, "allegorical interpretations of Scylla are found in both classical and medieval writers, and she is sometimes explained as personifying libido, which at least from the time of Prudentius had a conspicuous place in the canon of sins" (346). The body of Milton's Sin and its girdle of barking dogs is thus connected to the misogyny pervading Greek and Christian mythologies as well as those of Puritan England in the time of Milton, which is, ironically, the time in which the character Dogwoman lives as well.

Dogwoman's body is frequently depicted as surrounded by her dogs. When she goes to live at Wimbledon with Jordan, so that he can work for his friend and mentor John Tradescant who is the head gardener of the Queen's estate, "a half-wit went foaming and stuttering to Mr. Tradescant, crying that the garden had been invaded by an evil spirit and her Hounds of Hell" (29). Although this description strongly echoes Milton's description of Sin's body with its girdle of Hell Hounds, Dogwoman's dogs are her work and working with her dogs gives her professional status in her community. She breeds and trains

boarhounds, taking over her father's trade after his death and hoping that Jordan will take over the business (34). Dogwoman notes that her dogs are a source of both income and independence: "I would like to take Jordan to live in the country but we must be near Hyde Park so that I can enter my dogs in the races and fighting. Every Saturday I come home covered in saliva and bitten to death but with money in my pocket and needing nothing but a body for company" (13). As time passes, with Jordan grown and gone on a lengthy sea voyage with John Tradescant, Dogwoman rises in the world of dog-breeding and begins to sell her dogs to the nobility. She states proudly "I see I have a flair for enterprise. It was ever with me, but smothered, I think, under my maternalness and the pressing need to do away with scoundrels" (135). Adrienne Rich would concur with Dogwoman's pride in her independence, and would see it as beneficial to Jordan as well: "When the son ceases to be the mother's outreach into the world, because she is reaching out into it herself, he ceases to be instrumental for her and has the chance to become a person" (206). Jordan does not see his mother's emotional investment in wo. . with her dogs from the same perspective, for he does not understand that she refrains from voicing her regret at his leaving in order to ensure that he follow his own chosen journey: "When I left, I think it was relief she felt at being able to continue her old life with the dogs" (101).

Jordan's statement not only illustrates the difference between the function of dogs in connection to the bodies of Milton's Sin and Winterson's Dogwoman, but also points to another difference between these two mothering bodies: their connections to their sons. The body of Milton's Sin is torn and disfigured by the birth of her son; she is subsequently raped by him and tortured further by the resulting animalistic progeny. Dogwoman's

body, on the contrary, is not traumatized by her son's birth, as she is not his birth mother, and her son's treatment of her is never abusive or violent, whether described from his point of view or hers. When Jordan speaks of his mother, his words usually foreground her physical body, and his first memories of her are memories of rescue by a female body. He describes her face and body as she picks him up and takes him home (10). In adulthood, Jordan reminisces, "when I think about her, or dream about her, she is always huge and I am always tiny . . . She's laughing, and so am I . . . . I imagine her on the bank, in a bottle . . . my mother comes thickening out like a genie from a jar, growing bigger and bigger and finally solidifying into her own proportions" (79). Although Jordan does verbalize his need to differentiate himself from his mother's body, he also identifies with her body in statements such as "I want to be like my rip-roaring mother who cares nothing for how she looks, only for what she does" (101). Moreover, he describes dressing in women's clothing and gaining many insights about the practices and thoughts of women concerning men (30-33). Through Jordan's statements about his mother's body, as well as his narrative about his cross-dressing xperience, Winterson writes a son who negates the Freudian Oedipal view of the relation between mother and son, and displays what Eve Sedgewick terms "a secure identification with the resource-richness of a mother" (75).

Not only are Jordan's thoughts about his mother couched in terms of her physical body, but so are Dogwoman's attitudes toward child-rearing. Dogwoman states: "I wanted to give him a river name, a name not bound to anything. When a woman gives birth her waters break and she pours out the child and the child runs free" (11). Accordingly, when Jordan was three, she took him to see a banana, an extreme rarity in

the early 1600s in England. Looking at the banana, as their bodies touch, Jordan's vision becomes visible to his mother: "I put my head next to his head and looked where he looked and I saw deep blue waters against a pale shore and trees whose branches sang with green and birds in fairground colours and an old man in a loin-cloth. This was the first time Jordan set sail" (13). Dogwoman's body is thus metaphorically connected to her son's development of his imagination, and the beginnings of his voyages of discovery, and it is she who physically helps her young son mend his toy boats as he makes imaginary childhood voyages (19). Dogwoman does sometimes regret that her son's visions take him far from her. She states: "I should have named him after a stagnant pond and then I could have kept him, but I named him after a river and in the flood-tide he slipped away" (11). When she realizes that Jordan will go voyaging with John Tradescant, Dogwoman struggles with her feelings: "I saw the look on Jordan's face and my heart became a captive in a locked room. I couldn't reach him now. I knew he would go" (71). However, she remains true to her vision of her body pouring out a child to run free, for Jordan's comments show that he never realizes his mother's true emotions: "Even while Tradescant was talking about it she got up and went for a walk. She was busy with her own mind, but I was hurt" (101). When Jordan returns years later, Dogwoman declines to reveal how much his absence hurt her: "I wanted to tell him things, to tell him I loved him and how much I'd missed him, but thirteen years of words were fighting in my throat . . . There was too much to say so I said nothing" (108-9).

Dogwoman's body and the body of Milton's Sin also differ enormously in their connections to the worlds they inhabit, despite the fact that they both inhabit the world of

the fable. Sin, as we have seen, sits eternally at the gates of Hell with her son Death. Dogwoman's body is very interactive in its community, and can be seen as the abject body against which the community defines itself. In this context, Dogwoman's body takes on the function of the grotesque characterized by Russo, following the writings of Bakhtin, as carnivalesque: "identified with non-official 'low' culture of the carnivalesque, and with social transformation" (8). Dogwoman's body is the reverse of the proper female body of the Puritan England of the Reformation in which she lived: "The Puritans . . . forgot that we are born into flesh and in flesh must remain. Their women bind their breasts and cook plain food without salt, and the men are so afraid of their member uprising that they keep it strapped between their legs with bandages" (67). Dogwoman's breasts with their protruding nipples are quite the opposite of unbound. When told that cleanliness is next to Godliness by a Puritan, she retorts, "God looks on the heart, not a poor woman's dress" (22). Dogwoman also resolves "to spit on the Puritans whenever I passed them and to wear in my hair bright braids of clashing colour whenever I had occasion to be near one of their churches (83).

The notion of Dogwoman's body as abjected by the Puritan culture of her time is intensified by the body of her neighbour, a crone whose body is even more abjected by a Puritan ethic than that of Dogwoman herself:

> My neighbour, who is so blackened and hairless that she has twice been mistaken for a side of salt beef wrapped in muslin, airs herself abroad as a witch. No one knows her age; what age can there be for a piece of leather like a football that serves as a head and a fantastical mass of rags that serves as a body . . . She hardly

> moves but her hands are never still, scratching her head and her groin and darting out to snatch food and ram it square into her mouth . . . One look at her chin and it takes no witchery to divine what she has been eating these three weeks since. (13-14).

Despite the crone's disgusting bodily appearance and habits, however, it is to her that Dogwoman takes Jordan when she first finds him as an infant, to scrape off the mud and wash him down, and it is this crone who has the gift of prophecy (14). By the time Jordan returns from his voyaging, the crone is more shrunken and even more destitute, for she has lost her house, and Dogwoman has lent her a dog kennel to live in (105). Nevertheless, it is to her that Dogwoman takes Jordan, delirious with fever, demanding that she make him well. The crone brings over a pan of evil-smelling fluid to heal Jordan, "and after a few days Jordan's fever abated and he was well enough to eat a chop" (141) Finally, when Dogwoman is to sail away from the burning city of London with Jordan, "I would gladly have taken the dog kennel and its occupant, but she would not come" (143). Fortunata is Jordan's muse in this novel, and although she does not physically accompany Jordan as he sails into the future, her body will always be Jordan's marker: he will never forget what he has learned from her (103). Similarly, the witchlike crone can be seen to be Dogwoman's muse, for she declines to accompany Dogwoman into the future, but it is to her that Dogwoman comes when she is in trouble, and it is her gifts of healing and prophecy which Dogwoman needs and respects. The crone's grotesque and shrunken body can be seen as a distilled version of Dogwoman's grotesque enormous body; these two bodies simultaneously represent the most misogynistic views of the female body and the

embodiment of strong, resourceful, gifted womanhood.

There is no doubt that Winterson's depiction of Dogwoman's body is strong and dynamic, or that she remains in the reader's mind long after the novel is finished. The question to ask, after all, is whether or not this grotesque and unforgettable body serves a subversive function in the novel, or is just another misogynistic portrait of the female body approximating the myriad similar ones found throughout malestream literature. Although the narrative of this novel is shared by Dogwoman and her son Jordan, it is Jordan's narratives which begin and end the tale. It is Jordan who sails the seas with John Tradescant and brings back a pineapple from the Bahamas. It is also Jordan's quest that can be seen as the heart of the novel: his search for his invisible life and for the dancer Fortunata, who performs the function of Jordan's female muse. For her part, Dogwoman performs very traditional mothering functions: she rescues Jordan from the river as Pharoah's daughter plucks the Biblical Moses from the bulrushes, she introduces him to his visions, mends his toy boats, moves to Wimbledon so that he can work with John Tradescant, sends him off on his voyages with a stiff upper lip and waits for his return. When her returns haggard and ill, she nurtures him again, coerces the witchlike crone to heal him, then accompanies him to his future life. One could say that her entire life in the novel revolves around that of her son.

Why, then, is Dogwoman so appealing to a female reader? To find the answer, we must return again to her body. We readers watch Dogwoman go about her daily life, solving problems, doing her paid work, interacting with others in her community, fighting for social justice and social change, attempting to find companionship and love without

compromising her principles, struggling to mother her son in a way which facilitates his following his own dreams and visions, and we see all this through the lens of Dogwoman's body. In her narrative, the locus of her experiences is her body: the grotesque body which is both her ally and her foe. Her body prevents her from achieving many of her desires, but enables her to achieve some of them as well. When we think of how female bodies are objectified, attacked, vilified, programmed, dieted, constricted, medicalized, litigated and controlled in myriad ways in Western culture, it is no wonder that a female reader can relate to this grotesque body: uncontrollable, flowing, enormous, ugly, violent, tender, loving, energetic, smelly, noisy, rough, dirty, it is everything the female body is <u>not</u> supposed to be. It is an escape from the image of the proper feminine body that appeals to the women inhabiting bodies which in our culture are so overcontrolled by the notion of femininity.

The question that Mary Russo poses, however, remains:

> In what sense can women really produce or make spectacles of themselves? . . . [T]he marginal position of women and others in the `indicative' world makes their presence in the `subjunctive' or possible world of the topsy-turvy carnival `quintessentially' dangerous. . . . In other words, in the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive - dangerous, and in danger. (60)

Optimistically, Russo concludes that, "the conjuncture of a powerful women's movement and feminist scholarship has facilitated further interrogation of the relationship between symbology and social change. The figure of the female transgressor as public spectacle is

still powerfully resonant, and the possibilities of redeploying this representation as a demystifying or utopian model have not been exhausted" (60-1). It seems to me that in depicting the grotesque body of Dogwoman, Winterson has given us a female body that incorporates all the misogynist features of the female body imaginable, but a female body that is at the same time invincible and fabulous. Like the body of a Superwoman, Dogwoman's body pursues a feminist agenda, and effects social change. This is the body of a mother who does not follow prescriptions for compulsory heterosexuality, and in fact queers the traditional notion of motherhood: Dogwoman does not marry, she does not have a male lover, she does not reproduce a child by mating with a man, she brings up her child as a single mother with the help of other women.

Moreover, Dogwoman's body enacts a religious apocalypse. In her novel *Oranges*, Winterson shows us a mother who is controlled by the power of religious fundamentalism, and who manipulates that power in an effort to control her daughter in the interests of a fundamentalist church. In *Sexing*, Winterson shows us a mother whose body wreaks revenge on repressive institutionalized religion. When John Tradescant gives Dogwoman a peach, he tells her "You are eating from the King's tree" (22). She can be seen as a type of Eve, who eats the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge (in this case Adam gives it to Eve), and her struggle with the Puritans can be cast as a power struggle over the right to interpret and disseminate religious knowledge. Dogwoman, rather than upholding the repressive aspects of religion as "my mother" does, acts as an apocalyptic figure. Wearing the uniform of an executioner and wielding an axe, she dismembers Puritans for their crime of regicide (87). At the end of the novel, Dogwoman sees the

plague that consumes London as God's revenge on a city corrupted by Puritanism: a city which should, in her opinion, be burned to ashes to cleanse it of sin. Accordingly, she pours a vat of oil on a fire that starts in a baker's yard in Pudding Lane, deeming that she is furthering the work of God (141-43). Dogwoman's body accomplishes a purging such as that described in the Biblical Revelation of St. John the Divine. What we wish to do in the face of oppression, Dogwoman's body does. How can this body not effectively assist a female reader to construct her own subjectivity in positive ways? Do we not find Dogwoman, commenting on the curiosities of the world around her while in the process of physically turning this world upside down, both hilarious and wonderful, to be cheered on the way readers applaud the exploits of Homer's Ulysses or King Arthur's Knights? Dogwoman's fabulous body and its activities work to create a carnival effect such as Mary Russo envisions: "Carnival and carnival laughter remain on the horizon with a new social subjectivity . . . I see us viewed by ourselves and others, in our bodies and in our work, in ways that are continually shifting the terms of viewing, so that looking at us, there will be a new question . . . Why <u>are</u> these old hags laughing?" (73).

Villanelle: female flesh as holy

> The mystics and the churchmen talk about throwing off this body and its desires, being no longer a slave to the flesh. They don't say that through the flesh we are set free.
>
> Jeannette Winterson

Villanelle, like Dogwoman in *Sexing the Cherry*, is one of the two narrative voices in Jeannette Winterson's third novel, *The Passion*. However, she is a perplexing and confusing figure, compared to the more straightforward Dogwoman. Villanelle is a complex and dizzying combination of a prostitute, a worker in a gambling casino, a mother, a lesbian, and a Christ figure, with a fabulous body that is extremely attractive according to white Western standards of female beauty, as well as hermaphroditic, animalistic, occasionally cross-dressed, and able to perform miracles. Villanelle's body questions the nature of passion, while linking the passions for sex, love, religion, food and gambling which intertwine throughout the novel. In *The Passion*, Winterson offers no answers to the questions posed by Villanelle's body, and indeed indicates that people have very ambivalent attitudes toward the notion of passion:

> Words like passion and extasy, we learn them but they stay flat on the page. Sometimes we try to turn them over, find out what's on the other side, and everyone has a story to tell of a woman or a brothel or an opium night or a war. We fear it. We fear passion and laugh at too much love and those who love too

much. And still we long to feel. (155)

Winterson explores and interweaves the passions of the soldier Henri for Napoleon, Napoleon for chickens, Villanelle for a married woman, Henri for Villanelle, a casino patron/army cook for Villanelle, and gamblers for gambling, in a series of vignettes and stories. Villanelle's body moves among these stories like a will-o-the-wisp, illuminating them fitfully, but ambiguously, with her body appearing differently in each situation.

Telling stories for Winterson, as we have seen, is a political act, designed to challenge people to examine the stories of their culture and to invent their own stories. Two short imperative sentences occur like a refrain throughout *The Passion*, and comprise its closing words: "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (*Passion* 5, 13, 40, 69, 160). These sentences urge the reader to accompany Winterson into the realm of fable, while a wry "Don't believe that one" is designed to increase the reader's trust (23). In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Winterson explains her notion of the trust between readers and author: "they will climb with you to the most unlikely places if they trust you" (Winterson, Interview 1994). Winterson, once a preacher herself, points out to Wachtel similarities in the trust developed between author-reader and preacher-audience: "the most successful preachers are the ones who are able to convince their audience that the audience themselves have got it wrong and the preacher's got it right, and of course the artist tries to do this too. There are close parallels." From this perspective, *The Passion* can be seen as a collection of stories in which, as in the Bible, the divine intervenes in the lives of human beings and miracles occur which cannot be proven. Furthermore, the Bible and *The Passion* both connect love and faith, affirming that love is what gives life its meaning,

and demanding a leap of faith on the part of the reader. The title of the novel recalls the Passion of Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion, when Christ's love for, and faith in, God the Father was put to the ultimate test. When Wachtel asks for the source of her passion for language, Winterson acknowledges a debt to the Bible: "I suppose it comes from the Bible. . . . It contains in it ways of speaking, parables and stories, fictions, which are very potent and very powerful."

Winterson's foregrounding of the Bible in her writing begins with her first novel, *Oranges are not the only fruit*, a semi-autobiographical account of her growing up in an Evangelical Christian household (Hinds 154). Catherine Blair includes her second novel, *Boating for Beginners*, in "a twentieth-century tradition of women's rewritings of the Bible" (10). In her third novel, *The Passion*, Winterson departs from both autobiography and a direct rewriting of Biblical narrative to tell a story containing a female Christ figure: the main female character, Villanelle. In this novel, particularly through her representation of Villanelles's body, Winterson can be seen to attempt to harness the power of Biblical language and images to address concerns of gender, sexuality, and spirituality. In *Boating for Beginners*, Winterson explains that myth provides pointers for living which we need even in our present culture, for while myth seems to explain our world to ourselves, it actually creates room for us to explain our world as we imagine it to be:

> . . . what remains true is the potency of the myth. Myths hook and bind the mind because at the same time they set the mind free: they explain the universe while allowing the universe to go on being unexplained; and we seem to need this even now, in our twentieth-century grandeur. The Bible writers didn't care that they

> were bunching together sequences some of which were historical, some preposterous, and some downright manipulative. Faithful recording was not their business; faith was. . . . Robes and incense and larger-than-life and miracles and heroes. It's all there, it's heart-food, and the more we deprive ourselves of colours and folly, the more attractive that now legitimate folly will become. . . . It's very beautiful, and it's a pointer for living. The mistake is to use it as a handbook. That way madness lies. (66)

Myth not only allows us to explain our world to ourselves imaginatively, but, as Alicia Ostriker notes in her book *Stealing the Language*, there is considerable authority that accrues to an author through the use of myth:

> Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by culture, the poet is using myth. . . . Historic and quasi-historic figures like Napoleon and Sappho are in this sense mythic, as are folktales, legends, and Scripture. Like the gods and goddesses of classical mythology, all such material has a double power. It exists or appears to exist objectively, outside the self. Because it is in the public domain, it confers on the writer a sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes 'merely' of the private self. Myth belongs to 'high' culture and is handed 'down' through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority. At the same time, myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation - everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable. (212-13)

Winterson therefore takes unto herself extra authority in her story-telling through invoking

the Bible. Ostriker goes on to explain that it is critically important for women writers to relate positively to the predominantly malestream myths of our Western culture. She advocates that women writers move from a rejection of past authority to a recognition that the faces in mythology may be our own, and to a personal illumination that recalls and reproduces the psychic origin of all myth (215). Ostriker also points out, however, that relating positively to malestream myths, particularly the Bible, is not easy for women:

> How can we - how do we - deal with that ur-text of patriarchy, that particular set of canonized tales from which our theory and practice of canonicity derives, that paradigmatic meta-narrative in which innumerable small narratives rest like many eggs in a very large basket - the Book of Books which we call the Bible? (*Feminist Revision and the Bible* 27)

Ostriker argues that by going to the Bible itself, women can observe within biblical narrative the actual process of the patriarchy constructing itself, and if women can demonstrate that women writers respond multiply and plurally to this text, we can begin to examine the relation of women to the canon at large, moving beyond the simple assumption that a male text is a woman's enemy (121). Rather than an adversarial hermeneutics of suspicion or a hermeneutics of desire, Ostriker recommends a hermeneutics of indeterminacy: "There is not and cannot ever be a 'correct' interpretation, there can only be another, and another, and another. . . . Human civilization has a stake in plural readings" (122). Winterson appears to concur with Ostriker's viewpoint when she comments that in the rewriting of stories, of history, of myths, she offers another story about the story, rather than a definitive version (Marvel 168).

Other women writers point out that one can interpret the Bible from many standpoints, and offer various spaces and strategies for feminist intervention. The Bible is seen as a pilgrim wandering through history to merge past and present, embracing claims and counterclaims in witness to the complexities and ambiguities of existence (Trible 1). It is neither a feminist resource nor a sexist manifesto, but portrays and encompasses difference; all readings, including the sexist readings we have become used to, are relatively arbitrary, although in spite of major differences in the innumerable readings of the Bible, there has been in Christian, Western culture a continuous line toward a dominant reading: a monolithically misogynist view of those biblical stories wherein female characters play a role, and a denial of the importance of women in the Bible as a whole (Bal 1-2). An effect of this dominant reading is the "immasculation of the female reader" (a term denoting that a female reader is forced to read from a masculine viewpoint), which can be countered by various strategies including role reversal in some biblical texts and substituting females for males in others (Tolbert 17-19). Alicia Ostriker remarks that a recent development in women's biblical revisionism is a tremendous outpouring of comedy, shameless sexuality, an insistence on sensual immediacy and the details belonging to the flesh as holy, an insistence that the flesh is not incompatible with the intellect (*Feminist Revision and the Bible* 81).

In *The Passion*, I believe that Winterson effects some of the strategies mentioned by these feminist critics through her representation of the fabulous body of Villanelle, the only body in the novel with divine attributes. The other narrative figure is male, but Henri depends on Villanelle's miraculous powers to deliver him just as sinners depend on Christ.

In reversing the gender of a Christ figure, Winterson can be seen as effecting the substitution of one gender for another advocated by Tolbert. Merely reversing the sex of a Christ figure, however, is far too uncomplicated a strategy for Winterson. Christ's body in the Bible is never described in physical detail, whereas Villanelle's body is described from many points of view including her own. Furthermore, these descriptions at times present Villanelle's body as simultaneously Christ-like and sexual: for example, in one incident she is seen as both prostitute and crucified Christ figure, whereas Christ's body in the Bible is never portrayed as sexual (70). Winterson's representation of Villanelle's body exemplifies the Biblical revisionism remarked by Ostriker; a shameless sexuality, an insistence on sensual immediacy, the details of the flesh as holy and the compatibility of flesh and intellect are all present in connection with this body. Villanelle's body also forces a reader to imagine faith and spirituality as extending beyond the Bible and religious institutions into areas eschewed by traditional interpretations of the Bible. Winterson's novel thus troubles the traditional dominant reading of Biblical narrative by inscribing difference as advocated by Bal.

Winterson, however, inscribes difference on and through Villanelle's body by a more dramatic strategy than those listed above. Villanelle's body is also that of a freak. Elizabeth Grosz posits that,

> the freak is an object of simultaneous horror and fascination because, in addition to whatever infirmities and abilities he or she exhibits, he or she is an ambiguous being, a being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life. Freaks are those human beings who exist outside the structure of binary

> oppositions which govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition . . . . Freaks cross the borders which divide the subject off from all ambiguities, interconnections and reciprocal classifications. They imperil the very definitions we rely on to classify humans, identities, sexes - our most fundamental categories of self-definition. ("Freaks" 3)

Mary Russo links this notion of the freak to the notion of the divine when she comments: "the tradition of the freak as monster - literally, the de-monstrater of the marvelous power of the divine - has a long history in European culture" (75). Villanelle's body demonstrates the ambiguities and connection with divine noted by Grosz and Russo, crossing the borders between humans and animals, male and female sexes, and humans and gods, as well as demonstrating the power of the divine.

Villanelle's extraordinary status, like that of Christ, is foretold before her birth (49-51). Her father, like all the legendary Venetian boatmen, has webbed feet and can walk on water. However, having contravened custom and shown his webbed feet to a tourist for a purse of gold, he disappears forever. Her pregnant mother, going to the island of the dead to pray for a boatman's feet for a son or a clean heart for a daughter, also contravenes custom by dropping a sprig of rosemary into the sea when an owl knocks her shoulder with its wing, and her child is born during an eclipse of the sun. Thus Villanelle begins life in the midst of a series of omens that all point simultaneously to the monstrous and the divine, for: "In folk customs, rosemary was regarded as a protective agent against illnesses and evil spirits, and in this sense it was used particularly at births, wedding, and deaths. --As a hardy, evergreen plant, rosemary is an old symbol of love, fidelity, fertility,

and immortality" (*The Herder Dictionary of Symbols* 162). Furthermore, "the owl and its call are considered uncanny and are taken as omens portending misfortune. . . . --Since it sees in the dark and is thought to be serious and pensive, it also symbolizes wisdom, which penetrates the darkness of ignorance. . . . --In Christian symbolism it appears negatively as the image of spiritual darkness, but positively as a symbol of religious knowledge or Christ, as the light that illuminates the darkness" (*HDS* 143-44). Finally, "The total solar eclipse is a seldomly occurring event that has long terrified people and has given rise to evil premonitions and prophecies of catastrophe. . . . [T]he eclipse of the sun and of the moon is often associated with the death of the celestial body which is thought to have been devoured by a monster" (*HDS* 65). The symbols and portents include an absent father and a winged messenger coming to the mother--both features of Christ's birth. The birth of Villanelle lives up to all of these ominous portents: "it was when they spread me out to dry that my mother fainted and the midwife felt forced to open another bottle of wine. My feet were webbed" (51).

To discuss Villanelle's extraordinary and complex body is a task which stretches the imagination as much as Winterson could wish, but she does provide a clue in her character's name. Villanelle: a name to conjure with, a name that haunts, a name that teases - villain, villainess, vanilla? Surprisingly, it is a musical and poetic form, originally from Italy: "villanella, a rustic song or dance, villano, a peasant."[1] Introduced into France in the 16th century, the villanelle at first was distinguished only by a pastoral subject and a

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[1] This quote, and the following information about the villanelle are from Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

refrain. Later it became standardized into the 19 line poem in tercets on only two rhymes, in which the first and third line of the first tercet are repeated alternately as the third line of the following tercets, and appear together at the end of the final stanza, thus creating a quatrain. While French poets treated it as a stanza type and took liberties with it, in England it was invested with the status of a fixed form. Twentieth-century writers Dylan Thomas, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop, among others, have written villanelles. The villanelle has been described as a plait of gold and silver threads into which is woven a third, rose-coloured thread; the metallic, unyielding character of the refrains is an emotional fact which the rose-coloured thread of the intellect, in the various gyrations of the poem, tries in vain and in vain to escape. The lines of the rose-coloured thread have been characterized as attempting to withstand the conspiracy of the refrains and to assert change and mortality, thus having a peculiar poignancy and vulnerability.

Her name thus gives Winterson's character a form or structure, containing "refrains" of recurring themes of obsession and destiny, and a "rose-coloured thread" of change and mortality, which can be seen reflected in her body: her physical body echoes the body of a verse form. If Villanelle is indeed a villanelle, I believe that the most dominant refrains, the "plait of gold and silver threads," are her webbed feet and games of chance, while her heart is the "rose-coloured strand" of the villanelle, appearing again and again in different guises, always when Villanelle is attempting to counteract the control over her life maintained by the two dominant refrains. Her webbed feet and games of chance are both foregrounded by the old and disgusting hag whom Villanelle calls "a philosopher," "[m]y philosopher friend," or simply "my friend" (54, 74, 114). Like the old

crone in *Sexing the Cherry*, this old woman has the gift of prophecy, and her eating habits, living space and personal appearance are all portrayed as bizarre and filthy--for example, she is seen wearing a crown made out of rats tied in a circle by their tails (74). This toothless crone with green slimy hair says to Villanelle, "You're a Venetian, but you wear your name as a disguise. Beware the dice and games of chance" (54). Villanelle's name disguises her nationality, since it is French, while she herself is Italian. Furthermore, she has a body made ambiguously sexual by her webbed feet, attributes solely belonging to the men in her culture, while her name proclaims her as unambiguously female.

These male attributes, Villanelle's webbed feet, are the most dominant refrain connected with her body, as well as the aspects of her body that make her a freak. Before her birth, it is made clear that traditionally only males in a boatman's family have webbed feet. Therefore, at birth, her mother agrees to the midwife's attempt to cut the webs between Villanelle's toes, "but her knife sprang from the skin leaving no mark. She tried again and again between all the toes on each foot. She bent the point of the knife, but that was all. 'It's the Virgin's will,' she said at last, finishing the bottle. 'There's no knife can get through that'" (52). Weeping and wailing, her mother is not comforted until her stepfather comes home and comments that with shoes, the webs will be invisible. The reactions of horror, surgical intervention, and erasure of difference shown here have been typical ones historically for parents and caretakers faced with a sexually ambiguous infant body, and still are in our present culture. Discussing sexual ambiguity and the ideology of gender, Julia Epstein points out:

> the transvestite gesture signals the possibility that the social body is as fluid as the

> private body's drapery and that the gender definitions regulating the social order may shift and mutate. The anatomically ambiguous individual is even more threatening. Hermaphrodites . . . have historically posed epistemological challenges to definitions of natural boundaries and to the very notion of gender clarity itself. (100)

Epstein goes on to say that hermaphrodites have traditionally been fit into teratology (the study of monsters); historically, the mark of ambiguity originates in the genitals, and hermaphrodites in antiquity were frequently put to death (100-01). Although medical science now understands sexual development anomalies, according to Epstein, "in a curious way, the results of total medicalization return us to the semiotics of teratology: individuals with gender disorders are permitted to live, but the disorders themselves are rendered invisible, are seen as social stigmata to be excised in the operating room. Difference, again, is erased" (116). From this perspective, although her body is not sexually ambiguous in its genitalia, Villanelle's webbed feet can be read as a metaphor for male genitalia, for they have been marked as appurtenances specific to male bodies. Villanelle's body can thus be seen as hermaphroditic, particularly when its reception in the novel is similar to that currently given to hermaphroditic bodies in white Western culture.

Villanelle's body as hermaphroditic becomes relevant to her when her desires concerning her life's work are deemed inappropriate by parents and community. Villanelle notes, "what I would have most liked to have done, worked the boats, was closed to me on account of my sex" (53). Villanelle's restrictions on account of her webbed feet result in her working in a gambling casino, bringing her in contact with games of chance and

connecting the two dominant refrains of the villanelle. Villanelle's webbed feet are physically hidden at the casino, but the hermaphroditic aspect of her body, though invisible, can be seen as performed by the transvestite gesture. Having a body with both male and female sexual attributes, she elects to perform the male gender at the casino.[2] Here, Villanelle's body signals the social body as fluid and gender definitions open to shifts and mutations, in the manner noted by Epstein. Villanelle's refusal to even attempt the performance of a proper sexual identity also signals her as assuming a queer identity. She hides her hermaphroditic inscription, not by assuming a female identity which would be upheld by the secondary sex characteristics of her undressed body, but by assuming a male identity which would be upheld only by the revelation of her hermaphroditic status.

Winterson also constructs Villanelle as queer by placing her in a location dedicated to pleasure and excess. Villanelle states: "Since Bonaparte captured our city of mazes in 1797, we've more or less abandoned ourselves to pleasure. . . . We became an enchanted island for the mad, the rich, the bored, the perverted. Our glory days were behind us but our excess was just beginning" (52). However, Villanelle's workplace, the casino, is calculated to take economic advantage of these pleasure-seekers: "Satisfying our guests is what we do best. The price is high but the pleasure is exact" (55). Rosemary Hennessy argues: "Recognizing that pleasure does not exceed the social but is itself constituted through the often contradictory economic, political, and ideological production of social life means that its hegemonic articulation is always precarious" ("Queer Theory, Left

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[2] For an extensive discussion of gender as performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*.

Politics" 107). Villanelle exemplifies this statement, since she describes herself cross-dressing for economic reasons. Her relation to the pleasure she describes is complicated; she cross-dresses not just for her pleasure, but for a heightened seductive effect that produces a heightened economic profit. According to Julia Epstein, the lyrics of a popular twentieth-century song, *Woman or a Man?*, suggest "a kind of seductiveness in the very plasticity of gender designations" (100). Villanelle describes her transvestite body as producing a similar seductive effect for profit in her trade:

> I dressed as a boy because that's what the visitors liked to see. It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste. . . . I made up my lips with vermilion and overlaid my face with white powder. I had no need to add a beauty spot, having one of my own in just the right place. I wore my yellow Casino breeches with the stripe down each side of the leg and a pirate's shirt that concealed my breasts. This was required, but the moustache I added was for my own amusement. And perhaps for my own protection. (54-5).

Potential violence towards women, then, joins economics to further complicate Villanelle's relation to pleasure and sexuality. Villanelle knows that one physically repellent but wealthy casino patron comes to play games of chance with her specifically because of his fascination with her sexually ambiguous body: "now and again I wear a codpiece to taunt him. My breasts are small, so there's no cleavage to give me away, and I'm tall for a girl, especially a Venetian" (56). Although Villanelle knows that this man has a passion for her androgynous body, she feels that physical sexual ambiguity is another

matter: "I wonder what he'd say to my feet" (56). Pragmatically, Villanelle considers marrying him: "He has promised to keep me in luxury and all kinds of fancy goods, provided I go on dressing as a young man in the comfort of our own home" (63). Villanelle's body thus demonstrates that in the realm of queer politics, because of economics and potential physical danger, women occupy a different place than men, and this different place does have material consequences for her body. For example, when Villanelle rejects the advances of the casino patron, he rapes her, and eventually she marries him for his money, even though she despises him (64, 96). When she leaves him, he gains his revenge by selling her as a whore into the French army (99). Economics and the femaleness of her body thus restrict Villanelle from displaying "in your face" queer defiance. Therefore, women and men are positioned differently by their bodies even in a queer culture, and Villanelle's body is connected to a notion of work rather than pleasure.

The sexual ambiguity of her body proves attractive not only to the bestial male casino patron, however, but also to a mysterious female patron, for whom Villanelle has a passion. She invites Villanelle to dinner, causing Villanelle to ponder the meaning of her body once again: "She thought I was a young man. I was not. Should I go to see her as myself and joke about the mistake and leave gracefully? . . . And what was myself? Was this breeches and boots any less real than my garters? What was it about me that interested her?" (65-66). Villanelle's sexually ambiguous body is put to the test when the passion between Villanelle and the woman leads to physical intimacy. The woman asks to stroke Villanelle's feet, provoking the greatest alarm in Villanelle: "Sweet Madonna, not my feet" (70). She then asks Villanelle to take off her shirt, which Villanelle eventually

does (71). Villanelle is willing to expose herself as a cross-dresser, but not as a hermaphrodite. Here she can be seen as reacting to the fact that a cross-dresser and a hermaphrodite have very different options open to them. A cross-dresser, who has only one gender inscribed on her or his body, can choose to perform it or the opposite gender at will, but if naked, becomes visually a female or male body. A cross-dresser's body can only be queer through actions. A hermaphrodite's body, containing a mixture of female and male gender characteristics, can perform a female or male gender when dressed, but is discovered when naked to be intrinsically and unalterably queer, subject to shame and rejection. Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance appears to work better with the notion of a clothed, rather than a naked, body, and it also requires an essentialist, heterosexual model of gender for the performance of a gender to have any impact. Villanelle signals such a gender performance when she appears to her female lover in a soldier's uniform, calling it "fancy dress" (70). Here, she chooses to present her body to the woman she loves as a cross-dressed lesbian body, a normal female body, rather than a hermaphroditic body, the body of a freak, a queer body. Similarly, when Villanelle later meets Henri, a soldier in the French army who falls in love with her, she displays the same willingness to expose her lesbian desire while telling the story of her life to the soldiers (94). However, she will not display her webbed feet, the mark of her queer sexuality, despite Henri's curiosity. He wonders: "why had she never taken her boots off? . . . Not even in bed? . . . I determined on my arrival in her enchanted city to find out more about these boatmen and their boots" (109).

Villanelle's determined and continued erasure of her biological difference relates to

the desire of people stigmatized as "queer" to disappear into normal society. Sandy Stone discusses how many transsexuals engage in the process of "constructing a plausible history--learning to lie about one's past. What is gained is acceptability in society. What is lost is the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience" (164). This statement is echoed in Villanelle's comment: "I began to feel like Sarpi, that Venetian priest and diplomat, who said he never told a lie but didn't tell the truth to everyone. Many times that evening as we ate and drank and played dice I prepared to explain. But my tongue thickened and my heart rose up in self-defence" (70). Stone goes on to state "The most critical thing a transsexual can do, the thing that constitutes success, is to 'pass.' Passing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a 'natural' member of that gender. Passing means the denial of mixture" (165-66). Having a hermaphroditic body is, of course, not the same thing as being a transsexual: it does not mean that one has lived one gender for a time, and then switched to another. It does, however, mean suppressing the truth of one's body, and "passing" as a gender that is not ambiguous: it does mean the denial of mixture, the erasure of difference, and the obliteration of bodily complexity. When Villanelle takes off her boots and walks on the water in full view of Henri, then, she exemplifies a political act that Stone urges transsexuals to accomplish: "to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud--and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself into the discourses by which one has been written--in effect, then, to become a ... posttranssexual" (168). Stone points in an afterword to the subsequent development of a specifically transgendered positionality which has changed the situation of the transsexual both on the street and in the academy

(168). In a later article, Anne Bolin points out that transsexualism

> offered a challenge to the biological basis of gender and consequently provided the opportunity for change from a polarized system in which transsexuals and transvestites were dichotomized as variant women and men, respectively, into one in which a continuum and multiplicity of social identities were recognized and encouraged. . . . [P]eople of various gender-transposed identities have come to organize themselves as part of a greater community, a larger in-group, facing similar concerns of stigmatization, acceptance, treatment and so on. . . . Transgenderist is a community term denoting kinship among those with gender-variant identities. It supplants the dichotomy of transsexual and tranvestite with a concept of continuity. (460-61)

Villanelle's body can thus be read as a transgendered body; furthermore, her hermaphroditic body and her lesbian desire elaborate another point made by Bolin: "The transgenderist has pushed the parameters of the gender paradigm even further by disputing the entire concept of consistency between sexual orientation and gender" (485).

Villanelle's webbed feet not only mark her sexual anomaly, but also confer on her the ability to demonstrate the marvellous power of the divine as discussed by Mary Russo. Her divine attributes are confirmed, as were those of Jesus at his baptism, both by water and by enlightenment from the sky. Rather than the voice of a divine father, however, the light of the full moon and a recollection of her mother cause Villanelle's self-discovery:

> Then the moon became visible between the clouds, a full moon, and I thought of my mother rowing her way in faith to the terrible island. The surface of the canal

> had the look of polished jet. I took off my boots slowly. pulling the laces loose and easing them free. Enfolded between each toe were my own moons. Pale and opaque. Unused. I had often played with them but I never thought they might be real. (69)

The references to her mother, her mother's faith, the full moon and the moons of the webs in her feet complicate the construction of Villanelle's webbed feet as a mark of masculinity. According to *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols*, the moon, "because of its waxing and waning and its general influence on the earth, especially on the female, it is closely associated with female fertility . . . In many myths the moon appears as sister, wife, or beloved of the sun" (133). In Villanelle's webbed feet, then, Winterson gives her divine power, but specifically female divine power, so that this female Christ figure is not dependent on male images or sources of power, but female ones. Furthermore, the female origins and efficacy of Villanelle's divine power contrast with the phallic tower that Napoleon has built to survey the English channel preparatory to his invasion of England--a project culminating in disaster (22-4). Villanelle can walk on water; Napoleon cannot.

Villanelle's description of the incident marking her assumption of divine power also connects the divine attributes of her webbed feet to faith in stories and faith in lesbian desire:

> Could I walk on that water? Could I? I faltered. . . . I might die if I fell in. I tried balancing my foot on the surface and it dropped beneath into the cold nothingness. Could a woman love a woman for more than a night? I stepped out and in the morning they say a beggar was running around the Rialto talking about a young

> man who'd walked across the canal like it was solid. I'm telling you stories. Trust me. (69)

The plea for trust in stories, as we have seen earlier, connects faith in stories to faith in Biblical stories. Therefore, there are implicit connections made in the novel between faith in stories, lesbian desire, and spirituality. Later, Villanelle's webbed feet and Christ's ability to walk on water are both directly connected to faith in her own stories, as shown when Henri recounts: "Villanelle, who loved to tell stories, wove for their wildest dreams. She even said that the boatmen had webbed feet. . . . [T]he Poles grew wide-eyed and one even risked excommunication by suggesting that perhaps Christ had been able to walk on the water thanks to the same accident of birth" (104).

Villanelle does walk on water to deliver Henri from peril just as Christ delivered the disciples from the storm on the sea of Galilee. Her body thus becomes divine and Christlike in relation to Henri's mortal body, and he can be seen as "a pilgrim for whom this world is not his final home."[3] Henri's pilgrimage, seen through his autobiographical reminiscences, also falls into the genre of "Twentieth-century pilgrim narratives [which] generally depart from romantic externalization of the personal spiritual quest and, in the era of Freud, internalize the quest as a voyage through consciousness and memory" (*DBT* 258). His pilgrimage takes Henri from the farm community where he was born and brought up in the Christian faith to the French army, where he falls into sin. Henri displays the two senses of alienation in which the necessity of pilgrimage are rooted; his

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[3] This and subsequent quotes concerning exile and pilgrimage are taken from David Lyle Jeffrey gen. ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature.*

participation in a life of whoring and killing portrays sin and the Fall, while his passionate belief in and passion for his leader, Napoleon, portrays a belief in strange gods (*DBT* 255). Villanelle finds Henri in Russia, the wilderness from which he must return home, where he has come to hate Napoleon: "If the love was passion the hate will be obsession" (84). Henri no longer believes in Napoleon as a deliverer, but believes Villanelle, even though she is a vivandière (whore) in the French army, when she says, "I can help you" (88). Villanelle, here, is presented like Christ, who kept company with the lowest of society's outcasts. She guides Henri through various perils, where he appears as "the solitary knight errant who must seek out and triumph over hostile forces in aventure, by which means he may then hope to realize his true identity" (*DBT* 256). Henri also kills Villanelle's bestial husband, an act which can be seen as his "struggle with the forces of evil, sometimes a fight with a dragon, or . . . a descent into hell" which is involved in a pilgrimage (*DBT* 257). Villanelle's words to him are comforting: "Home soon, Henri, keep calm" (126). Her words cast herself as the pilot, Christ, bringing Henri the pilgrim to a safe harbour on a sea voyage, moving him, as from Dante's selva oscura (dark wood), from confusion and alienation toward a truth outside the self (*DBT* 256). Henri's recollections strongly support this image:

> Our boats were moving. . . . We were moving. How? I raised my head fully, my knees still drawn up, and saw Villanelle, her back towards me, a rope over her shoulder, walking on the canal and dragging our boats. Her boots lay nearly one by the other. Her hair was down. I was in the red forest and she was leading me home. (129)

Here, Villanelle's body is seen by Henri as Christ-like, but when Villanelle goes to put her boots back on, Henri's words return us to a consideration of Villanelle's body as transgendered: "It's the only time I've ever seen her feet and they are not what I'd usually call feet. She unfolds them like a fan and folds them in on themselves in the same way. I wanted to touch . . . " (135-36). His fascinated acceptance of her strange feet allow us to imagine an acceptance of a transgendered body. Therefore, Villanelle's body is seen simultaneously as sexual and holy--Christ-like and transgendered--and this body has brought Henri, the pilgrim, home.

Henri himself connects his homecoming to Villanelle's body, and specifically her heart, when he states:

> I laid my head on her heart and heard it beating, so steady, as if it had always been there: I had never lain like this with anyone but my mother. My mother who took me on her breast and whispered the scripture in my ear. . . . I heard nothing but her heart and felt nothing but her softness. 'I love you,' I said, then and now (140).

Villanelle's heart plays a major, and complicated, role in *The Passion*, for it is the metaphor through which the reader discovers that Henri has made a journey from the rustic village where he lived with his religious mother to his self-chosen exile on the rock of San Servelo, where he dreams of dandelions and creates a garden (6-12, 155-160). It is also through the metaphor of Villanelle's heart, the "rose-coloured thread" of her villanelle, that the reader views her struggles to deal with the "plait of gold and silver," the obsession and destiny, of her webbed feet and games of chance, both inescapable influences in her life. The journey of her heart can be seen as parallel to Henri's journey into Russia: they

are both journeys of self-discovery and a search for the nature of passion.

The journey of Villanelle's heart, as it reveals her struggles with obsession and destiny, begins in the casino. Games of chance, watching the gamblers, are her first introduction to passion: "I like to smell the urgency on them. Even the calmest, the richest, have that smell. It's somewhere between fear and sex. Passion I suppose" (55). Villanelle sees herself as exempt from the gambler's passion, a philosophical Venetian, conversant with the nature of greed and desire, holding hands with both God and the Devil and not wishing to let go of either, having a soul that is Siamese (57). Furthermore, Villanelle describes gambling as part of the human condition, rather than an obsession: "Gambling is not a vice, it is an expression of our humanness. We gamble. Some do it at the gaming table, some do not. You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play" (73). At this stage in her journey, Villanelle has a cynical view of passion and considers her body as a commodity, passion as commodified pleasure, and her heart as a machine:

> Passion is sweeter split strand by strand. Divided and re-divided like mercury then gathered up only at the last moment. You see, I am no stranger to love . . . . I am pragmatic about love and have taken my pleasure with both men and women, but I have never needed a guard for my heart. My heart is a reliable organ. (59-60)

Villanelle also notes the thrill of gambling: "We gamble with the hope of winning, but it's the thought of losing that excites us" (89). Villanelle has lost at games of chance, and even when she has not lost, she has been mistreated (70, 64). For Villanelle, however, these encounters involve only sexual intercourse and not her heart, which she sees as an "everyday work-hard heart" (94). When Villanelle meets a captivating masked woman,

she disregards the previous advice of the old hag to beware games of chance, believing that gambling with her heart is no different than gambling for any other wager, and comments naively, "You play, you win. You play, you lose. You play" (66). Later, a chastened Villanelle realizes what she has lost: "It was a game of chance I entered into and my heart was the wager. Such games can only be played once. Such games are better not played at all" (94). Villanelle's married lover does not return Villanelle's passion in kind, and Villanelle realizes that gambling on love can be a disastrous enterprise: "The gambler is led on in the hope of a win, thrilled with the fear of losing, and when he wins, he believes his luck is there, that he will win again . . . all the time losing bit by bit that valuable fabulous thing that can never be replaced" (95-6).

The loss of her heart causes changes in Villanelle's body which mark it as out of her control. She is in a hectic stupor, cannot eat or sleep regularly, loses weight, and is cold: "The body must move but the mind is blank" (62-3). Villanelle's body here exhibits insomnia, weakness and depression which were seen in the Middle Ages as the symptoms of lovesickness, a disorder of the mind and body that is still, according to Mary Wack, "a reality for many people in American culture" (xi).[4] Villanelle imagines herself able to cure this lovesickness if she did not have a Venetian Siamese soul: "If I were a little different I might turn passion into something holy and then I would sleep again. And then my extasy would be my extasy but I would not be afraid" (63). She also imagines possible physical effects on her body, such as a heart attack, and notes how her passion places her outside

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[4] For a complete discussion of lovesickness as an illness, see Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages.*

civilised culture (66, 95). Thoroughly infected with lovesickness, Villanelle's heart itself is now seen as a gambler; no longer a reliable organ, it can even dissolve and disappear: "If you should leave me, my heart will turn to water and flood away" (73, 76).

Indeed, Villanelle's heart does disappear out of Villanelle's body, to be physically possessed by her female lover. She demonstrates to Henri that she has gambled her heart and lost it and asks him to get it back for her, afraid that if she tries to retrieve it herself, she may never be able to leave again (94, 115-16). Although her female lover has almost finished a tapestry which would imprison Villanelle's heart forever, Henri retrieves it; after hearing Villanelle physically ingest her heart, he can feel it beating in her breast (121). The physicality of Villanelle's heart in this phase of its journey foregrounds the physical effects which passion has on her body, described in terms of lovesickness. The physical taking and giving of her heart also demonstrate that the female lover views love between women as physical pleasure only, demanding nothing more from her than occasional assignations and time left over from the far more important responsibilities of her marriage. She can regard an affair with a woman lover, metaphorically represented by the heart, as a bead on a string, enhancing her self-image, but requiring no responsibility to do more than lend her body to the occasional sexual interlude when it pleases her. Her pragmatic attitude to her body is similar to that of Villanelle in the casino, but Villanelle must give her body to lovers for economic reasons, whereas the female lover, economically supported by her heterosexual marriage, can give hers solely for pleasure. Thus both women differentiate giving a body for love and giving it for commerce, but Villanelle would give up the commercial for the passionate, whereas the female lover would not. Henri's return of

Villanelle's physical heart to her demonstrates that he, on the contrary, considers Villanelle's heart to be her own possession; Henri will not take her heart unless she gives it to him of her own accord, and his attitude is one of responsibility and respect.

When Villanelle's heart is back in her body, the metaphor of her heart explains the way she relates to Henri, whom she resolutely refuses to marry, even though she is the mother of his child: "He loves me, I know that, and I love him, but in a brotherly incestuous way. He touches my heart, but he does not send it shattering through my body. He could never steal it. I wonder if things would be different for him if I could return his passion" (148, 146). Furthermore, Villanelle learns to her sorrow that the most repellent body can house a passionate love, when Henri cuts open the body of her bestial husband to reveal that even he had a heart (128). The sight of her dead husband's physical heart causes her to realize that she has done to him what her female lover has done to her, and his physical heart lies between Villanelle and Henri, symbolically denoting that the murder of her husband causes an unbridgeable separation between them. The journey of her heart causes Villanelle to respect her own body and its lesbian desires, and she gains the knowledge that her passions deserve better than the female lover can give her. Games of chance enter her life again in the form of the unpredictable wild card, when Villanelle meets her female lover and hears that the lover's husband has left her. Villanelle respects and acts upon her own acquired wisdom: "I was angry because she had wanted me and made me want her and been afraid to accept what that meant. . . . [P]assion, because it is noble, will not long accept another's left-overs" (145).

In the end, can the complexities of Villanelle's body do anything to affirm a woman

in the construction of her own subjectivity? Villanelle is a mythical creature with a fabulous body: part human, part divine, part animal--a freak. Mary Daly suggests: "Those who are really living on the boundary tend to spark in others the courage to affirm their own unique being . . . . Jesus or any other liberated person who has this effect functions as model precisely in the sense of being a model-breaker, pointing beyond his or her own limitations to the potential for further liberation" (75). From this point of view, Villanelle's body can be seen as a model-breaker: Villanelle's body does not conceivably fit into the mold of "woman" considered appropriate in white Western culture. She can therefore be a role model to women facing difficulties because their bodies also do not fit this culture, such as Jess, who describes her body as that of a he/she in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. Whatever her physical anomalies and her problems, Villanelle carries on, like the women Henri remembers from his village: "They go on. Whatever we do or undo, they go on" (27). Written against the grain of the traditional heterosexual romance plot, Villanelle's story tells us that there can be more tragedy in following traditionally accepted social practices than not; she marries for convenience once, but will not repeat that disastrous experience. It also points out that we all struggle with obsession and destiny, so that we can all be seen as structured like a villanelle; even if our bodies are not like Villanelle's we struggle with our own "plaits of gold and silver," intertwined with the "rose-coloured threads" of our own hearts. More than that, however, Villanelle's body exemplifies the ambiguity and boundary-crossing being who imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life discussed in Grosz's categorization of the freak. In *The Passion*, Winterson has given us a myth full of the heart-food, colours and folly that she

feels provide both beauty and a pointer for living, and does much of this through her representation of Villanelle's fabulous body. Indeed, as Winterson warns us, we must not use any myth as a handbook for living, but we can use it to enrich our imaginations and stretch our thinking beyond its present limitations.

In this context, perhaps we can see Villanelle's body as addressing the fears and anxieties arising in the debates around women's bodies that are currently raging in our present white Western culture--for example the debates around the ethics of reproductive technologies, cosmetic surgery, current research on personality-altering drugs, and the emergence of the transgendered community from the closet.[5] Sociologist Chris Shilling notes that for people who have lost faith in religious authorities and grand political narratives, the body initially appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world. However, Shilling notes emphatically: "We now have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over bodies, yet we are also living in an age which has thrown into radical doubt our knowledge of what bodies are and how we should control them" (3). Furthermore, he argues, "the more we have been able to control and alter the limits of the body, the greater has been our uncertainty about what constitutes an individual's body, and what is 'natural' about a body" (4).

This uncertainty has been prominently reflected in present feminist debates around

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[5] Among various discussions of these issues, see Anne Balsamo, "On the Cutting Edge: Cosmetic surgery and the Technological Production of the Gendered Body"; Anne Bolin, "Transcending and Transgendering: Male-to-Female Transsexuals, Dichotomy and Diversity"; Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*; Peter D. Kramer, *Listening to Prozac*; Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*; Martine Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*; and Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: a Posttranssexual Manifesto."

sexual difference. Rosi Braidotti discusses "the political will to assert the specificity of the lived, female bodily experience, the refusal to disembody sexual difference into a new allegedly postmodern anti-essentialist subject and the will to re-connect the whole debate on difference to the bodily existence and experience of women" (174-75). Braidotti, moreover, asserts that feminist theoreticians should re-connect the feminine to the bodily sexed reality of the female, refusing the separation of the empirical from the symbolic, or of the material from the discursive, or of sex from gender, arguing for the ontological basis of sexual difference (177). This position, however, includes the ability for a woman to say, ""I" have been a woman--socially and anatomically--for as long as "I" have existed, that is to say, in the limited scale of my temporality, forever" (186). It becomes problematic if one considers any hermaphroditic or transgendered body such as that of Villanelle, and limits the category "woman" to those persons born with only female genitalia. I believe that a rethinking of the category 'woman' is necessitated by the emergence of the transgender community as a political entity into our culture, and that we can no longer think in terms of a physical definition of 'woman' as defined by her body, or continue to react with horror, surgical intervention, and attempts at erasure when faced with bodily differences.

The necessity for rethinking of the category "woman" is currently driven home with considerable impact by the attendance of transgenderists at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, historically a women-only space, causing divisive political battles over whether they are indeed "women" or not. Currently, many transsexuals are "non-surgical," still possessing male genitals, yet consider themselves to have always been

women. In light of current debates such as this, defining a woman by genitalia becomes problematic, and it is time to consider that whatever genitals a person possesses, that person can be considered to exist at whatever point on a gender continuum that s/he deems appropriate. In that way, Villanelle, who places herself at various points on this continuum at different times, can be seen as a liberatory figure. If gender were more difficult to "read," and seen as more of a continuum, it would be more difficult to favour one gender and oppress the other. Elizabeth Grosz, in *Volatile Bodies*, argues:

> Sexual difference, though, cannot be understood, as is commonly the case in much feminist literature, in terms of a comparison and contrast between two types of sexual identity independently formed and formulated. Instead it must be seen as the very ground on which sexual identities and their external relations are made possible. . . . [S]exual difference is a framework or horizon that must disappear as such in the codings that constitute sexual identity and the relations between the sexes. Sexual difference is the horizon that cannot appear in its own terms but is implied in the very possibility of an entity, and identity, a subject, an other and their relations. (208-09).

Sexual difference seen from this perspective might be seen as mutable. It exists, but more as a notion against which an individual can project a notion of sexual subjectivity that fits with a personal notion of sexuality. We already can no longer look at any body and know for certain that it is the body of a "woman" or a "man." Indeed, people are now experimenting with their gender in workshops aimed at deconstructing gender; Shannon Bell describes a "Drag-King For-A-Day" workshop at the Annie Sprinkle Transformation

Salon in New York, and a Cross-Gender Workshop in Toronto given by Kate Bornstein, who has been both male and female and now is neither one nor the other, but both-and-neither (91, 104). Such sexual fluidity can be seen as leading to a politics of extreme individualism, but it could also mean that identity politics must give way to more global politics on a sexual level. It is no longer reasonable, if we are to exist as a human species, to form allegiances to small exclusive groups and refuse to consider the needs of those outside our own small spheres, whether it be in regard to sexuality or any other aspect of human existence. In our present world, with global information constantly revealing the fragility of all life, and the precarious existence of even the very planet we live on, a global notion of community and responsibility is more necessary and appropriate in to pursue than the small-group identities we struggle to defend with increasing violence. Here, the notion of "queer" appears to be politically effective in that it envisions possibilities for very different individuals to work together and promote social change. Anthony Slagle notes:

> Queer Nation has reconceptualized the notion of identity in such a way that it does not essentialize those who take on a queer identity. Queer Nation develops a collective identity based on the idea that queers are unique not only from the mainstream but from one another. For this reason, the movement can be understood as an identity politics (collective identity) based on differences and diversity (individual identities). (98)

Villanelle's fabulous body fits in well with this notion of identity; there is not likely to be another like it, and it is undeniably queer. Through Villanelle's body, readers learn, as Henri the pilgrim does, to connect queer bodies to spirituality. Furthermore, what

Henri learns foregrounded developments in Biblical revisionism noted by Ostriker: sensual immediacy, details of the flesh as holy, and an insistence that the flesh is not incompatible with the intellect. Henri states:

> To love someone else enough to forget about yourself even for one moment is to be free. The mystics and the churchmen talk about throwing off this body and its desires, being no longer a slave to the flesh. They don't say that through the flesh we are set free. That our desire for another will lift us out of ourselves more cleanly than anything divine. . . . [W]ithout love we grope the tunnels of our lives and never see the sun. When I fell in love it was as though I looked into a mirror for the first time and saw myself (154).

Henri thus learns to love Villanelle for herself, rather than a fantasy or a myth or a creature of his own making such as he created in Napoleon (157). He experiences her in all of her bodily aspects, even as his own lover who cannot give him her heart and therefore will not marry him, yet he loves her in all her complexity. Villanelle's body shows Henri the enormous difference between a passion for a woman in her material reality and a passion for a fetish: "Her. A person who is not me. I invented Bonaparte as much as he invented himself. My passion for her, even though she could never return it, showed me the difference between inventing a lover and falling in love. The one is about you, the other about someone else" (158).

Villanelle's body, therefore, in all its postmodern complexity--a queer body, deconstructing all possible notions of a stable bodily identity and a "natural" body--can give a female reader the confidence to participate in being part of or relating to the

differences that surround us at the end of the twentieth century. We, in white Western culture, are still bound, legally and institutionally, to a two-gender model of sex and gender, and fear anyone that does not fit into that model. We need to deal with these fears. Callan, a transgendered woman, stated recently: "We need to find a way to identify ourselves by our common hearts rather than our common external characteristics" (Williams 1995). We need to talk to each other, seeing each other in our material realities, no matter what differences our bodies project. The heart metaphor transfers very appropriately from the pages of *The Passion* to the street, where the ideological battles of our culture are fought by actual human bodies instead of fictional ones.

And what does Villanelle, the villanelle, have to say herself about her heart, the "rose-coloured thread" entwined with the "plait of gold and silver" of her webbed feet and games of chance? She is still optimistic still learning, and still committed to the notion of mortality and change signified by her heart when she notes: "I content myself with this; that where I will be will not be where I am" (150). Her story is not over, and her last words portray irrepressible enthusiasm and a continued determination to withstand the conspiracy of the refrains of the villanelle: "And the valuable, fabulous thing? Now that I have it back? Now that I have been given a reprieve such as only the stories offer? Will I gamble it again? Yes" (151).

The Lover: "the body where your name is w. ten"

> Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing.
>
> Your hand prints are all over my body. Your flesh is my flesh.
>
> Jeannette Winterson

In her fifth novel, *Written on the Body*, Jeannette Winterson gives her readers a body that is not represented as a body at all; the body of the narrator, the lover, is both ungendered and invisible to the reader. Winterson thus moves from pursuing the implications of the proliferation of sexual and gender identities through the body of Villanelle in *The Passion* to pursuing the implications of a total eradication of sexual and gender identities through the lover's ungendered body. A political reason for exploring these implications can be glimpsed in Winterson's interview with Mark Marvel, when she states:

> For years, gay people have been expected to absorb comfort, strength, illumination, education from the mainstream world. And they have done this by a process of fancy footwork, not minding that the models have been overwhelmingly heterosexual. What hasn't happened yet is the heterosexual world learning to do the same kind of sharp dancing, learning from the gay community. I mean, for me a love story is a love story. I don't care what the genders are if it's powerful enough. And I don't think love should be a gender-bound operation. It's probably

> one of the few things in life that rises above all those kinds of oppositions--black and white, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual. . . . And fiction recognizes this. It builds bridges between people who would normally be separate. (165)

From this point of view, *Written* can be seen as fiction building bridges between readers who see the world from a queer perspective, and those who do not. It also allows, or even requires, a queer reading, for the lover in this novel reminisces about both female and male sexual partners, which renders the notion of the lover/narrator as a straight, heterosexual male or female impossible. Readers, therefore, are forced to imagine at least some deviation from the heterosexual norm. Further, because physical descriptions of the lover are lacking in addition to the lack of gender designation, readers are free to imagine as much deviation as they can invent! Invisible to any objectifying gaze, the body of the lover can be seen as female, male, hermaphroditic, transgendered, differently abled, from any culture on the planet, or any combination of the above. The lover's sexual preferences, with the exception of straight male or female heterosexuality, can also be imagined according to the reader's wishes, and the lover's body is not connected to any specific cultural norm of female or male beauty, the way other bodies are in Winterson's fiction. Villanelle's body, for example, although requiring a reader to imagine the proliferation of sexual identities, conforms to a white, Western cultural norm of female beauty when she describes herself as having luxuriant red hair, brilliant eyes, and a tall, slender body (51, 56). The lover states, "I don't lack self-confidence, but I'm not beautiful," but Louise answers "You can't see what I see. . . . You are a pool of clear

water where the light plays," preventing the possibility of defining the lover's relation to a specific cultural norm of human beauty (85). Winterson's representation of the lover's body in *Written* foregrounds various political issues concerning sex and gender. In this chapter, I will discuss how these issues are illuminated by the lover's body, which highlights political aspects of love and sexual relationships and enables a female reader to experience her subjectivity in differing ways.

By prohibiting the reader from reading any inscription of the lover's gender in *Written*, Winterson can be seen to experiment with a practical application of political ideas found in the writings of Monique Wittig. In her article, "The Mark of Gender," Wittig states: "Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it" (4). Whereas Winterson can be seen to portray the violence of this shaping quite forcefully in the case of Villanelle's hermaphroditic body in the previous chapter, she can be seen to experiment with evading this violence in the case of the ungendered lover's body. Wittig goes on to argue that the destruction of the categories of sex in politics and philosophy, as well as the destruction of gender in language, are part of a writer's work (6). Further, Wittig believes that eradicating the mark of gender would cause a transformation that would affect the conceptual-philosophical and political, as well as the poetic, levels of society (11). Wittig points out:

> Gender takes place in a category of language that is totally unlike any other and which is called the personal pronoun. Personal pronouns are the only linguistic instances that, in discourse, designate its locutors and their different and successive situations in relationship to discourse. . . . Gender is the enforcement of sex in

language, working in the same way as the declaration of sex in civil status. (4-5). She also maintains that the appropriation of the abstract form, the universal, by men, and the reduction of woman to the particular is a criminal act, perpetrated by one class against another at the level of concepts, philosophy and politics (5). Although their methods of introducing their politics into their fiction differ, with Wittig using personal pronouns strategically in several of her novels, while Winterson chooses to eliminate them completely in one of hers, both writers do attempt to eradicate the mark of gender for political reasons. In *Written*, therefore, Winterson attempts to evade a gender-bound heterosexual concept of love through the complete absence of personal pronouns pertaining to the character of the lover/narrator.

Winterson explores the political implications of love relationships not only through ungendering the body of the lover, however, but also through the ways in which she deploys the lover's ungendered and invisible body among the bodies of previous passionate but short-term loves, the unloved but comfort-giving bodies of Jacqueline and Gail, the quintessentially female body of the lover's love-object, Louise, and the bodies of Louise's husband, mother and grandmother. These bodies all form a design in the novel featuring certain bodies as extremely physically present, and others as largely or totally physically absent. The central body in the novel, the non-body of the lover, the protagonist and narrator, is physically present only once, in a brief mention of a nipple (162). Even though the other bodies in the novel are all more present than this central body, they are all seen through the eyes of the lover, and therefore present the lover's point of view, rather than their own. The novel may not present the lover's body in the flesh, but it is nevertheless all

about the lover, and the lack of a physical body in this character underlines the fact that the lover is undertaking an inner psychological journey to find love, rather than a physical journey to a specific location. However, as well as exploring the lover's own psyche to achieve understanding, the lover's quest delves into bodies--the bodies of all those who have an impact on the lover's life in various ways.

The bodies of those involved in a multitude of short-term affairs with the lover are physically present, but only in fragments--for example the lover recalls Inge's breasts, Judith's bottom, or an anonymous woman's cunt (24, 76, 73). The lover's rem[illegible] include male as well as female bodies--for example Frank, with the body of a [illegible] hoops through his nipples, and Carlo, with his completely shaved body smelling of fir cones and port (93, 143). The lovers in this parade of affairs are characterized as holiday adventures, which the lover ultimately eschews to attempt a quiet predictable life with a woman for whose body the lover feels absolutely no sexual attraction: "I became an apostle of ordinariness. . . . [P]assion is for holidays, not homecoming" (27). The body of Jacqueline, with whom the lover in[illegible]es living out the traditional clichés of the armchair, the expanding waistline and the [illegible] the suburbs, is only peripherally described in the text: she is "smart but not trend[illegible] made-up but not co[illegible]spicuously, her voice flat, her spectacles clownish" (25-26). The reader never knows if she is tall, short, thin, fat, dark or light-skinned, blonde or brunette and so on. What Jacqueline's body does is described: she performs domestic chores; she works at a Zoo; she and the lover have sex very seldom; they wear pyjamas in bed (26, 28, 41). When Jacqueline discovers that the lover is leaving her, she cries, drops things and wreaks havoc in the lover's apartment, but the

reader never knows one physical detail of her body (57, 69-70). The pattern of the lover's interactions with all of these bodies is a pattern of failed relationships, for even the peaceful relationship with Jacqueline does not work because it is essentially loveless: there is a "worm in the bud," which is revealed when the lover meets Louise (28).

Louise's luxuriously quintessential female body rises like Venus from the foam among the scattered jumble of non-bodies and unattractive bodies to dominate the novel. It is passionately described in language that revels in the physicality of her body. the lover lingers in fervent detail over many experiences of tasting, touching, smelling, hearing and looking at her. From the first mention of Louise, with her abundantly energetic red hair, creamy skin, nipples grazing the surface of the river as she swims, to the paler, thinner Louise still endowed with a mane of hair the colour of blood at the end, the reader never experiences her as anything but completely grounded in her physicality (11, 190). The lover not only rhapsodizes over lovemaking with Louise's body, but also erotically connects her body with food: "Let me be diced carrot, vermicelli, just so that you will take me in your mouth . . . I will taste you if only through your cooking" (36-7). Louise's body is likened to natural flora and fauna. She first appears naked, swimming in a river, then standing up with water falling from her in silver streams (11). Her hair is seen as a swarm of butterflies, and she reminds the lover of a tree, the way her hair fills with wind and swirls around her head and her flesh gleams with the moonlight shade of a silver birch (28-29). At one point she is seen as a volcano, endangering the lover, Pompeii (49). Further, Louise wears clothing made of natural fibres, reads *World Wildlife* magazine, and attends the opera in a simple dress of moss-green silk (12, 29, 32). While in the library, the lover

sees red hair like Louise's and imagines being a seed in a pomegranate: "Some say that the pomegranate was the real apple of Eve, fruit of the womb, I would eat my way into perdition to taste you" (91).

The abundance and sensuality of Louise's body, and its affinity to nature are emphasized by the bodies of other people in Louise's life. She appears to have come by some of her physicality genetically. Her maternal grandmother, whom Louise affectionately calls The Aged Pea, "was like a child's drawing of a snowman, just two circles plonked one on top of the other . . . her hair . . . was serpentine in its rising twists, a living moving mass that escaped from its tight bands just as Louise's did," and since Louise is said to be the spitting image of The Pea in her youth, The Pea's hair was once presumably red (166-67). According to *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols*, "Wild, tangled hair, sometimes interlaced with snakes, alludes to horrific deities, the Furies etc. . . . blond hair was associated with light; RED hair in the high Middle Ages was considered a sign of evil" (93). Louise is thus connected matrilineally to female deities and mythological forces. Although she is physically repugnant to a much lesser degree, the Pea also echoes in appearance the old crones who are Dogwoman's neighbour in *Sexing the Cherry* and Villanelle's philosopher friend in *The Passion*, deliberately spilling food down the front of her clothes and demonstrating a similar earthy wisdom with pithy comments about kangaroo shoots, bugs, smells, and Louise's problems (164-66). Therefore, Louise's body is grounded through The Pea's body to sexual, earthy vitality, and common sense just as are the bodies of Dogwoman and Villanelle through the bodies of the other crones. The recurrent crone figure in Winterson's fiction appears to signal a

respect for age that is not normally accorded old women in white Western culture, as well as the significance of looking to a matriarchal value system as a source of wisdom rather than a patriarchal one. Louise's mother Kitty, on the other hand, supports a patriarchal view of the world, considering the fame and fortune of Louise's husband to be more important than her daughter's happiness (167). Louise is fond of her grandmother but not particularly close to her mother, and Kitty, desiring Louise to remain in her marriage to facilitate her husband's ascent to worldly success, promotes a life of traditional cliches for Louise just as Jacqueline promotes a life of traditional cliches for the lover (165). Kitty's body, like Jacqueline's, is never physically described, an absence which underlines the total denial of bodily desires required by such a life.

Where the body of The Pea adds extra energy and augments Louise's body, the body of Louise's husband, Elgin, opposes and diminishes Louise's body. Elgin is small in stature, narrow-chested, short-sighted, and likened by both The Pea and Kitty to a little rat (39, 166). His sexual preferences are sufficiently contrived and bizarre to warrant that Louise and he no longer make love: early in their marriage, Elgin asks Louise to scaffold his penis with bulldog clips, and later, he enjoys kinky sex with prostitutes, sunk in a bath of porridge while Celtic geishas rubber-glove his prick (34, 68). Furthermore, the union of Elgin and Louise does not produce children, for she has miscarried and will not attempt another pregnancy (92). A doctor who prefers isolated work in a lab to work with actual bodies, Elgin "sits in a multimillion pound laboratory in Switzerland for half the year and stares at a computer"; when not working, he frequently plays computer games (67, 29, 104-05). Louise's and Elgin's bodies are also differentiated by the fact that he wears

clothing slightly too tight, while hers is "gloriously too large" (34, 35, 48). Elgin's body, metaphorically the detested scavenger and carrier of disease in the animal world, is also linked to disease, malformation, the unnaturalness of technology, sexual perversion, and obsessive bodily practices in the human world; Elgin's body is the complete antithesis of Louise's body, seen as naturally beautiful and glowing with health. Elgin's body foreshadows his role in the novel, that of the snake in the Garden of Eden inhabited by the lover and Louise. Elgin announces Louise's cancer to the lover, causing the lover to abandon Louise to him, the expert on cancer, who can supposedly offer Louise life (105). Elgin and the lover thus appear as antagonists in the novel, both struggling for control over the body of Louise.

Despite Elgin's non-physical, possessive and sterile relationship with Louise and his attempts to control her through dire predictions about cancer, ultimately it is not Elgin who proves to be the lover's primary antagonist. The real enemy of the love between the lover and Louise is the lover's own lack of understanding of, and habitual ways of behaving in, love relationships. The entire novel is taken up with reminiscences of the lover's previous relationships and the attempt to make the relationship with Louise different. The lover attempts, through an in-depth exploration of Louise's body, a psychological inner journey from a life of serial six-month affairs, which is beginning to pall, to a love in which hearth and quest become one: "With Louise I want to do something different. I want the holiday and the homecoming together" (79). The lover imagines being a pilgrim, like the one caught in the thicket of thorns in the Burne-Jones print hanging on Louise's bedroom wall: *Love and the Pilgrim* (54). Louise will be the

angel, leading the lover from the tangle of past relationships. Just as Henri the pilgrim follows Napoleon and Villanelle the mysterious woman in *The Passion*, the lover will follow Louise, with "the hope of a saint in a coracle," driven forth by love and hoping to be brought home by love again, stating, like Villanelle, "what you risk reveals what you value. . . . I want to take the risk because the life I have stored up is going mouldy" (81). The lover, however, is afraid to take the necessary risks: "It is so terrifying, love. . . . I am desperately looking the other way, so love won't see me" (10). The lover also expresses an extreme fear of losing the beloved, and twice during the novel asks the question that comprises the novel's opening sentence, "Why is the measure of love loss?" (9, 39). In a moment of self-knowledge, the lover even comments on the need to blame love on the grand excuse of being swept away by passion instead of taking responsibility for one's own actions, and confesses, "Oh Louise, I'm not telling the truth. You aren't threatening me, I'm threatening myself" (39). Rather than a duel between the lover and Elgin, then, the novel depicts a journey of self-discovery in the realm of love: a journey played out on the field of Louise's body.

In the first stages of this journey, the lover attempts to relate to Louise's body by possessing it completely:

> I didn't only want Louise's flesh, I wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues, the sinews that bound her together. I would have held her to me though time had stripped away the tones and textures of her skin. I could have held her for a thousand years until the skeleton itself rubbed away to dust. What are you that makes me feel thus? Who are you for whom time has no meaning? . . . [H]ere is

her hand with my future in its palm. (51)

Here the lover depicts holding and being held by Louise simultaneously, but still seeing their bodies as separate entities.

As the journey continues, the lover comes to depict their bodies as merged, seeing their two bodies as one: "You are my blood. When I look in the mirror it's not my own face I see. Your body is twice. Once you once me. Can I be sure which is which?" (99). Even after disaster strikes and they are apart, the lover states: "Skin is waterproof but my skin was not waterproof against Louise. She flooded me. . . . [S]he threatens my innermost safety," and fears that Louise's statement, "I will never let you go," will always be true whether they are together or apart, because they are not two bodies, but one (163). From this obsessive perspective, it is dangerous for the lover to love Louise, for if this relationship fails, the loss of Louise will materially affect the lover's physical body. Stressful material effects of love on the lover's body occur when Louise asks the lover to give her three days to sort out her relationship with Elgin. Not knowing what decisions Louise will make, the lover is sick to the gut with fear, unable to work, feels shivering and wretched, and drinks gin to the point of insensibility (91, 94-6). Again, after fleeing to Yorkshire to hide from Louise, the lover, like the stray cat outside in the rain, is filthy: "My clothes were stale, my skin was grey. My hair fell in defeated flashes" (109). Joyce Lindenbaum, a psychotherapist, considers the wish to merge with one's partner in light of her long-term experience working with lesbian couples:

> I have frequently observed a particular interpersonal phenomenon in the lesbian couples whom I have treated: it is a behavioral pattern that generates a crisis, and

> commonly results in the dissolution of the relationship. . . . The crisis occurs when one of the women begins to feel that she has become lost in her partner. She no longer has a sense of who she is. . . . I have come to believe that I am seeing, with all its distortions, the re-creation of a primary experience: an effort to develop a separate self. (86)

Lindenbaum does not see this phenomenon as restricted to lesbian couples, although she considers that they are more predisposed to this experience because a sexual relationship with a woman can reproduce more completely the primal intimacy between an infant and its mother (86-7). Lindenbaum's comments, then, apply to the lover regardless of gender. Furthermore, according to Lindenbaum, a couple builds a healthier relationship using strategies such as competition in order to "encourage a separateness that is relational rather than reactive, a sense both of the ongoing presence of an other, and of a self that is separate and whole" (102). A focus on merging, therefore will not create the relationship that the lover longs for, and the lover must come to this realization.

The lover does indicate an appreciation for a self that is separate and whole several times in the novel, and even imagines a relationship in which each individual does not lose individuality despite being part of a close loving couple. The lover sees a sense of separateness and wholeness in Louise: "It was necessary to engage her whole person. Her mind, her heart, her soul and her body could only be present as two sets of twins. She would not be divided from herself" (68). Further, it is through a physical connection with Louise that the lover begins to imagine a lasting love in which each partner retains an individual self:

> I was holding Louise's hand, conscious of it, but sensing too that a further intimacy might begin, the recognition of another person that is deeper than consciousness, lodged in the body more than held in the mind. I didn't understand that sensing, I'd never known it myself although I'd seen it in a couple who'd been together for a very long time. Time had not diminished their love. They seemed to have become one another without losing their very individual selves. (82).

To imagine such a relationship, however, is different from actually living it, and this insight is only a glimmer of understanding which is not enough to prevent the lover from repeating past performances and fleeing when encountering difficulties. In this instance the lover's determination to possess/merge with the body of Louise cannot withstand the revelation that Louise has terminal cancer. On hearing the news, the lover's own body disappears: "I grapple, but my body slithers away" (101). The lover can imagine neither merging with a body that will imminently die, nor preventing Louise's illness from causing her death; the lover's attempt to merge with Louise's body thus is foiled by the approaching dissolution of that body. Because the lover is still wedded to the idea that the body of a beloved is an object to be given or taken, and believes that Elgin's expertise with cancer is more valuable to Louise than any other help, the lover abandons her diseased body to Elgin's care and flees to Yorkshire to hide (106-07). Therefore, the pilgrim lover cannot be led through the maze of love by the angel, Louise, but must continue the pilgrimage alone, experiencing a sojourn in the wilderness of Yorkshire to complete the quest for self-understanding.

Even in the wilderness of Yorkshire, the strategy that the lover adopts to counter

the horrors of Louise's absence and seemingly inevitable death is a renewed attempt to merge with and possess her absent body. Previously, their bodies had merged through lovemaking, and could be felt to merge through the senses. Deprived of physical sensation, the lover attempts to find a way to merge their bodies though imagination. An abandoned cottage provides a backdrop for the lover's first response to the loss of Louise, which is an imagined gradual decay and death of the lover's own body: "It was dirty, depressing and ideal. . . . I want to rot here, slowly sinking into the faded pattern, invisible against the dead roses. . . . You'd just see my hair, sparse and thinning, greying, gone. Death's head in the chair. . . . I have neither life nor hope" 107-08). A stray cat, starving and rain-soaked, provides the release from this response to loss. The lover, recognizing that they are companions in misery and responding to the hope in the eyes of the cat, names it Hopeful and provides both their bodies with a hot bath, food and rest (109). However, the lover continues the pursuit of an imaginative merging with Louise's body, this time through words, describing Louise's body for thirty pages of the novel in the minute detail and clinical language found in medical books: (113-139).

This section of *Written on the Body* echoes Monique Wittig's novel, *The Lesbian Body*, which contains a similar catalogue of body parts, and these two writers catalogue body parts in ways that appear to pursue similar political agendas. According to Wittig herself, *The Lesbian Body* is produced

> in a context of total rupture with masculine culture. . . . To recite one's own body, to recite the body of the other, is to recite the words of which the book is made up. The fascination for writing the never-previously written and the fascination of the

> unattained body proceed from the same desire. The desire to bring the real body violently to life in the words of the book (everything that is written exists), the desire to do violence by writing to the language which *I* [j/e] can enter only by force. (ix-x)

Winterson, like Wittig, can be seen to be responding to the same desires and fascinations. She implicates the bodies of male artists in the production of works of art by having several characters in the novel state that Renoir painted with his penis and Miller wrote with his prick, so that when they died, only an old brush and a ball-point pen were found between their legs (22, 60). Here, Winterson addresses Wittig's point: "The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men" ("The Mark of Gender" 5). In her creation of a genderless protagonist, however, Winterson can be seen to attempt to appropriate the universal herself, as well as to escape the pejorative stance that reduces women to sexual beings meaningful only through their reproductive activities critiqued by Wittig ("On the Social Contract" 11). To further distance the body of the author as well as the body of the protagonist from the practice of seeing "women's writing" and "women's feelings about relationships" as inappropriate for public spaces and confining them to the privacy of the home, Winterson frequently depicts the lover in the public library, simultaneously working through the problems of relating to Louise while pursuing the profession that provides the lover with the financial means for living an independent life: the profession of translation (145).

The lover's translating work not only is beneficial economically, but has enabled Louise and the lover to meet initially, for she acquired the lover's name and address from a

desk clerk when she saw the lover at work in the British Library (84). Therefore, the lover attempts to regain the lost body of Louise through the profession that has previously enabled Louise to find the lover, and a profession that may enable the lover to possess/merge with Louise's body by translating it into language: "I cycled to the library but instead of going to the Russian section as I had intended I went to the medical books" (111). The lover catalogues various parts of the body: cells, tissues, systems, cavities, skin, skeleton, and includes the senses as well. In these descriptions, the lover's body interacts with that of Louise continually, so that the two bodies appear to become merged as one whole, rather than remaining as individual bodies. The lover's objective is clear--if merging via physical bodies is no longer a possibility, merging via language is:

> I became obsessed with anatomy. If I could not put Louise out of my mind I would drown myself in her. Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away. (111)

The lover, however, faces an intrinsic problem: how does one translate a living body into words? Writing on bodies, reading them, and translating them, according to the lover, are skills at which Louise is adept, and the lover remarks of Louise "Your hand prints are all over my body. Your flesh is my flesh. You deciphered me and now I am plain to read" (106). The lover believes that Louise performs these skills solely with her fingers--words are not involved in the process:

> Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body. Your morse code interferes with my heart beat. I had a steady heart before I met you, I relied upon it, it had seen active service and grown strong. Now you alter its pace with your own rhythm, you play upon me, drumming me taut.
>
> Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book. (89)

This passage is quoted in its entirety because it not only states clearly Winterson's notion of writing on, reading, and translating the physical body, but also significantly combines this notion with the notion of the heart as a metaphor for love, which Winterson uses extensively in *The Passion*. The lover states here that in writing on the lover's body with her fingers, Louise is able to alter the lover's heart beat. Therefore, metaphorically speaking, Louise takes possession of the lover's body and manipulates its physical functioning through touch, but also through touch is able to "read" the true story of the lover's life. If Louise has done this, why has the lover failed to take possession of Louise's body through touch in like fashion? Translation of Louise's body into words does

not appear to help the lover to "read" her body or to find a respite from the grief of losing her, since the lover moves from despair to depression (156).

Unfortunately for the lover, translating a body into words runs into the inevitable problem that the process of translation involves language: it is possible to translate one language into another, but the body, although it may "speak" to us in various ways, cannot make a linguistic connection with us. The lover, in attempting to translate a body into words, only comes up with a fantasy instead of a reality: Louise's translated body is only a figment of the lover's imagination. Lovers usually live in a fantasy world when first falling in love, since they know little about each other at the outset, and what they do not know, they invent. Lovers do get to know each other through physical connection, but to move from fantasy to reality, they must also make a linguistic connection, since if a linguistic exchange were not necessary to achieve mutual understanding, beings able to converse in human speech and those unable to do so--for example, brain-damaged people, animals, trees and so on--would understand each other infinitely better than they do. Further, a linguistic connection facilitates the merging aspect of a relationship; without it, lovers remain locked in their own individual realities--an opposite state from attempting to merge completely, but equally problematic in the development of a healthy relationship. Looking at Louise's ability to "read" the lover's body reveals that Louise may do this through the evidence of her senses, but also does it in part by being an extremely good listener. Louise listens carefully to the lover's tales of former loves, and asks questions to discover exactly what they mean to the lover in the context of the relationship of the lover to Louise. It is all very well to know facts, but it is how those facts fit into a person's philosophy of life

that requires language--or as Winterson puts it, story-telling--to make sense to another person (see Introduction). For example, Louise asks if the fact that the lover is not married makes the lover freer to love Louise, or just freer to leave her, and also asks if she is just another scalp on the lover's pole (52-3). She also challenges the lover with the comment that the lover only says "I love you" to try and regain control of their relationship (53). Louise asks directly whether the lover wants her to leave Elgin, and notes the lover's hesitation (83). Louise also challenges the lover's use of the heart as metaphor for love in the following exchange:

> I have been a wandering bark of unknown worth but I thought I was a safe ship for Louise. Then I threw her overboard.
>
> 'Will you be true to me?'
>
> 'With all my heart.'
>
> I took her hand and put in underneath my T-shirt. She took my nipple and squeezed it between finger and thumb.
>
> 'And with all your flesh?'
>
> 'You're hurting me Louise.' (162).

Louise's perceptive questions and challenges, and her careful attention to the lover's responses, indicate an intense interest in what a love relationship actually <u>means</u> to the lover in terms of practicalities. Louise appears to believe that what one actually <u>does</u> with one's body should match what one says. Faced with her love for the lover, Louise leaves her husband Elgin, stating: "I'm going to leave him because my love for you makes any other life a lie" (98). She tells the lover, "Never say you love me until that day when you

have proved it": to Louise, love is more about practicalities than metaphors.

The lover, on the contrary, tends to speak of love completely in metaphors, commenting, "You never give away your heart; you lend it from time to time" and describes people as able to hide their hearts while giving their bodies (38, 58). These comments indicate a desire to live in a fantasy world and not a real one, and the lover does address this issue, stating, "I couldn't admit that I was trapped in a cliché every bit as redundant as my parents' roses round the door. I was looking for the perfect coupling; the never-sleep non-stop mighty orgasm. Ecstasy without end" (21). The lover does eventually realize the real problem after losing Louise: "Why didn't I hear you when you told me you wouldn't go back to Elgin? Why didn't I see your serious face?" (187). The lover's inability to negotiate a way through the maze of love is symbolized in a failed attempt while working in the library to negotiate a way through the maze of the letter L in an illuminated manuscript: "How would the pilgrim try through the maze, the maze so simple to angels and birds? I tried to fathom the path for a long time but I was caught at dead ends by beaming serpents. I gave up and shut the book, forgetting that the first word had been Love" (88).

Love: how does one define it? How does one live it? In *The Passion*, Henri states, "through the flesh we are set free . . . our desire for another will lift us out of ourselves more cleanly than anything else," but also goes on to comment that love involves being in love with "a person who is not me," as opposed to a fantasy or a myth or a creature of his own making (154, 157-58). In *Written* as well, desires of the flesh in themselves are seen as not quite enough: fleshly desire in itself cannot be the sole basis for

love, or cleanse a relationship of the negative possibilities of myth-making and manipulation. The lover states, "Love is the one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation" (78). This statement implies that love involves more than just the body, and also necessitates that the lover must realize the significance of bodies as other than objects for conquest and sexual satisfaction, or even material comfort.

The lover gains these realizations about love and bodies in the wilds of Yorkshire, where the lover encounters another female body: Gail Right, a woman who works alongside the lover in a wine bar. An older woman, physically resembling the crones who are Dogwoman's neighbour in *Sexing the Cherry*, Villanelle's philosopher friend in *The Passion*, and Louise's grandmother, the Aged Pea, Gail describes herself as a "fat old slag" (149). Gail has a vast bottom, small red eyes, and hair that sticks out like a straw rick (143, 147). Her personal habits, like those of the two other crones, are repellent: she wears exhausted make-up, has vestiges of red nail polish on the nails of her plump ringed hands, and drips grease from bacon on herself while eating greedily, causing the lover to vomit in disgust (147-48). Gail wants a sexual relationship with the lover, and displays a dignity that belies her repellent body when she explains, "You don't lose your lust at the rate you lose your looks. It's a cruel fact of nature" (149). Though Gail's body is repellent to the lover, Gail's insights force the lover to face the fact that wisdom is not necessarily connected to physical beauty. Like the other crones, Gail has both wisdom and the gift of prophesy, and gives cogent advice to the lover even when she is drunk enough to drop her false eyelash in the soup and be sick down her blouse: "You made a mistake. . . . You shouldn't have run out on her. . . . You didn't give her a chance to say what she wanted.

You left" (158-59). Gail's words echo the experience that the lover has in the fields, where to be close to nature seems to bring the lover closer to Louise's body, a body consistently described in metaphors of nature. Here, the lover is finally able to imagine reading Louise's body more accurately, "to think of Louise in her own right, not as my lover, not as my grief. It helped me to forget myself and that was a great blessing. 'You made a mistake,' said the voice"--finally, the lover acquires the piece of the puzzle that is missing (153). This time, the worm in the bud is the worm of doubt in the lover's mind: the heroics of a Sir Launcelot may not have been the right way to go (159). Gail even offers the pilgrim lover the way out of the maze, since she also tells the lover what to do to just before she passes out: "I may not look like a messenger from the gods but your girl isn't the only one who's got wings. I've got a pair of my own under here. . . . You don't run out on the woman you love. . . . You'd better go and find her" (160). Thus the pilgrim is given a hand out of the thicket by an angelic body quite different than that of the beautiful angel in the Burne-Jones print. This angel is old, ugly, physically disgusting, and drunk to the point of throwing up and passing out, but offers the insight that the lover may have been true to Louise with the heart, but what about the flesh? Was the lover physically present to Louise after disease and death loomed in their lives? No. Gail later offers the final insight, similar to the one Henri acquires in *The Passion*: "Did I invent her?" the lover inquires, and Gail states, "No, but you tried to. . . . She wasn't yours for the making" (189).

These insights may enlighten the lover, and the prayer that the lover utters to Louise, "come in tongues of flame and restore my sight" (139) may have been answered in

a somewhat unusual fashion, but what does *Written on the Body* tell a female reader about her own subjectivity? It can be argued that this is a traditional fairy-tale formula: lover falls in love with beautiful but unattainable woman, goes into the wilderness to conquer a dragon (in this case the lover's own shortcomings) and wins the lady in the end. Emma Donoghue, reviewing *Written*, comments that the lack of identifying gender might pass unnoticed were it not mentioned on the jacket of the book, since to her "In the rebellious angle on nuclear family life . . . , central devotion to an unattainable woman, and amused disdain for masculine pomposity, the narrator sounds to me like another of Winterson's lesbian or bisexual heroines" (94). Further, Donoghue notes, "her central character sounds at times like a woman trapped in a series of masculine masks. . . . It seems that we have not yet found any good language (even between women) for having more than one lover, to replace the stale rhetoric of heterosexual conquest and possession" (94-5). Therefore, whether this lover is male or female does not change the impact of the formula, since either way the tale could be seen as one of a male-oriented quest to find oneself with the beautiful woman as reward. The tale also valorizes traditional physical beauty, and suggests that the beautiful body is a product of nature. Even the lover, who firmly rejects the label beautiful, is compared to a pool of clear water (85). This equation of human physical beauty with nature completely disregards the ravages that human bodies continue to inflict on nature, as well as the effects of the amenities civilization has to offer--for example, dentistry and hot water--on the relative beauty of bodies.

Nevertheless, the text does celebrate women's bodies in their physical specificities, in what Donoghue terms "the most powerful sentences being written today" (95). It is not

often that women come across women's bodies in fiction written by women that are so passionately described in detailed and sensual language that almost makes female flesh live on the page. It is as though the same fingers writing on the body write that same body into such sensual language that the body, instead of immediately becoming a disembodied metaphor only able to engage the reader's mind, engages the senses of the reader through language as if it were a real body. Further, since Winterson is a woman writing women's bodies, she can, with enormous familiarity and detail and in very specific terms, delineate the ways that these bodies affect the senses of smell, taste, hearing, touch, sight--for example the lover's description of sensitivity to Louise's skin temperature during lovemaking (124). Through Winterson's use of language, even medical terms sound lyrical. Winterson's leaning toward the natural aspects of bodies, and their place in the world of nature, has a certain nostalgic appeal in the face of current technologies such as cosmetic surgery or in vitro fertilization that can be seen as invading women's bodies rather than enhancing them. Sexually, the new technologies of Virtual Reality--teledildonics, allowing a person to have sex alone through the manipulations of a machine--seem inhuman and emotionally sterile when the lover states "I'd rather hold you in my arms and walk through the damp of a real English meadow in real English rain. . . . No, I don't want to smash the machines but neither do I want the machines to smash me" (97-8). Winterson reflects a very realistic tension between the abilities and innovations of new technologies and their possible negative impact on the world of nature, which in our times is becoming rapidly extinct.

Whether Winterson's strategies work to evade gender oppression, however, is

another question. Emma Donoghue sees in *Written* a "wish to escape from the buzz words of 1990s identity politics" and notes that Winterson "evades the hard facts of gender and sexual identity" (94). I believe that she does not escape either identity politics or the usual scenarios of gender and sexual identity, but rather recasts them so that they can reflect other than a solely heterosexual perspective. At one point, the lover/narrator delineates the predictable and repetitious script of an affair: a Lothario seduces a middle-aged married woman, who although she commits adultery refuses to leave her husband or tell him of the affair (14-15). Further, the woman says simultaneously, "I love my husband you know. He is not like other men. . . . I never wanted to give him a moment's worry. That's why I can't tell him" and "When he touches me I think about you. I'm a middle-aged happily married woman and all I can see is your face. What have you done to me?" (15). The script can be seen as depicting a traditional affair between a male lover and a married woman. An uncertainty appears in the script, however, when the stage directions at the end point to the lover crying in the bathroom upon hearing the married woman's sentiments (15). A reader cannot easily imagine a male lover doing this, particularly a male lover who confesses to having an internal clock prohibiting the duration of affairs beyond a period of six months (79). A lesbian lover, on the other hand, can easily be imagined to feel both devalued and helpless in the face of the societal power of the heterosexual contract, which operates in such a way as to render lesbian love insignificant and peripheral in comparison with heterosexual love, bolstered by the institution of

marriage, as well as many other state institutions and cultural customs.[1] However, a lesbian lover, particularly a feminist lesbian lover, would not normally be portrayed as a lover who has collected girlfriends like scalps on poles in a series of short-term affairs (53). Therefore, the notion of the lover as either male or female is rendered problematic by textual contradictions.

This ambiguity in the text allows the female reader to imagine the lover as female, and therefore to imagine herself as the protagonist of the novel: a luxury that is often granted to male readers, but less often to female ones, in the case of fairy-tales and legends with a hero pursuing an unattainable woman and finally winning her. The script is also overturned when Louise tells the lover she is leaving, but leaves her husband rather than the lover (98). Sexual orientation also comes into question with the lover's reminiscences of affairs with both females and males. These enable either female or male bisexual readers to imagine themselves as the lover. The lack of physical details about the lover's body gives the same imaginative possibilities to females or males with bodies that do not conform to the two-sex model--for example hermaphrodites, or members of the transgendered community--regardless of the genitals they do or do not possess. Further, the lover has no desire to conform to the traditional nuclear family arrangement for procreation of children in which sexual desire is considered by white Western society to be appropriately expressed: "I have no desire to reproduce but I still seek out love" (108). The heterosexual contract is thus refused in various different ways in the text, and the

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[1] For a discussion of the heterosexual contract, see Monique Wittig, "On the Social Contract."

possibilities of other arrangements in sexual relationships emerge.

There are other refusals in the text enabled by the complete omission of physical details pertaining to the lover's body: size, shape, race, injuries, and so on, which leaves space for female readers, including those of different physical attributes, different races and the differently abled, to imagine themselves as the lover. The lover is not wealthy, working throughout the novel at the job of translating, as well as working in the Yorkshire wine bar, in order to pay the rent, and purchases the necessities of life (106, 145). Further, the lover has no car, but borrows Jacqueline's or Louise's, and accepts lifts from Gail (30, 69, 142). The lover cannot rely on Louise for economic support either, even if their attempt to live together is successful. Louise's husband Elgin makes a great deal of money, but Louise worked during the early stages of their marriage to support him, and continued to work until a year before meeting the lover (63, 92). After the divorce, Louise must support herself independently by teaching Art History (99). Louise may be beautiful, but she is not rich. Moreover, she is a social outsider in Britain; she comes from Australia, and her family are definitely not aristocratic (164-65). The text, therefore, refuses the assumption that the two main characters are white, middle-class, British, and economically advantaged, and leaves room for differences.

Another empowering aspect of the text for a variety of female readers is that the lover, whatever the lover's gender, solves problems through the counsel and wisdom of women, not men. It is a woman who tells the lover Louise's address when the lover goes looking for her; it is The Pea who berates the lover for leaving Louise; it is Gail who gives the lover the advice and direction which result in reunion with Louise (173, 166, 160,

189). Men are not relevant to the story, unless the lover is one, and, as usual in a Winterson novel, a penis is cut off and this time even eaten, symbolically, when a snake's head poking out of the letterbox belonging to one of the lover's ex-girlfriends snaps a leek in half which is then eaten for dinner (41-2). Further, Elgin, the only male character who appears for any length of time, is knocked unconscious by the lover, therefore symbolically rendered impotent (172). Men, therefore, including the lover if the lover is indeed male, are not the ones with insight or power.

Whether a reader imagines the lover to be a woman or a man, Louise still appears as the prize in a contest between her husband and her lover, and even love itself is seen as "a big game hunter" (10). Since the lover's body could possibly be female, the lover's body confronts a female reader with the fact that all women internalize to some degree the patriarchal aspects of our white Western culture, no matter how feminist or even how lesbian separatist any of us might attempt to be politically. By making the sex of the lover indecipherable, Winterson implicates both men and women in our cultural expectations of love, thus making a far more accurate political statement about male-female relations in our present white Western culture than a political stance locating males as responsible for the entire gamut of womens' oppression(s) and women as merely passive victims, as some radical feminists suggest.[2]

With all these political aspects of the novel in mind, I believe that the most important point Winterson makes in *Written* is that love is about bodies, but it is also

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[2] For a discussion of 20th century radical feminism, see Chapter 5, "Radical Feminism and Human Nature," in Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature.*

about story-telling: sex is verbal, not just physical. Winterson makes another important point in her interview with Mark Marvel:

> For many people, to step outside the normal confines of society is a way of seeming mad, of dissolving one's own identity. But it's important that people should make the choices for themselves. And it may well be that those choices will lead them to a place that is so outside society, and outside any coherent framework as we know it, that they seem utterly crazy. However, I think that that's a valid choice" (168).

To make both the above points, Winterson writes the lover's body in *Written* in such a way that the entire novel turns on the ability of people in love relationships to talk and listen carefully to each other, and normalizes people's choices concerning sexual relationships which place them outside the normal confines of society. Anthony Slagle notes:

> By reconceptualizing the notion of identity--indeed, by asserting an identity based on difference--Queer Nation subverts the dominant structure by refusing to use its terms. . . . Indeed, Queer Nation celebrates difference and diversity in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality among its membership. (93)

Winterson can be said to be creating, in characters such as Villanelle and the lover, exemplars of queer identity: people who are outside the normal confines of society in terms of the heterosexual norm. The lover's body turns *Written on the Body* from a traditional romance novel, with a heterosexual male undertaking a quest for true love, into a post-modern novel, with a sexually ambivalent protagonist searching to understand a queer identity. This notion is underlined when the lover states: "I don't want to reproduce,

I want to make something entirely new" (108). The lover's body, "the body where your name is written" (178), demonstrates that a love relationship need not be limited to a heterosexual, or even a homosexual partnership: lovers can be any gender, or indeed any sex, at all.

Conclusion

Finally, do these three bodies in Winterson's novels make a difference to who a female reader thinks she is? I believe that they do for several reasons. Winterson's novels add to the works of women writers that are well regarded and widely read even by mainstream critics and readers. Numbers are important, as Winterson notes in *The Passion*: "Snow . . . when you catch those pieces of nothing in your hands, it seems so unlikely that they could hurt anyone. Seems so unlikely that simple multiplication can make such a difference" (100). Winterson's writing also accomplishes some of the work called for by Wendy Brown, who urgently asks feminists to develop an oppositional politics within postmodern political conditions (63). Brown notes that feminist political spaces must define themselves against the private sphere, bodies, reproduction and production, mortality, and all the populations and issues implicated in these categories, and states:

> [W]e can harbour no dreams of perfect communication, or even of a "common language," but confront as a permanent political condition partiality of understanding and expression, cultural chasms vigilantly identified but rarely "resolved," and powers of words and images that evoke, suggest, and connote rather than transmit meanings. . . . I am suggesting that only political conversation oriented toward diversity and the common, toward world rather than self, and involving conversion of one's knowledge of the world from a situated (subject) position into a public idiom, offers us the possibility of countering postmodern

social fragmentations and political disintegrations. (80-81)

To me, the characters Dogwoman, Villanelle and the lover, with their fabulous bodies, do work in Winterson's novels toward identifying unresolvable cultural chasms, and are represented in very powerful language that evokes, suggests and connotes rather than explains. I believe that they allow women to imagine themselves in ways that effectively counter the frustrations of constructing oneself subjectively in the face of postmodern fragmentations, de-centerings and deconstructions of identities, giving women hope for political identities that can work together to effect social change.

These three fabulous bodies are instrumental in portraying these characters as examples of Rosi Braidotti's nomad: "a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity" (22). This kind of identity seems urgently necessary in our present white, Western culture, where few women can take on an identity and live it over a period of years, but must instead redefine themselves quite frequently in terms of family ties, relationships, work opportunities, class status and economic status, just as Dogwoman, Villanelle, and the lover were obliged to do.

Since these three bodies are all fabulous rather than normal, and very different in bodily appearance and capabilities, both from each other and from bodies considered "normal" in our current white, Western culture, they help to construct imaginative, rather than actual, role models, and thus give women opportunities to make myths about themselves, rather than blueprints for living. Sexually, they can be seen to perform

according to the tenets of queer theory, which challenges the ways in which identities are constructed, rather than emphasizing a unitary identity, and foregrounds sexuality as a critical component of identity. Various ways of being sexual in bodily appearance and sexual expression are thus open to women's imaginations, and validated as well, for no female sexual behaviours are constructed as repellent or perverse in Winterson's novels. Certainly no body that we are familiar with is like that of Dogwoman or Villanelle, or indeterminable like that of the lover. Therefore, these three bodies work to deconstruct the idea that woman are a "natural group," in accordance with Wittig's notion of a materialist feminist approach to women's oppression ("One is Not Born a Woman" 47).

Lastly, critical responses to Jeannette Winterson's work attest to the fact that it is never simply disregarded. Writing passionately and with political aims, Winterson fits into the category of the "last sex" as defined by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker: "men who are feminists, women who would meet violence with violence, clit club activists, transgendered bodies, abused women who cure themselves, and us, by gathering to tell their stories of disappearance, and fiction writers who make of words exploding viral infections that contaminate the antiseptically closed world of binary gender signs" (12). Such credentials do not always endear a writer to mainstream critics. Furthermore, when asked by writer Nicolette Jones to name the greatest living novelist writing in English, Winterson named herself: "No one working in the English language now comes close to my exuberance, my passion, my fidelity to words" (*Sunday Times* Books 7-9). Both her attitude and her writings provoke responses which are correspondingly passionate, and also reflect strongly held political views. A male reviewer of Winterson's *Art and Lies*,

Peter Kemp, finds a rudimentary plot, unoriginal ideas, a contempt for ordinary folk, a parroting of routine modernist opinions and unadventurously second-hand beliefs and bigotries in the novel, and deplores her cavalier treatment of male genitals (*Sunday Times* 7-1). Kemp goes on to state that the hosannas, maledictions, apocalyptic visions, ecstasies, zealotry, sanctimonious sermonizings, messianic vehemences and dogmatisms which Winterson mocked in *Oranges are not the only fruit* have become her stock in trade, and that her talent is more and more dispiritingly debased by self-worship (*Sunday Times 7-2)*. However, a female reviewer of the same novel, Rachel Cusk, notes:

> The initial unpalatability of Jeannette Winterson's *Art and Lies* is nothing but the first taste of the unfamiliar, a flavour which requires a demolition of expectation before it can be unlocked.
>
> This is an infuriating and exciting novel . . . the ice of first meeting is melted by the real alchemy of literary achievement, the marriage of invention with compassion . . . Winterson's belief in love, beauty and most of all, language, is evangelical and redemptive. (*Times* Books 39).

These two very disparate views of the same Winterson novel both appeared in England in June of 1994, and can be seen to display male and female reactions to Winterson's work at extreme opposite ends of a continuum. Even though such a small sampling of critical reaction obviously cannot produce a definitive conclusion, it does point out that Winterson's work is sufficiently "in-your-face" to provoke strong critical comment from both supporters and detractors, as the feminist and queer movements continue to do.

Winterson began her writing career in the right-wing England of Margaret

Thatcher and pursues it as the politics of the New Right gather ever-increasing momentum in North America. Hopefully, she will continue to give female readers imaginative writings that enable them to construct female subjectivities in ways countering a swing to conservatism which could erode many of the gains made by feminists and queers past and present. May Jeannette Winterson continue to articulate her conviction that "the everyday, for me, is quite a miraculous experience" by writing even more fabulous bodies (Marvel 168). Writing about bodies is, as many writers have attested, an impossible task. However, my own attempts to write about the fabulous bodies in Winterson's fiction have been continually fascinating, and I will always see bodies, and the everyday, as more miraculous because of her work.

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