

Dog-Women and She-Devils: The Queering Field of Monstrous Women

Lorena Russell¹

Contemporary British writers Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, and Fay Weldon all employ representations of excessive and powerful female characters in their fiction. Although these often monstrous characterizations may be read as posing an onslaught to the notion of the subject, such representations ultimately allow for greater complexity in exploring possibilities of sexual subjectivity and identifications. All three authors craft their characters through a strongly-invested materialism, one derived through Bakhtinian excesses, pornography, and S/M. This essay investigates how these monstrous bodies model both feminist and queer applications, and how the narratives open spaces for a queer configuration of female heterosexuality.

KEY WORDS: queer theory; heterosexuality; Angela Carter; Fay Weldon; Jeanette Winterson.

In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemary Jarvis Thomson (1997) traces the normalizing discourses of monstrous bodies in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. She works from the case of Julia Pastrana, a hirsute Mexican-Indian, to show how narratives that developed around this woman's body challenged both concepts of what it takes to be a human and what it takes to be a woman. Discourses around Pastrana's excessive body hair, while initially disturbing binary constructions of human/animal and man/woman, ultimately devolved into a kind of "border control," one that contributed to normalizing discourses of the time. Late twentieth-century fictional accounts of "monstrosity" carry some of the same risks and benefits as the narratives surrounding Julia Pastrana. Contemporary British writers Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, and Fay Weldon all script characters whose bodies are marked with transgressive elements, qualities that cross boundaries of containment and categorization. In many ways, these representations function in

¹Department of English, CB#3520 Greenlaw Hall, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3520; e-mail: lorenar@email.unc.edu.

liberatory ways to forge spaces of perverse corporeality. Yet these crossings are never purely transgressive, and always retain some of the normalizing potential that Thomson describes.

The ambivalence of these representations stems in part from the comedic modes of parody and excess in which Carter, Winterson, and Weldon work. Linda Hutcheon (1985) argues that a certain doubleness will always be apparent in parody, which is “fundamentally double and divided . . . from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression” (p. 26). Although these comedies invite readers to reconsider their formulations of women, the force of their humor derives from standardized notions of Woman, a standard readers must still bear in mind to make sense of the excesses the representations mock. But even beyond these authors’ use of parody, the body itself serves as a slippery site for launching oppositional discourse, making these “body projects” rife with potential for misreadings and misappropriations. Despite, or maybe because of, these risks, Carter’s, Winterson’s, and Weldon’s uses of “perverse” bodies and technological transformations open spaces for recasting a transgressive female heterosexuality through a formulation of the queer. The mobility of their monstrous representations creates a narrative “queering field,” effectively challenging normative configurations of female heterosexuality.

In an essay “Notes from the Frontline,” Angela Carter (1997) identifies herself as a materialist feminist, and comments further that she is “in the demythologizing business” (p. 38). Weldon’s and Winterson’s female characters further reflect both of these concerns; women’s bodies in their novels are scripted as grounds of materiality, places where specificity confounds universalizing. As such, bodies in Carter, Winterson, and Weldon, however fantastic, often function paradoxically to pull readers away from the abstract readings their excesses might invite. This link between material specificity and excess further relates to the Bakhtinian construction of “grotesque realism,” a form with strong links to folk tradition and bodily functions, and an association with an exaggeration that exceeds notions of biological individualism:

The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth and brimming-over abundance. Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic ‘economic man,’ but to the collective ancestral body of all the people. Abundance and the all-people’s element also determine the gay and festive character of all images of bodily life. . . . The material bodily principle is a triumphant, festive principle (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 19).

The comedic force of such characterizations is linked to the excesses exemplified by Rabelais, an excess, at least in Bakhtin’s description, that is derived through the body itself in the revitalizing spirit of carnival. But as is also clear in Bakhtin’s description, the notion of carnival relies on mythic elements to formulate its logic, with an appeal to “the collective ancestral body of all the people” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 19). Thus while Carter, Weldon, and Winterson may deploy certain elements of Bakhtin’s materially-bound excesses, they are more likely to paradoxically employ

any appeals to broader universalisms and myth in their projects of materialist feminism.

Recent critical works have called distinctions between the material and the social into question. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler (1993) complicates understandings of the material. She proposes “a return to the notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as a *process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*” (p. 9). Butler’s work on materiality further challenges the divisions between “the material” and “the cultural,” and the ways in which such divisions have become part and parcel of the feminist division of “sex” and “gender.” While Carter, Weldon, and Winterson can all be understood as working from positions of material feminism, theirs is a peculiarly poststructuralist materialism as well, one that, like Butler’s, implicitly questions divisions of language and the material. As Butler (1993) describes it:

Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependence, but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different (p. 69).

Carter’s, Weldon’s, and Winterson’s narratives effectively exploit this element of chiasmic interdependence between language and materiality. The stylistic excesses of their representations move against their materialist agendas to create a sense of cognitive vertigo. Their fiction therefore might be understood as appropriating Bakhtinian excess as part of a poststructuralist feminist strategy, a strategy whereby they challenge readers to move between positions of dominance and submission, misogyny and feminism, myth and materiality, with a dizzying mobility that might be best categorized as “a queering.” Although it’s a term that resists easy categorization, the notion of “queer” tends to imply an anti-homophobic agenda that questions received configurations of sexual and gendered identities. In *Tendencies* (1993), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes how the queer project seeks to open possibilities around the sometimes calcified terms of gendered and sexual identities. Queer theory works within “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be made*) to signify monolithically” (p. 8). The mobility of Carter’s, Weldon’s, and Winterson’s representations functions to disturb any attempt to fix sexualities and identities, and, therefore, operates as a kind of queering.

While queer theory is traditionally associated with a privileging of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered politics, Winterson’s, Weldon’s, and Carter’s fiction frequently works towards a transgressive heterosexuality that would still allow for anti-homophobic discourse. All three authors may employ gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered characterizations to allow for a recognizable queering, but these characterizations are further linked to a more subtle queering in their rescripting of traditional heterosexual relationships. One of the ways such rescripting takes place is through their perverse writing of women’s bodies, somatic texts

that mobilize readings of sexual difference(s) and identification(s) towards the queer. For if Judith Butler (1993) is right when she claims that heterosexuality circumscribes and contours the “materiality” of sex (p. 15), the disruption of that materiality might best be pursued through a queering of such normative heterosexuality.

In a quite different sense from Butler’s view of heterosexuality as contouring the materiality of sex, Sedgwick (1993) notes the way that normative heterosexuality actually stands *outside* of notions of the sexual because it is accepted as an unmarked category, the identity that “perversions” like homosexuality are read against. Thus, “uninterrogated ‘regular’ heterosexuality may not function as a sexuality at all” (p. 10). One of the results of such naturalization is that heterosexuality, in addition to being de-sexed, loses any sense of material specificity:

the making historically visible of heterosexuality is difficult because, under its institutional pseudonyms such as Inheritance, Marriage, Dynasty, Family, Domesticity, and Population, heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade so fully as History itself—when it has not presented itself as the totality of Romance (Sedgwick, 1993, pp. 10–11).

Carter, Winterson, and Weldon effectively denaturalize heterosexuality by resignifying the category of the female heterosexual through grotesque, fragmented, and excessive bodies. By rendering this identity category through the realm of a troubled materiality, these authors are thus able to demythologize the over-determined category of “Woman,” while denaturalizing the unmarked, de-sexed category of “heterosexuality.”

In proposing that these authors open possibilities for refiguring a transgressive female heterosexuality, my intention is *not* to foreclose lesbian possibilities. Indeed, for all these authors, and especially in the work of Jeanette Winterson, I would argue that the indeterminacy of sexualities works actively to promote lesbian possibility, and that such sapphic potential is a large part of what allows for any sense of non-normative heterosexuality. Critics who have developed such arguments regarding Winterson include Marilyn R. Farwell (1996), Laura Doan (1994), and Lisa Moore (1995).

In an early Gothic novel, *Shadow Dance*, Carter (1966) details the woman’s suffering body. Here the three main characters, Ghislaine, Honeybuzzard, and Morris (the narrator), create an odd triangle in a plot based on an evolving S/M scene. From the beginning of the novel, Ghislaine bears the marks of the sadistic “Honeybuzzard,” a scarring that entralls Morris, inspiring this close reading:

The scar went all the way down her face, from the corner of her left eyebrow, down, down, down, past nose and mouth and chin until it disappeared below the collar of her shirt. The scar was red and raw as if, at the slightest exertion, it might open and bleed; and the flesh was marked with purple imprints from the stitches she had had in it. The scar had somehow puckered all the flesh around it, as if some clumsy amateur dressmaker had roughly cobbled up the seam and pushed her away. . . . The scar drew her whole face sideways, and even in profile, with the hideous thing turned away, her face was horribly lop-sided, skin, features all dragged away from the bone (Carter, 1966, p. 3).

When Carter moves with a close lens in her intimate examination of women's bodies, she effectively invites readers to attempt ambiguous contact with the flesh itself, to probe the abject borders of the brutalized skin. Such contact, were it possible, would turn writing into flesh. The implication of such a shift troubles the boundaries between the material and the representational. In her 1978 work, *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter argues: "pornographic writing . . . turns the flesh into word. This is the real transformation the text performs upon libidinous fantasy" (p. 13). Carter's sadomasochism describes a double motion—one that plays with the boundaries between the representational and the material in what, to borrow from Linda Williams (1999), might best be termed a "frenzy of the linguistic."

In the final chapter of *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter (1978) discusses distinctions in English between the word "flesh" and the word "meat," noting the former term's ambiguous associations. Flesh is more than meat, but still "Fleshly delights are lewd distractions from the contemplation of higher, that is, of spiritual, things; the pleasures of the flesh are vulgar and unrefined, even with an element of beastliness about them" (pp. 137–38). It is through the process of materialization, the movement through the baroque excesses of her language to the "beastliness" of the flesh, that Carter traverses boundaries between the human and the monster. As in her parodic employment of violence and pornography, Carter effectively turns the logic back on itself, moving against readers' expectations by replacing "flesh" with "meat." This unexpected movement effects a kind of narrative vertigo, a dizzying ambivalence that defamiliarizes the construction of female heterosexuality Ghislaine represents. Where we might expect to view the feminized, sexualized object Woman, we instead are faced with the scarred monster: part human, part animal, a disturbing hybridity that opens possibilities for queering Ghislaine's "heterosexuality."

Constructions of heterosexuality in *Shadow Dance* are further displaced by Morris's fluctuating desires and abhorrence, his fierce ambivalence of cross-identifications and homoerotic desires. Morris's fascination with Ghislaine's disfigurement is matched only by his fascination with Honeybuzzard, caught as he is between his empathy for the suffering Ghislaine and his identification with the violent Honeybuzzard.

As readers, we too have conflicting responses to the unfolding violence of the narrative. As purveyors of the S/M scene, readers are typically offered the choice of identifying with the suffering of the masochist or the victory of the sadist. Carter troubles that binary through a mobility that moves quickly from horror to sympathy. Carter may later distance herself from what she describes as her "sinister act of male impersonation" (1988, p. 113), but she continues to work in ways she describes as "moral pornography" (1978, p. 21), a paradoxical rhetoric that accentuates sexual violence and oppression through a troubling focus on women's bodies, one that highlights how bodies and psyches have been damaged through

the processes of objectification. Lorna Sage (1994) observes that for Carter, “[t]he strategy is to *follow through* the monster Marquis’s plots in ironic paraphrase. His perversity spells out the secret subtext of law and order and hierarchy” (p. 39). The subversiveness of “the monster Marquis” is based on his perversion of heteronormativity, a subversion Carter would adapt. At the same time, Carter’s parody rejects the “diabolic solitude” of the Sadeian libertine (Carter, 1978, p. 150). Carter’s work on de Sade undermines the normative discourses of heterosexuality through excess and irony, and opens places for new configurations of queering.

Carter’s 1982 *The Passion of New Eve* exemplifies her fictional reworkings of de Sade and exploration of the rhetoric of pornography. In this dystopian novel, the sadistic Englishman Evelyn journeys to an apocalyptic United States only to be captured by a radical woman’s community where he is forcibly transformed from a man to a woman. Three of the main characters undergo sexual permutations: the narrator, Evelyn is forcibly transformed through surgery into the pin-up girl Eve; the languorous masochist Leilah becomes the mythic warrior Lilith; while the glamorous actress-icon Tristessa, “Our Lady of Sorrows,” is revealed to be a man dressed as a woman. All of these transformations serve to trouble our notions of coherent and stable sexual identifications and channeled desires, since characters in this story counterpose each other through their individual transformations and unexpected sexual liaisons.

The mutability of gender in *The Passion of New Eve* works to disrupt normative heterosexuality even as it inscribes its potential. The sexual encounter between Eve and Tristessa is an encounter between man and woman that marks a positive moment of intersubjectivity in an otherwise bereft fictional landscape. Nevertheless, their liaison is endlessly complicated by their gendered histories. Even though they come together as a man and woman, they retain traces of their past. As Anja Müller (1997) comments: “In mirroring each other’s sexual ambiguity, they point to the arbitrariness of gender categories” (p. 34). For Müller, the transgression of Tristessa’s and Eve’s liaison comes from the inscription of their biological origins, so that when Eve and Tristessa make love, the moment is in some sense a love scene between two men, and thereby becomes a distortion of “the heterosexual matrix” (p. 35). The complication and irresolvability of their sexual natures creates the queering implicit in their lovemaking.

Carter further employs bodily transformations and doublings in *The Passion of New Eve* to trouble notions of suffering and objectified women. On one level, she works within the pornographic to accentuate the objectification of women, furthering readerly discomfort. The sadistic and misogynist Evelyn travels to New York, where he follows and enslaves the seductive sadomasochist Leilah. They stay in a seedy apartment where Evelyn grows increasingly dissatisfied with Leilah, whom he binds and beats, and leaves languishing in their flat:

What did she do all day when she wasn’t working? She lay in her narrow, iron bed of white-painted iron the landlord must have stolen from a hospital, ate hash candy she made

herself, so much hash candy her teeth were rotting, and dreamily agitated her clitoris with her forefinger, her mind—as far as I could tell—full of diffuse, purplish and crimson shapes that came together and divided in patterns that, as she described them to me, seemed singularly listless, limp, exhausted (Carter, 1982, p. 26).

Here Evelyn describes his observations of Leilah's body and his projections of her mind, the latter of which seems to display like a lava lamp, reflecting the languishing, impotent, and sterile landscape of Carter's apocalyptic United States. The pornographic imagery of the Gothic is mitigated by an ironic excess, as Evelyn's growing alienation and abuse paradoxically lead the reader towards greater sympathy and identification with the decadent Leilah. Moreover, the passage exemplifies Carter's use of pornography as a troubling device. Marina Warner (1994) suggests "[Carter's] profanity was of the unsettling variety that made it necessary to examine one's own received ideas" (1994, p. 255). Here the violent and the erotic are brought together in a move that invites an elision of psyche and body, as the "diffuse, purplish and crimson shapes" unfolding in Leilah's mind seem to mirror the bruising on her body.

When Leilah is transformed into Lilith, she adopts the phallic pose of Ellen Ripley from *Aliens* (Carroll, et al., 1986), a competent, active leader with a gun on her hip. But Leilah's "transformation" is closer in kind to Tristessa's unveiling. Eve ponders:

What's become of the houri of Manhattan? Had she all the time been engaged in guerilla warfare for her mother? Had that gorgeous piece of flesh and acquiescence been all the time a show, an imitation, an illusion? (Carter, 1982, p. 172).

Such questions problematize distinctions between "flesh" and "illusion" as well as interrogate power in the S/M scene. Leilah was apparently "in charge" from the start, allowing Carter to comment on complexities of power in intimate relationships. Jessica Benjamin (1988) suggests in *The Bonds of Love* that viewing oppression as a more complex dynamic helps to avoid the tendency in feminist thought to glorify the oppressed "as if their politics and culture were untouched by the system of domination, as if people did not participate in their own submission" (p. 9).

Monstrous mothers offer another avenue for Carter to challenge the commonplace in feminism while queering normative heterosexuality through tropes of monstrosity and technology. The surgeon who performs Evelyn's forced sex change is an incarnation of the goddess Cybele, the ruler of the women's community, and is known only as "Mother." This figure in many ways combines elements of Carter's abject bodies with the ironic excesses that mark her later carnivalesque fictions. Mother is also, like Leilah, described as black. The futuristic setting of *The Passion of New Eve* describes an America embattled with racial divisions. Harlem has fractured from New York, and, like parts of California led by Latinos, has declared its separation from the "United" States. Some critics have read these moments as markers of Carter's dystopia, her warning that if racial divisions are not resolved, they will lead to wide-spread violence. Carter further

employs blackness as a marker of difference and of “Othering,” something that from the protected Englishman’s perspective would provide a paradoxically exotic attraction and repulsion, thus functioning as another level of abjection within the novel.

Mother is further described as six and a half feet tall with rows of breasts. Her bodily excesses place her in middle ground between myth and materiality, and her technological feat of self-fashioning places her in the realm of the cyborg: “And she had made herself! Yes, made herself! She was her own mythological artifact; she had reconstructed her flesh painfully, with knives and with needles, into a transcendental form as an emblem, as an example” (p. 60). In another place she is described by the soon-to-be transformed Evelyn as “too much mother, a femaleness too vast, too gross for my imagination to contain” (p. 66).

Such excesses continue in Carter’s later comic novels, which achieve some of the same ambiguities and discomfort of her earlier work through a complicated comedic turn. This is Carter turned full throttle, full-tilt boogie. Her exuberance manifests through a Rabelaisian excess, an excess displayed in part through the bodily make-up and desires of her heroines. Linden Peach (1998) notes, “Carter became increasingly interested in the grotesque body as a site where the body as fetishised in realist narrative is challenged” (p. 12). Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus* (Carter, 1984) is perhaps the finest example of this latter-day Carter figure. Fevvers is a giant at six feet, two inches who furthers the sense of excess through her outstanding feature, a set of wings, appendages given an extra punch through the artifice of purple dye and her “natural” six-foot wing-span. These wings give her access to the realm of air, allowing her fame and fortune through her *aerialiste* expertise as “The Cockney Venus” (p. 7). But as abnormal appendages the wings also mark a crossing of boundaries, one that calls into question her status as human or as monster, while gesturing towards the angelic.

Carter (1978) explores how body parts become estranged through idealization, how they lose even the significance of the conventional attributes of the female: they become the signs of a denaturalised being, as if there was an inherent freakishness about breasts and buttocks at the best of times, as if half the human race were not equipped with them. As if they were as surprising and unusual physical appurtenances to find on a woman as fins or wings (p. 68).

In the same essay, *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter (1978) will further claim: “a free woman in an unfree society will be a monster” (p. 27), a maxim that applies to a powerful figure like Fevvers, although she lacks the abhorrently monstrous qualities of a character like Mother. A similar phenomenon is at play in Jeanette Winterson’s (1989) *The Passion*, where the character Villenelle possesses webbed feet that allow her to walk on water. Like Fevvers’s wings, they give her access to another element, yet remain markers of a paradoxical difference: an inhuman monstrosity and a gesture towards the divine.

This dynamic of difference and monstrosity is discussed by Rosi Braidotti (1994), who observes that the category Woman has a “natural” affiliation with the category of monstrosity:

Woman as a sign of difference is monstrous. If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of *fascination and horror*. This logic of attraction and repulsion is extremely significant; psychoanalytic theory takes it as the fundamental structure of the mechanism of desire and, as such, of the constitution of the neurotic symptom (p. 81).

Thus, the mechanics of monstrosity put into play the complexities of power dynamics in Foucault (1980), as well as the paradoxical function of desire in psychoanalysis.

Jeanette Winterson, like Angela Carter, has earned a reputation as a post-structuralist writer, one who troubles notions of identity and sexuality. Alongside these poststructuralist tendencies, Winterson also scripts narratives that simultaneously offer a liberal humanist notion of a core identity. The heart functions as a central metaphor in *The Passion* (1989), and offers Winterson a means of employing corporeality as a strategic category to disrupt our notions of identity. On one level, the heart denotes the core of a material being, and as such, is sympathetic to the essentialist perspective. But the passions and desires that issue from the heart operate as powerful solvents of identity categories, and challenge any simplistic constructions of materiality or subjectivity. Thus, through highlighting love and matters of the heart, Winterson engages in a materially-based critique of identity categories, using her fiction to create the paradoxical coexistence of corporeality and subjectivity.

It is largely through this interplay between corporeality and subjectivity that Winterson effectively queers identity categories. In both *The Passion* (1989) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1991), Winterson challenges categories of sexual identity through themes of desire. Unlike Winterson’s first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1987), *The Passion* is not a coming-out story centered around the lesbian experience of the protagonist. However, homoerotic desire operates as a viable thematic element that both structures and questions categories of sexual identity, including those of female heterosexuality. *The Passion* both enhances understanding of the central character as a lesbian, while it simultaneously challenges such a possibility. Although Villanelle clearly is erotically and passionately involved with another woman, the contexts and complexity of desires within the economy of Winterson’s fiction deny her categorization as a “lesbian,” and ultimately render such a category meaningless. The identity crises that Winterson’s texts effect evacuate meanings for “heterosexuality” alongside “lesbian,” opening the way for a queering of female heterosexuality (not to mention a queering of “the lesbian”), in a narrative challenge to operations of homo- and heteronormativity.

One of the obvious ways in which Villanelle’s sexuality counters attempts of categorization is through her bisexuality. Elisabeth D. Däumer (1992) argues for

the power that bisexuality offers in overcoming the temptation to simplify sexual identities:

Because bisexuality occupies an ambiguous position *between* identities, it is able to shed light on the gaps and contradictions of all identity, on what we might call the difference *within* identity (p. 98).

Winterson effectively incorporates this destabilizing effect of bisexual behavior, challenging readers in their efforts to categorize individuals in terms of their sexual identities.

But this challenge is not necessarily completed through the mere incorporation of bisexual themes. Within our social context, gender-of-object-choice is privileged as the primary signifier of sexual identity, and we still tend to categorize bisexuals within the terms of this understanding. For its full destabilizing force to be realized, bisexuality needs to be operationalized outside of the prevailing discourse of gender-of-object-choice.

In a 1994 open email exchange on the QSTUDY-L listserv, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offered some ideas on the limitations of bisexuality as a political category, and the totalizing potential some notions of bisexuality employ:

Although (or because) it makes such a strong claim for recognition and space *within* the prevailing discourse that categorizes sexuality exclusively according to gender-of-object-choice, 'bisexuality' as a political concept is NOT, it seems to me (at least as it has been used recently) a strong place from which to launch a meaningful challenge to that aspect of the prevailing discourse. In fact, there are ways in which the political concept of 'bisexuality' seems to offer a *consolidation and completion* of an understanding of sexuality as something that can be described adequately, for everybody, in terms of gender-of-object-choice.—As though, once you've added 'goes for both same *and* opposite sex' to 'goes for same sex' and 'goes for opposite sex,' you have now covered the entire ground and collected the whole set (Sedgwick, 1994).

But then Sedgwick continues:

I should add that in a discursive context that WASN'T so radically structured already around gender-of-object-choice, the concept of bisexuality could work very differently: instead of seeming to add the finishing touch to a totalizing vision of human sexuality/gender, it could function as one sexually dissident self-description among many others, some of which would and some of which would not feature gender-of-object-choice. My impression is that the latter kind of challenge—a challenge to the DECISIVENESS of gender-of-object-choice as a way of understanding sexuality—is well under way, and that the rubric most often associated with it is "queer," not "bisexual" (Sedgwick, 1994).

It is the queer context Winterson creates in her novels that gives bisexuality its destabilizing powers, and highlights the instability of gendered desire, therefore opening possibilities for alternative formulations of non-normative female heterosexuality. Winterson uses chaotic and fabulous settings that further destabilize notions of identity. In the fluid world of Venice, Villanelle's sexuality combines with her transvestitism to confuse the reader's preconceptions regarding gender identity and sexual orientation. In her account of lesbian desire, Winterson employs

the setting of Venice, a place so magically unsettled and fluid that the theme is at once politically unproblematized and epistemologically questioned. Laura Doan (1994) notes:

Venice, the city of disguises, is a postmodern city par excellence in its mutability and is thus the ideal domain for Villanelle, now accoutered with a moustache and man's shirt to hide her breasts. . . . Cross-dressing emphasizes the demarcation between various possible essences . . . and appearances (p. 148).

Because Venice's unique setting is libertine and accepting, one woman's love for another woman is not to be questioned on moral grounds. But the unstable and shifting qualities of the city where "canals hide other canals, alley-ways cross and criss-cross so that you will not know which is which" (p. 114) also serve to problematize identity. The maze-like Venice becomes a parable for identity, and we are twice reminded: "The cities of the interior are vast and do not lie on any map" (p. 152). Venice is a queer place, one that maintains an implicit understanding of the doubleness of the heart. Judith Seaboyer (1997) describes two Venices implicit in *The Passion*, one functioning as psyche, one as body:

The waters that define the first city penetrate its porous body, which, in its unmappable illegibility, recalls the ancient myth of the labyrinth, a fluid space of transformation and danger that has traditionally stood for the psychic inward journey, and increasingly for textuality itself. Distinguished by death and decay, it is a figure for Kristevan abjection: all border. Together the Venetian Renaissance urbs and mythic/psychic labyrinth form a fantastic meta-city, a precisely articulated grammar that is a reflective ground for the reconstructive readings of the nature of gender and of human violence that Winterson undertakes (p. 483).

Winterson's use of masks and disguises further functions to destabilize sexual difference, and confuses identity categories to open the possibility of same-sex love. Villanelle's cross-dressing functions in the novel as another destabilizing device. Like her bisexuality, it serves to highlight her flexible and pragmatic approach to life, and is another behavior fully suited to the carnivalesque atmosphere of Venice. Venice is described repeatedly as "the city of disguises" where "what you are one day will not constrain you the next. You may explore yourself freely" (p. 150). We are once again reminded that it is not appropriate within the context of this city to look for anything like a stable identity. Winterson's portrait of Venetians depicts identities as fluid and changeable as the city itself.

Cross-dressing is also another way for Winterson to express a level of paradox, to present the reader with some confusion regarding the stability of figure and ground. Laura Doan (1994) argues that transvestitism in *The Passion* contributes to ontological uncertainties, as it becomes "a cultural performance that illustrates how perceptions of external 'appearance' and internal 'essence' interrelate in a problematic state of flux" (p. 148). Such confusion is also noted by Marjorie Garber (1992), who claims that "gender exists only in representation. But this is the subversive secret of transvestitism, that the body is not the ground, but the

figure” (p. 374). This ontological confusion further relates to Elizabeth Grosz’s (1994) metaphorical use of the Möbius strip:

This model . . . provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside (p. xii).

A similar drift appears in Winterson’s 1993 novel, *Written on the Body*. Here Winterson offers a consideration of the relationship between the body and the word as the lover plumbs the depth of the beloved in an fantastic voyage through the “organs, tissues, cells” of the body. The intimacy is captured through the close examination of physiological details, and the excess of details troubles the distinctions between biological and poetic discourses, the body and the word. While the most obvious level of queering in *Written on the Body* occurs through the indeterminacy of the narrator’s sex, the indeterminacy achieved by the lyrical exploration of the body also operates a queering that, as Sedgwick (1993, 1994) advises, disturbs the easy categorization of identity with gender of object-choice. What we focus on is the intimacy of the body, the lover’s depth of engagement with the beloved’s body. In this story, love is experienced through the body itself, a body operating beyond the surface distinctions of sex and gender.

In *Sexing the Cherry* (Winterson, 1991), it is hard to know where Dog-Woman’s body ends and her personality begins, since she expresses herself by virtue of her bodily excesses. Even though we know her as Jordan’s mother, her violent personality and mammoth proportions challenge conventional ideas of maternity. Winterson draws attention to the bulk of Dog-Woman, and exploits the subversive potential of body size. Her weight relates to her feminism, and is part of her ability to survive. As her twentieth-century counterpart states:

I wasn’t fat because I was greedy; I hardly ate at all. I was fat because I wanted to be bigger than all the things that were bigger than me. All the things that had power over me. It was a battle I intended to win (p. 141).

The strength and excesses of Dog-Woman defy our notions of motherhood and of “Woman,” making Winterson as much in the “demythologizing business” as Angela Carter. Many of Dog-Woman’s bodily markers and womanly ways are dangerous, and she has the unpredictability of Fay Weldon’s (1983) Ruth Pradgett. She is an extra tough woman “whose nipples stood out like walnuts” (Winterson, 1993, p. 3). She pulls a man to her breast in what under normal circumstances would be a feminine move of nurture, but because of her strength, bulk and odor, the move is nearly murderous: “He was soon coughing and crying because I haven’t had the dress off in five years” (p. 5). Her attempt at intercourse nearly results in the death of her suitor. For the Dog-Woman: “there’s no man who’s a match for me” (p. 4). Winterson is not relying on the construction of “gender of object-choice” to mark her characters; instead she uses bodily excesses to make them stand outside the gendered and sexual norms of female heterosexuality.

The tensions between the destabilizing powers of passion and the core reality of the human heart are never resolved. Winterson's fiction retains that precarious balance between chance and desire, as her characters struggle on various levels with the paradoxes of the human heart. While Winterson repeatedly challenges notions of identity, she nevertheless insists on the power of the human heart, reinscribing subjectivity within the body itself. In this way, she follows the project of Grosz (1994), who states that:

whatever models are developed must demonstrate some sort of internal or constitutive articulation, or even disarticulation, between the biological and the psychological, between inside and the outside of the body, while avoiding a reductionism of mind to brain (p. 23).

Women in Fay Weldon's works suffer in some of the ways that Carter's women suffer, but more often they enact a sense of agency in ways more akin to Winterson's characters. Like women in both Winterson and Carter, Weldon's characters queer accepted notions of female heterosexuality through material details, excess and technology. Like the comedies of Winterson and Carter, Weldon's writing engages materialism in part through close attention to details of everyday life. As Lana Faulks (1998) notes,

Details are a distinctive force in Weldon's fiction: her narratives evoke a sensual world in which people eat, have sex, and carry on the pedestrian activities of everyday life (p. 7).

Such "pedestrian activities" return us to the Bakhtinian notion of "grotesque realism," for Weldon works her parodies of heterosexual femininity through detailed explorations of the excesses of body types and materiality.

One of the best examples of Weldon's use of corporeality comes in her 1980 novel *Puffball*, the story of the tension between an impregnated woman named Liffey and her (only recently) barren neighbor Mabs. The narrative is interspersed with sections that recall strategies of Winterson's (1993) *Written on the Body*. In *Puffball*, Weldon is interested in exploring how pregnancy operates for women as a defining factor of their gender, and she uses a series of sections entitled "Inside Liffey" to counterpose the biological changes within Liffey's body against the social changes in Liffey's life, a juxtaposition that calls into question boundaries of inside/outside. Using a textbook tone, the narrator of "Inside Liffey (6)" tells us:

Liffey slept. The female nuclei of the ovum and the ale nuclei of the sperm, each containing the chromosomes which were to endow her child with its hereditary characteristics, both moved towards the center of the ovum, where they fused to form a single nucleus" (p. 99).

The novel focuses on pregnancy, a defining moment of female heterosexuality, but Weldon works within the norms of that very pregnancy to trouble ideals. Like Carter, Weldon challenges easy assumptions of "sisterhood," as Mabs sets out in a seething, irrational jealous rage to blight Liffey's baby through witchcraft.

The Weldon character Ruth Pratchet, the title character in her 1983 *Life and Loves of a She Devil*, works as an interesting counterpart to Carter's masochistic

women. Ruth navigates in several areas of life, effectively manipulating systems of medicine, law, and religion to exact a far-reaching and technologically-stunning revenge on her husband. Ruth evokes social, cultural, and technological powers to do her work, seducing a lesbian nurse, sadistic judge, and abstemious priest to condemn Bobbo. At the end of the novel, she avenges on a bodily level through extensive plastic surgery, a technological refashioning of her self in the feminine image of “Mary Fisher,” her husband’s now-dead lover.

Weldon’s “She-Devil,” Ruth, is self-described as a “Dog,” an unattractive woman of outstanding proportions. Like similar characters in Carter and Winterson, Ruth’s size is part of what sets her apart from others, establishing a specific contrast to her nemesis and husband’s lover, Mary Fisher: “When Mary Fisher ran, her footsteps were light and bright. Ruth’s weight swayed from one massive leg to another and shook the house each time it fell” (p. 23). Ruth repeatedly describes herself in contrast to feminine norms, norms best represented by Mary Fisher:

I am dark as Mary Fisher is fair, and one of those jutting jaws that tall, dark women often have, and eyes sunk rather far back into my face, and a hooked nose. My shoulders are broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy, and the muscles in my legs are well developed. My nature and my looks do not agree (p. 5).

Susan McKinstry (1994) notes the ways such a description points to an aberration of feminine norms of the material: “Such a physical body is practically immoral, for its very existence breaks the rules for femaleness, the spiritualization of the fragile flesh” (p. 108). Ruth’s size reflects more than her eccentricity to heterosexual norms, however. It also reflects her response to her social environment in words that echo Dog-Woman’s:

I was born, I sometimes think, with nerve endings not inside but outside of my skin: they shivered and twanged. I grew lumpish and brutish in the attempt to seal them over, not to know too much (p. 11).

In the end of the novel, however, she is no mere lump of clay fashioned by the bumps of a cruel world. She devises a technological conclusion to her revenge by remaking her body through massive reconstructive surgery:

“I have an exceptionally adaptable personality,” Ruth observed. “I have tried many ways of fitting myself to my original body, and the world into which I was born, and have failed. I am no revolutionary. Since I cannot change them, I will change myself. I am quite sure I will settle happily enough into my new body” (p. 203).

As McKinstry (1994) points out, this is a radical move, one that returns to those troubling spaces between “material” and “representational”:

Weldon proves that writing can, indeed, articulate the body. In this novel, the female voice is embodied—full-bodied, and speaking only through the body, in a sort of French feminist’s nightmare. The monstrous female literally, physically, grotesquely, transforms herself into the angel (p. 105).

There is considerable room for ambivalence in Ruth’s decision to slim herself to conform to social norms. On the one hand, the enormity of her agency would

seem to allow that this perverse undertaking is another example of the She-Devil's power. Ruth wills herself into a new physical form, assertively commanding a virtual army of doctors and surgeons who initially balk at such an undertaking, but who ultimately carry out Ruth's commands. Further, in her self-fashioning, the She-Devil echoes the cyborgian qualities of Carter's fearsome Mother, creating a technological hybrid with powerful potentials. But despite these positive readings of her slimming, the She-Devil's final "revenge" could just as easily represent a capitulation to social norms.

This doubleness returns us to the slippery nature of parody. Ruth's final words point to the edge her tale crosses in its telling: "I am a lady of six foot two, who had tucks taken in her legs. A comic turn, turned serious" (Weldon, 1983, p. 241). It is the very ambiguity of the ending that allows for the novel's social critique of heterosexual normativity, a normativity implicated in constructions of materiality. Regina Barreca (1994) argues:

Just as there is no hard core of reality, since truth, as Weldon describes it, is like an onion where you simply peel away layer after layer only to find that there is no heart of the matter, there is also "no such thing as the essential self." So admits one of Ruth's many doctors when she asks about changing her physical self: "It is all inessential, and all liable to change and flux, and usually the better for it" (p. 221).

When women recognize that the apparent orthodoxy is held up by mere consensus, they can begin to acknowledge the powers of subversion which they have within them. Every prevailing notion is then held up for questioning, especially those as fundamental as the concept of nature itself (p. 180).

For all three of these writers, the body remains a troubled and ambiguous site of discursive effects and resistance. In her work on Margaret Atwood and Sylvia Plath, Pamela Cooper (1997) comments how these two authors "explore a common topography of gender, effectively mapping women's struggle for survival and empowerment onto the body" (p. 92). Much the same dynamic occurs in Carter, Weldon, and Winterson, where inscriptions of oppression and power are "at once invested and thwarted" through what Cooper calls "the multiple ambiguities of anatomy" (1997, p. 93). For late twentieth-century feminists like Carter, Winterson, and Weldon, the body's propensity for ambiguity proves a useful site for a tentative and fluid mapping. The complexities of these characters' bodies reflect the intricacies of discourse, subjectivity, and experience, enabling further possibilities for thinking through the contradictions and complexities of poststructuralist feminism by way of potentially queer configurations of female heterosexuality.

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