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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

"YOU MAY EXPLORE YOURSELF FREELY":
GENDER AND THE FANTASTIC IN JEANETTE WINTERSON
AND ANGELA CARTER

by

ELISSA CORDING

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

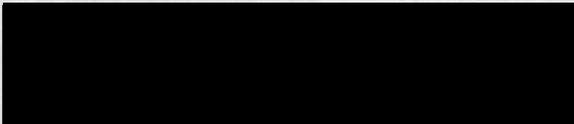
For the Degree of

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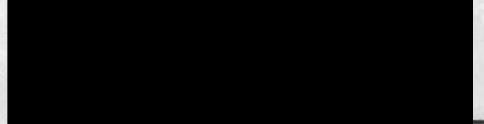
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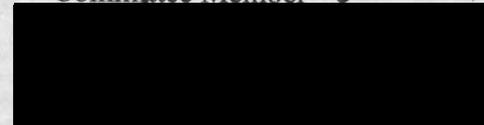

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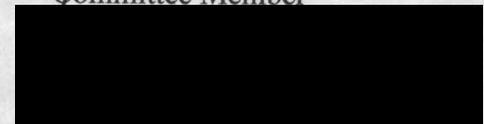
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"YOU MAY EXPLORE YOURSELF FREELY":
GENDER AND THE FANTASTIC IN JEANETTE WINTERSON
AND ANGELA CARTER

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of the Arts

by

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Montclair, NJ

2007

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Abstract

Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson's novels contain magical moments in which reality is questioned and a reader suspends disbelief in the fantastic. While we know that a living heart cannot be kept in a jar and a woman cannot be born with wings, we are meant to accept these moments as possible. The use of fantastical elements in *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry* and *Nights at the Circus* supports Winterson and Carter's unique portrayals of gender. The blending of fantasy and reality allows for the exploration of non-traditional gender roles because as these authors rewrite genre they are also rethinking gender.

In this thesis, I look at how these novels explore and challenge our expectations regarding gender roles for women, both individually and within relationships. After discussing Judith Butler's gender theory, I explore how there is an agreed societal awareness concerning certain roles that women are supposed to fulfill and what happens when these beliefs are destabilized. Women have typically been separated into the binary of whore or virgin, sometimes with the third option of mother. While Winterson and Carter present the binary of virgin/whore, they also break it down. Fevvers is referred to paradoxically as "the Virgin Whore" and though both Villanelle and the Dog Woman work as or with prostitutes, they are much more complex than simply fitting into that label. These authors, therefore, intentionally create characters that do not always fulfill their traditionally expected roles, never mind stay within the bounds of their presumed gender. There are multiple examples of crossdressing, androgyny, and a blurring of masculine and feminine characteristics.

Winterson and Carter write within the genre of magical realism. A realist novel is more suitable for a portrayal of gender that follows strict societal codes, while a novel that has its foot both in realism and fantasy is able to better explore unconventional alternatives. A realistic narrative would likely not be able to express their provocative ideas. In a way, freedom from gender constraints implies a sense of the fantastic. Breaking from the norms of sexuality is similar to breaking free of the norms of textuality. In these novels, gender is presented as fluid and as a way for a character to begin to explore his/her identity. Relationships, both conventional and unconventional, both familial and romantic, are also ways that the characters explore their identity. Winterson and Carter promote a belief in multiple conceptions of self and these postmodern, feminist texts explore how characters can discover aspects of themselves through a blurring of gender.

These novels also use other texts as jumping off points for their personal rewriting of gender roles. Winterson gives voices to the princesses of Grimm's "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" and to those who followed historically recognized figures like Napoleon. Carter often references Shakespeare and throughout all three of these works there are many mythological and Biblical references. These are not just allusions but also a way for these female authors to reclaim traditionally masculine writings as their own, as a part of their history as well, and to mold them accordingly.

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Introduction

Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter both employ elements of the fantastic in their novels as a way to subvert traditional expectations regarding gender. Their novels destabilize the binary of masculine/feminine. These female authors use the fantastic to explore their characters more fully. *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry*, and *Nights at the Circus* are each centered on a female protagonist who defies expected modes of femininity. Villanelle, the Dog Woman and Fevvers are all women who blur gender for their own benefit. These women do not passively or typically occupy their womanhood (or lack thereof); they inhabit a sort of hybridized, middle ground regarding gender. Though their lack of culturally accepted femininity often ostracizes them, each woman embraces her eccentricities. Winterson and Carter use their three main female characters to reveal the contradictions and assumptions inherent in gender roles or, more explicitly, in the ways that women are expected to act.

Their protagonists are not just marginalized because they are women, but also because they are “freaks.” Whether it is through crossdressing, incredibly large size or massive wings, each of these women stands on the periphery of her society. In each of these novels, the protagonist undergoes a series of struggles, loosely reminiscent of a picaresque novel. During the course of these difficulties and experiences, many of them relating to the interactions of men and women, the protagonists begin to develop their characters. Through their gender ambiguity and their relationships with others, these characters are able to discover aspects of themselves.

Identity is not an easily definable concept. In many ways, these novels present the belief that there is no true self or, rather, that there are multiple possibilities of self. It has

been presumed that identity is linked to one's sense of sex, gender and sexuality, and for many, it is. Yet, just because someone is sexed one way or sexually oriented another way does not define who that person is. Identity, like gender, is fluid. Rather than promoting a singular notion of self, the characters in Winterson and Carter's novels explore multiple aspects of their beings.

As a result, Winterson and Carter embrace androgyny in their novels. The blurring of gender, especially for women, is a way to explore identity. In patriarchal society, women have been forced into certain gender roles and in order to break those roles they have to enact traditionally male parts. *The Dog Woman* and *Fevvers* are both biologically atypical women. They are larger and stronger than the average female and therefore have been forced to deal with being more masculine in appearance from birth; Villanelle, though feminine in many of her features, chooses to crossdress as a way to escape the confines of her gender.

These novels explore the ways that society enacts gender or, as Nicola Pitchford explains, these authors have a "growing interest in the social construction of gender" and what happens when it breaks down (417). Society is not entirely ready to have its norms directly questioned, so the format of magical realism allows for exploration through more extreme fantasies and scenarios. Winterson and Carter, however, do not gently approach the issues they raise. Though somewhat indirectly, they forcefully and violently question society's norms through this format. Having fantastical moments that suspend one's disbelief already opens a reader up to experiencing new ideas. By believing that a woman can walk on water or have incredibly large wings, the reader is more accepting of other

atypical beliefs. Moreover, gender can only be rethought through the use of fantasy. For Winterson and Carter, rejecting realism and rejecting patriarchy go hand in hand.

It is therefore important to note early on a current trend in gender theory and how it informs these novels. Gender and sex are terms that are often used interchangeably; however, many scholars differentiate between these terms. Sex is the biological makeup of a person that makes someone physically male or female; gender is a social construction regarding how certain sexes are expected to behave. Yet, even this distinction is not completely agreed upon because many critics believe that this definition of sex is too limiting. What about transsexual, transgender or hermaphroditic people? Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*, has tried to break from these assumptions, claiming that both gender *and* sex are socially constructed. The crux of her argument is that the coherence of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality is itself a culturally constructed phenomenon accomplished through the repetition of stylized acts over time.

Butler famously theorizes gender as performative, as not necessarily a conscious choice but as a socially constructed one. The effect of reiterated acting is that it produces the illusion of a static and normal gender while obscuring the contradictions and instability of gender. For her, society has a "tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler 140). She critiques the notion of identity and gender being linked. Gender is performative and no authentic identity exists behind the acts that supposedly express gender; these acts constitute an illusion of a stable gender identity. There is no blissful sense of identity prior to cultural inscription.

Butler also explicitly challenges biological accounts of binary sex. She explores how the sexed body is used as the explanation for the constructions of gender and sexuality and questions the very root of these assumptions. Butler challenges the assumption that sex is biological and prediscursive, while gender is culturally constructed. For Butler, sex is just as constructed as gender.

Eventually, Butler calls for gender trouble, for a disruption of the established categories of gender through performance. One way she discusses this is through the use of drag to destabilize the exteriority/interiority binary since drag exaggeratedly demonstrates how all gender is scripted, rehearsed and performed. Winterson and Carter, though they do not directly address the sex/gender issues that Butler explores, do cause gender trouble. Their characters actively crossdress and embody a variety of gender roles and characteristics that do not uphold the gender binary.

Though Butler's views are very helpful in understanding and exploring a current trend in gender theory, they do not fully lend themselves to complete application to these novels. Winterson and Carter are clearly aware of the debate regarding sex and gender and use this to their advantage in their novels. However, they seem to view sex as something definable, while gender is a different case. Their narratives blur the concept of gender and the expectations attached to gender roles. They view gender roles as a way to explore the possibilities of one's identity, while Butler seems to dismiss any innate sense of identity being linked to one's sex or gender. Winterson and Carter, thus, do not fully subscribe to the belief that sex and gender are both constructed. Their characters are described by one sex but then enact a variety of gender roles. Butler is still quite relevant to these novels, though, because, as Laura Doan explains, "What Butler pioneers

theoretically, Winterson enacts in her metafictional writing practices: a sexual politics of heterogeneity and a vision of hybridized gender constructions outside an either/or proposition, at once political and postmodern (1994, 153-54)" (Smith 39). Winterson and Carter's main motivation in using the fantastic to explore gender is to break down the binary of masculine and feminine.

Thus, it is difficult to distinguish between sex and gender fully and accurately (if that is even necessary). However, for the purpose of this paper, sex will be looked at as encompassing the physical nature of a person, the biological parts they are born with and that define what gender they "should" embrace, while gender will be viewed as the socially constructed and accepted ways in which one acts. In these three novels, Winterson and Carter present sex as something that is almost always definable, while gender can be much more ambiguous. The three female protagonists are not usually questioned on whether or not they are female, but rather on how well they perform femininity. Then again, the sex of these characters is sometimes contested because of their more fantastical features. Villanelle's webbed feet and Fevvers' wings are appendages associated with masculinity. Their biology is thus also questioned at times because these attributes are a physical part of their bodies.

Salman Rushdie explains, in discussing Gabriel Garcia Marquez, that some third world writers have claimed their literary place through the use of magical realism, a genre that has one foot in the realist world and one foot in fantasy. Because the dominant literary tradition is one of white men, women writers, like minorities, need to claim their own place in the literary world. The realist novel of the white, masculine tradition does not necessarily lend itself to the experiences of both oppressed women and minorities.

According to David Lodge, after modernism and World War Two the novel was at a crossroads and while many writers continued with realistic narratives, others went in the different direction of fantasy. Carter and Winterson, however, have one foot on each path. Using magical realism, they are able to claim their own place in the literary world. They are able to explore issues of gender in a manner that the realistic novel would not allow.

Winterson and Carter subvert expectations about gender through their employment of fantasy. A basic understating of the genre of magical realism, the type of writing to which they are often assigned, is necessary in order to understand the modes in which these authors operate: "Magical realism is a fictional technique that combines fantasy with raw physical reality or social reality in a search for truth beyond that available from the surface of everyday life. The startling irony behind this technique is that only through the conjunction of the fantastic and the factual can truth fully emerge in literature" (Mellen 1). Thus, both of these authors use the genre of magical realism to reveal atypical views towards gender. A narrative grounded solely in realism would not allow for a blending of gender roles the same way that a story that incorporates both the real and the fantastic permits. As Joan Mellen further explains, "magic clears a path for the emergence of larger, philosophically pointed questions, which emerge as if out of a jungle fertile with the promise of life-enhancing truths" (20). The questions that Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson ask revolve around what it means to be a woman and how society defines womanhood. They use the fantastic to explore new possibilities.

This trend is popular in many writings today: "Like many British postmodern authors, Winterson is dissatisfied with mere realism, and she, like Angela Carter, would

graft new possibilities onto the received social order” (Burns, “Fantastic Language” 292). They attempt to explore the possibilities of a world without strict gender definitions, of Butler’s theoretical world where sex, gender and sexuality are not intrinsically linked. Realism is not capable of describing the fantastic worlds they imagine and equally incapable of allowing their progressive ideas to flower. As Winterson and Carter are rethinking genre, they are rethinking gender. They use fantasy “to create repeated images of strong women who can step clear of the web of demands made by traditional gender roles” (Burns, “Woolf” 36). They allow their female characters to explore a world where they are not encumbered by their gender and by expectations of femininity. Villanelle is not burdened by her female sex and is able to explore relationships with both men and women; the Dog Woman, proud and powerful, stands on her own on the periphery of society; Fevvers embraces the spectacle of her body and uses it to her advantage.

It is quite interesting that Winterson and Carter apply their postmodern ideas onto much earlier time periods. All three of these contemporary books deal with historical moments - the Napoleonic wars, seventeenth century England, the beginning of the twentieth century. Winterson and Carter rewrite historically known moments and incorporate the underprivileged and ignored. These authors “playfully invert social expectations for women, [by] linking the present to some fantastically reconstructed moment in the past” (Burns, “Fantastic Language” 280). Though some critics, such as Linda Hutcheon, have seen such historical gestures as a characteristic of postmodernism, Winterson and Carter empower women by using fantasy to rewrite history and tell their untold stories. They do not allow men to be the only ones to narrate the lives of women; they give voice to the historically disadvantaged sex. Also, by drawing connections

between the past and the present, as seen in *Sexing the Cherry* in the link between the twentieth century eco-feminist and the Dog Woman, these authors reveal the ongoing struggle of women.

Many of the characters in these novels spend time questioning their identity. Villanelle ponders her multiple reflections in the lagoon; Artemis tries to capture the many sides of her self; Fevvers wonders if she is fact or fiction. Even some of the main male characters in Winterson's books look at their own identity. Like Villanelle, Henri sees varied reflections of himself in a cooking pot; Jordan travels the world searching for his beloved, Fortunata, but often comments on the likelihood of finding oneself while searching for another. However, in Carter's novel examined here, she is less forgiving in her portrayal of men. Though all three of the novels have men that are cruel, often being rapists and torturers, Winterson also balances that with redeemable men like Henri and Jordan. Walser, conversely, is primarily portrayed as nothing more than Fevvers' toy. She exaggerates her life story to him and needs him to be her audience, to love and admire her. She talks about turning him into her New Man, a choice that Walser is not consulted on. Though he is not viciously unkind, like many of the minor male characters, he is not as sympathetic as the male protagonists in Winterson's novels.

The characters in these novels explore their identity through their associations with their own gender and in their relationships with others. It is through their interaction with society, with the culture that has socially constructed their views on gender, that the characters become more aware of their perceptions. They realize how they are viewed by others and begin to look at how they view themselves. Winterson and Carter "emphasize the mutability of identity and the function of the mask" in many of their novels (Cella

58). They focus on how a person's sense of identity can fluctuate over time depending on his/her life experiences. Though none of the characters starts out at the beginnings of these novels by saying that she is on a quest to discover herself, through the course of many adventures and mishaps, they all begin to learn about their being. Jordan says in *Sexing the Cherry*:

The Buddhists say there are 149 ways to God. I'm not looking for God, only for myself, and that is far more complicated...I have met a great many pilgrims on their way towards God and I wonder why they have chosen to look for him rather than themselves. Perhaps I'm missing the point - perhaps whilst looking for someone else you might come across yourself unexpectedly. (115-116)

The search for self is clearly a predominant theme in these novels. Winterson and Carter, though, do not define the self as something static, but rather as something that is constantly changeable, just like gender. Through performing gender, these characters explore the multiplicity of their identity.

Through their relationships with both men and women, Villanelle, the Dog Woman and Fevvers explore what it means to be female. Though Villanelle and the Dog Woman are two characters in novels by Winterson, there are more direct similarities between Fevvers and the Dog Woman. Fevvers belches and stinks and so does the Dog Woman; they are both physically larger than life and rather uncouth. Many critics have seen them as examples of the female grotesque. Sara Martin believes that "the excess and power that accompanies [the female grotesque] are seen as the solution to counteract the patriarchal model of controlled femininity...By creating grotesque female monsters they deny men the privilege of being the sole producers of monstrous portraits of women"

(195). Winterson and Carter are thus taking control of literary portrayals of women. This is very similar to why Winterson incorporates a rewritten version of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" into *Sexing the Cherry*. Irrelevant to whether the characters are written in a positive or negative light, men are no longer the only ones able to narrate female lives.

In contrast to Fevvers and the Dog Woman, Villanelle is more typically feminine because her features are more delicate and refined. Yet she more drastically causes gender trouble because she actively chooses to participate in the masculine gender. While Fevvers and the Dog Woman are born more masculine and enact these characteristics regularly, Villanelle consciously crossdresses and therefore complicates assumptions about appearance and gender.

All three of these characters not only blur the line between masculinity and femininity, but also between animal and human. Villanelle, with her web-like feet, and Fevvers, with her wings, have their physical bodies in both the animal and the human worlds. The Dog Woman, named so because she breeds boarhounds, is immediately associated with the animalistic because of her lack of a name. Therefore, Carter and Winterson not only ask what it means to be a woman, but also what it means to be human. Just as man/woman, masculine/feminine, and virgin/whore are binaries that they attempt to disrupt, human/animal is a distinction that is also too extreme. It is not that Carter and Winterson are trying to dehumanize their characters; rather they are pointing out the multiple natures of all beings. Their attack on the definitions of masculine and feminine is taken even further by questioning the presumed differences between humans and animals. Having protagonists that are hybridized in both gender and humanness

pushes the issue of identity even further. Because identity is not static, people should not be so easily and definitively separated into distinct categories.

Because these authors are fans of ambiguity, their protagonists are not neatly defined when the novels conclude. They embrace what Alison Lee defines as the “literary tactics of postmodernism - indeterminacy, openendedness, and fluidity” (111). Their characters have undergone many adventures and experiences and have started to explore their gender and identity. Though in many ways they seem to have a better idea of who they are and make healthier choices (Villanelle turns away from her lover; the Dog Woman leaves with her son), Winterson and Carter offer no easy truths about the result of blurring gender. Does the embracing of androgyny lead to a confusion of identity or is it a way to explore one’s identity more fully? Is there even such a thing as a fixed identity? The answer seems to be that identity, like gender, is fluid and meant to be constantly explored, but neither of these authors directly states this as her intent. Christy Burns picks up on this lack of a clear answer by writing, “Fantasy, in Winterson’s works, is not an experience that leaves a reader content, but one that fuels desire, denies catharsis, and propels readers back out into their contexts” (“Fantastic Language” 302). Carter and Winterson force readers to think about their assumptions, particularly in regards to gender and identity. By using fantasy to explore the lives and experiences of these female protagonists, Carter and Winterson allow for a beautiful uncertainty to surround their personal development of self.

Chapter One: *The Passion*

Embracing Androgyny

Jeanette Winterson uses Villanelle, a crossdressing Venetian woman who works in a casino, to explore the fluidity of gender roles and complicate assumptions about gender. *The Passion* is half her story, the other half belonging to Henri, a cook for Napoleon whom she eventually befriends. Winterson uses both her setting and her characters to break down binaries. As Judith Seaboyer writes: "For Winterson, Venice is the site within which the neat binary oppositions of true/false, pious/sinful, mind/body, masculine/feminine, Thanatos/Eros collapse into a mixture that is at once confusing and stimulating" (484). One of the binaries that she clearly spends time rupturing is the difference between masculine and feminine gender roles. Villanelle, though sexed female, crossdresses, takes lovers of both sexes, and performs whichever gender suits her at the moment. Winterson's style and use of fantastical elements allow for a complication of expectations regarding gender and relationships. Villanelle does not subscribe to the belief that one must solely perform his/her presumed gender. She embraces aspects of both genders and uses her exploration of gender roles to discover multiple notions of self.

Villanelle is the first Venetian woman to be born with webbed feet, which are considered to be a specifically masculine characteristic possessed only by Venetian boatmen. As Seaboyer explains, in this society "webbed feet are a kind of cultural fantasy, a phallic signifier of secret power" (506). Villanelle has this significant attribute that has been hereditarily denied to her sex. Therefore, from her birth she has already embodied a blurring of sex, of masculinity and femininity. Chloe Merleau similarly points out how Villanelle's webbed feet are a symbol of her androgyny: "She is socially

object in that she is a female with a male body part of mythic status, a sort of displaced phallus, making her gender ambivalent or hybrid. This ambiguity is augmented by Villette's bisexuality and habit of cross-dressing" (98). Despite the fact that she has the mark of a boatman, the webbed feet, she explains that her desire to be a boatman is "closed to me on account of my sex" (*Passion* 53). Even though she has the required hereditary trait, she is denied access to the profession because she is a woman.

The webbed feet function in this magical novel by allowing for a disruption of reality. Though *The Passion* is situated in something very much like the real world, there are moments that break with believability. The webbed feet not only signify the masculine qualities of Villanelle but also the atypical possibilities of the novel. In the everyday world, people are not normally born with webbed feet, especially not only people who are boatmen. Winterson uses this fantastical description and the consequent disruption of reality to challenge expectations of gender roles. As she rewrites reality, she rewrites gender. Though Christy Burns is referring to the use of the refrain "I'm telling you stories. Trust me," her comment is relevant to the repeated occurrences of the unexpected in the novel: "Winterson's metafictional turn to the reader likewise suggests that suspending disbelief or trusting the 'lies' in her story will have a powerful effect on the reader" ("Fantastic Language" 289). Similarly, accepting the unbelievable in regards to many aspects of the story - sexuality, gender, relationships, identity - will profoundly affect a reader's understanding of the assumptions inherent in a binary way of thinking in ways that a realistic novel cannot. Winterson reinvents gender in the same way that she rethinks genre. By writing both a realistic and a fantastic novel, the grey area between binaries is more easily explored.

While the webbed feet emphasize her dual physical nature, Villanelle embodies a blurring of gender because she repeatedly chooses to crossdress and is aware of the effect of her crossdressing. At the casino where she works, Villanelle uses crossdressing to her advantage, as another game for her clients to play. She teases them with a codpiece and sometimes works in the afternoon as a woman and in the evening as a man. Villanelle explains, "I dressed the part of 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..." (*Passion* 54). Clearly she is embracing Judith Butler's view of gender as performance. Villanelle does not abide by strict gender rules. She dresses whichever part suits her for the moment.

Villanelle most intensely explores gender roles in her romantic relationships with others. She claims to be "pragmatic about love and have taken my pleasure with both men and women" (*Passion* 59-60). She does not conform to a standard view of femininity, nor does she partake only in more traditionally accepted heterosexual relationships. Her bisexuality and crossdressing are further examples of how she complicates traditional views on sexuality, sex and gender. In a world of webbed feet and stolen hearts, many standards are intentionally not embraced.

Villanelle is forced to question her own views on her gender during her relationship with the Queen of Spades. Villanelle first meets the Queen while she is dressed as a boy at the casino and is therefore unsure throughout their secretive courtship if the Queen knows she is really a woman or if she truly thinks she is a boy. This curiosity about what her beloved thinks leads Villanelle to question her own gender, even her own sex: "And what was myself? Was this breeches and boots self any less real than

my garters?" (*Passion* 66) Throughout the novel Winterson repeatedly questions the social construction of gender and the performance of gender. If one looks the part and acts the part, what then defines that person? The way they act or what they look like underneath the clothes? This directly ties into Judith Butler's belief that neither sex nor gender is innate, but rather performed. Villanelle embodies this performative aspect by consciously crossdressing. Her pondering the truth of her own sex and gender only underlines the possibility that identity, just like appearance, is fluid. Villanelle's search for self is linked to her gender performances.

The Queen later reveals that she knew all along that Villanelle was a woman, and this is a transcendent moment for Villanelle. Typifying Winterson's concise, poignant writing, Villanelle says, "I didn't go home. I stayed" (*Passion* 71). Her sex and gender did not matter to her beloved. This moment can be seen as being supportive of clandestine lesbian relationships in the 1800s but, moreover, it supports a lack of attachment to sex and gender. Their love seems to overcome those definitions.

Over the course of their love affair, the Queen of Spades steals Villanelle's heart and keeps it in a jar in her closet. Though a reader knows this is impossible, we accept the magic of the moment. As a result of this contradiction between logic and acceptance, a reader is forced to read the novel metaphorically. Henri, speaking as the disbelieving reader, questions the loss of Villanelle's heart: "Was she mad? We had been talking figuratively" (*Passion* 115). Winterson writes in both realistic and fantastical modes and by joining the two, she can more easily blur other binaries. Winterson subverts gender binaries by subverting realism. By not situating herself solely within a realistic or magical tradition, she uses ambiguity to explore alternate options. Having a living heart hidden in

a closet, a metaphor for losing oneself in love, and also webbed feet, opens the door for more atypical readings of gender and sex.

Villanelle's crossdressing allows her to experience loving, transcendent relationships but also puts her in many dangerous, unpleasant situations. While crossdressing does not cause her troubles, it does enable these encounters. Villanelle marries one of her other casino customers, a man who is later revealed to be the cook from Henri's unit. She cannot continue to see her already married beloved any longer and therefore gives into the societal expectation of marriage. The cruel cook desires to marry her only if she continues to dress as a boy for his sexual pleasure: "He liked me to dress as a boy. I like to dress as a boy now and then. We had that in common...[It would be] just the three of us. Him, me and my codpiece" (*Passion* 96). Villanelle's crossdressing helps her to find her beloved, but it also facilitates this harmful marriage. Even though the cook rapes her, a moment of female degradation seen throughout all three of these novels, Villanelle still agrees to marry him. Merleau explains her choice:

As a fatherless, working class woman, and moreover as a cross-dressed non-virgin who works at a casino, Villette counts for nothing, has no position from which to voice a complaint or even feel damaged...She very quickly decided to marry her rapist, as so many working class woman have done in history. She marries him because her future has no better prospects. (99)

Villanelle is constrained by her sex not just in that she cannot pursue her dream of being a boatman, which surprisingly her genes also made her ready for, but because she lacks control over many aspects of her life. Winterson is making a social and political statement by writing Villanelle as a woman who is unable to readily choose her own

profession and therefore marries because there is no other option. The few choices she does have, regarding crossdressing and certain love affairs, are often partaken of secretly.

Meeting and marrying the cook is not the only negative result of Villanelle's crossdressing. When she later runs away from him, she is dressed as a boy and at this moment the crossdressing safely hides her identity. However, her husband eventually sells her to the French army as a *vivandiere*, or prostitute, and her crossdressing harmfully affects her now because she is asked to dress in her masculine disguise to aid their ease in traveling to the camp. Crossdressing, therefore, has both positive and negative results for Villanelle. Winterson does not present gender exploration as idealized or easy. Villanelle both benefits and is harmed by her desire to play at performing gender.

In all three of the novels under discussion, the female protagonist engages in a form of prostitution at some point. Villanelle, as explained above, directly works as a prostitute for the army. Fevvers, in *Nights at the Circus*, not only lives in a whorehouse as a child but also spends most of her life prostituting the sight of her body. In *Sexing the Cherry*, the Dog Woman befriends women who work in a brothel and that is also where she murders the sinful preacher and neighbor. Prostitution repeatedly occurs throughout these novels and not just in relation to the female protagonists. While in the military, Henri is exposed to sex for the first time when visiting a brothel with other soldiers. In *Sexing the Cherry*, Jordan discovers how the harem of a rich townsman and the nuns work together to aid the prostitutes in both temporary and permanent freedom. In *Nights at the Circus*, Mignon sells herself in order to survive on the street.

Like many of the binaries mentioned so far, women have often been defined by the distinct categories of either virgin or whore. Winterson and Carter, though, do not allow these distinctions to be simply accepted. They challenge views of prostitution and virginity on many levels. Some women, like Fevvers, use their sexuality consciously and to their own advantage. As seen in the alliance between the harem and the nuns, Winterson intentionally disrupts our expectations regarding the virgin/whore binary. This ability to break down assumptions and merge distinctions is aided by the magical moments of the novels. Being safely and repeatedly swept out of an underground river and then swimming upstream all night embraces the unexpected. Because this novel utilizes the fantastic, there is no need to describe the assistance of the nuns to the prostitutes realistically; such deconstructions of expected relationships happen “magically.” Similar to how they do not portray masculinity and femininity as completely oppositional categories, women also cannot be pigeonholed into the labels of either virgin or whore. They challenge all of the assumptions attached to those words. For Winterson and Carter, people are not so easily definable.

Just as a person who crossdresses can put on certain clothes to momentarily define him/herself, all sorts of roles in this novel are shown to be continually changeable. Henri believes, “Soldiers and women. That’s how the world is. Any other role is temporary. Any other role is a gesture” (*Passion* 45). Though Henri says this, Winterson clearly does not believe that even the roles of soldier and woman are permanent. She presents almost every role in the novel, from *vivandiere* to soldier to lover to casino worker, as momentary. The characters perform many different roles and undergo many changes throughout the course of the novel.

Because roles are presented as impermanent, Villanelle often questions her identity, not just her sexuality and gender, but the person she is or could have been. Early in the novel, right after she meets her Queen, she notices her reflection in the lagoon and sees “in the distortions of my face what I might become” (*Passion* 62). Villanelle questions her gender, her sexuality and her path in life as a result of experiencing passion. Towards the end of the novel a moment very similar to this occurs again. Villanelle says, “I looked into my palms trying to see the other life, the parallel life. The point at which my selves broke away and one married a fat man and the other stayed here, in this elegant house to eat dinner night after night from an oval table” (*Passion* 144). Villanelle ponders the path that she took and the path she might have taken. There are repeated references throughout the novel to the transitory nature of one’s being and Villanelle clearly embodies this. She constantly wonders about who she is and who she might have been. “The fluidity of Villanelle’s gendered identity” reflects the variability of her character and the possibilities of her life (*Seaboyer* 506). Through her exploration of gender, she searches for her identity.

The ending of the novel presents a complication in regards to Winterson’s embracing of androgyny. Henri tries to force Villanelle to marry him, but she rejects him. She has become a more confident person and is not persuaded into an arrangement that she does not want. Villanelle no longer crossdresses and is no longer used by men. She rejects another day with her beloved and though that is difficult for her, it is also empowering. Villanelle “resists obsession by turning away from a noncommittal lover” (*Burns*, “*Fantastic Language*” 290). She has given up her passionate attachment and

chosen to live her life for her child. She now adopts the role of mother. Villanelle says:

I don't dress up any more. No borrowed uniforms. Only occasionally do I feel the touch of that other life, the one in the shadows where I do not choose to live.

This is the city of disguises. What you are one day will not constrain you on the next. You may explore yourself freely...In the soft darkness that hides the future from the over-curious, I content myself with this; that where I will be will not be where I am. (*Passion* 150)

Villanelle performs gender throughout the novel when it suits her needs. She wears gender like a disguise. She has explored herself freely in her relationships. What seems to be sadly contradictory at this moment, though, is that Villanelle no longer embraces ambiguity once she becomes a mother. The role of mother now makes the binary of virgin/whore into a tertiary and Villanelle adopts this role wholeheartedly. But while that binary is repeatedly questioned, simply presenting a third, distinct option is not what Winterson does throughout the novel. Though her maternal instincts are admirable, it seems inconsistent with the rest of the novel that Villanelle stops crossdressing after she has a child. Is Winterson then presenting gender exploration only as a youthful pastime? As something to be overcome? By happily situating Villanelle in the role of mother at the end of the novel, she has her embrace a traditionally female role, something that Villanelle rarely did throughout the novel. Although Winterson may be deliberately causing this discomfort in having Villanelle embrace this new position, the ending of the novel reinforces the traditional roles expected of women.

Despite the ending's possible incongruity, Villanelle undoubtedly explores many aspects of her identity throughout the novel. Through her relationships with others and on

her own, she considers (and constantly reconsiders) her sexuality, her gender, and her roles in life. Christy Burns emphasizes the changeability of gender in Winterson's novels:

Winterson's [characters] are allowed to experiment with exchanging traits... Thus, the differences between genders are neither crystallized nor ignored; Winterson's androgyny works to open up possible variations in personality and act... [Winterson uses androgyny] as a glimpse into possibilities, along with the implicit critique of gender assumptions that it carries" ("Woolf" 386-387).

Winterson clearly allows for a fluid perception of gender and identity. Heredity provided Villanelle with the necessities for being a boatman but because that was denied to her, she was forced to explore other outlets. She was a prostitute, a casino worker, a lover, a daughter, a wife, a mother. All of these roles were temporary and all of these roles allowed Villanelle to discover different aspects of her character. Villanelle's notion of self is related to her performance of gender. For Villanelle, deconstructing gender is part of her exploration of self. Winterson has Villanelle embrace masculine and feminine characteristics as a way to explore the lack of a need for a gender binary. By writing a novel that is fantastical in nature, Winterson can cause gender trouble because only through fantasy can gender be rethought.

Chapter Two: *Sexing the Cherry*

Alter Egos and Identity

Sexing the Cherry explores gender issues through both the experiences of the main characters, the Dog Woman and her foundling child Jordan, and also through the many minor characters. From the two protagonists to the mythological goddesses, the characters all question their identities. By looking at the ways that men and women interact and the expectations placed upon each gender to behave in a certain way (i.e. women passive, men active), Winterson has these characters explore themselves. In *The Passion*, Villanelle actively embraces androgyny as a way to discover who she is, but in this novel the choices are more often more passive. The Dog Woman is forced to be an outsider because of how she looks and acts; Jordan learns about the “conspiracy of women” in his quest to find his beloved and reflects on his own position in society as a result (*Sexing* 29); many minor female characters, exploited and oppressed by men or society, break their constraints to become the women they desire to be. Almost all of the characters either unconsciously or, at times, actively are forced to try to figure out who they are during the course of the novel. As in *The Passion*, Winterson’s style and use of fantastical moments allow for an exploration of gender and identity. Rethinking gender is key to many of these characters’ searches for identity, and by rethinking genre through the incorporation of the fantastic, Winterson subverts gender expectations as she subverts realism.

The Dog Woman:

The stories of the Dog Woman and Jordan are the principal foci of *Sexing the Cherry*. Winterson uses the symbols of a banana and a pineapple, respectively, to alternate between their voices; the appearance of each icon in the text indicates a shift to the narrator associated with that symbol. Just from these symbols it is clear that Winterson does not intend to uphold traditional views of masculinity and femininity. A banana is a phallic symbol and yet it is used to designate the voice of a woman. The Dog Woman, consequently, is not distinctly female in her characteristics. She is extremely strong, large, dirty and crude. Her size is always described in exaggeration of believability; she is so big that she once “forced an elephant into the sky” (*Sexing* 21) and “must turn sideways through any door” (*Sexing* 8). Instead of having the Dog Woman as simply an incredibly obese, but believably sized person, Winterson takes her description into the realm of the fantastic. From the very opening of the novel our disbelief is suspended and we are more sympathetic to the plight of the Dog Woman. As Angela Smith explains, “Dog-Woman narrates her stories from a position of marginalization: she is poor, female, large, and ugly” (27). Winterson uses this status of the Dog Woman to explore what it means to be an atypical woman and how this position of marginalization affects her life.

The Dog Woman is aware of her status as an outsider and is conscious of the way people look at her. She has acknowledged her grotesqueness and comments on it repeatedly throughout the novel. The Dog Woman knows that “people are afraid of me” and therefore always feels like she is unaccepted by society (*Sexing* 21). Sadly, despite her very obvious love for Jordan, she is unloved by others. This rejection has left her

isolated from the world and more willing to be cruel. She admits, "I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains...I fell in love once, if love be that cruelty which takes us straight to the gates of Paradise only to remind us they are closed for ever" (*Sexing* 32-33). Her size is a direct hindrance to her ability to be loved (and sexually satisfied) by others.

While in *The Passion* Villanelle's lack of strict femininity allows her to find love with the Queen of Spades, in *Sexing the Cherry* the female protagonist is denied love on account of her lack of womanliness. The Dog Woman was once interested in a boy who would come by to sell things and she would make herself pretty--wash, comb her hair, put on a new dress--in order to try to attract him. Even so, he never noticed her and when he directly rejected her, he admitted that it was because he was terrified of her. The Dog Woman never again tries to experience romantic love and that only solidifies her outsider status. The Dog Woman's love for Jordan, while always staying parental, is the only great love she experiences in her life. She longs for romantic love, and slightly experiences it once, but overall she cannot be loved or sexually satisfied on account of her masculine grandeur. Angela Smith discusses this moment in further detail:

In her personal narrative of her first, thwarted love, in her failure to conform to dominant images of womanhood which grants her a certain freedom, in her fierce independent mothering of Jordan, and in her friendships with marginalized women such as her neighbor the witch and her prostitute friend, Dog-Woman simultaneously embodies and defies the gendered conventions which structure her experience and her history. (32)

The Dog Woman embodies gender conventions because she beautifies herself in an attempt to attract a lover, while she defies them based on the way she typically looks and acts. Her defiance is much stronger than her momentary embracing of gender expectations. If anything, the novel “highlight[s] the heroine’s resolute breaking down of conventions associated with proper feminine behaviour” (Martin 194). There are only brief moments, as seen here when trying to attract a lover, that she embraces expected modes of femininity. In general, throughout the novel she disregards the assumptions that a person sexed as woman should act in a certain manner.

The Dog Woman has a very difficult time coming to terms with who she is because she receives conflicting responses. She repeatedly hears herself being compared to a mountain range and therefore cannot fit into the feminine mold expected of her. For the Dog Woman, her blending of gender expectations is not necessarily a conscious choice like it was for Villanelle when she crossdressed; rather, the Dog Woman must attempt to tread the path between how she looks and what is expected of a woman. When she cannot fit into those expectations, she embraces her outsider status and often acts vulgarly.

Some critics have commented on the Dog Woman as being a grotesque monster, not just because of how she looks but because of the way she murders men. Her murderous tendencies, though, are more the consequence of naivety than cruelty. The morality of these acts is somewhat beside the point. She has been shunned by all, forced into being an outsider, and when certain groups address her, like the Royalists, she takes their acknowledgement to heart. She believes in avenging the King’s murder and takes the preacher’s comment about “an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” literally, and thus

collects the eyeballs and teeth of the Puritans. Sara Martin, in reference to the Dog Woman and other monstrous women in literature, writes, "If they are special women in any sense, this is not because they are grotesque freaks, but because they learn to limit the power of the others over them and to use their power to steer the course of their lives in the direction they choose" (194). The Dog Woman acts this way because she wants to be accepted by a group in which she has the right characteristics and also because she genuinely believes in the hypocrisy of the church and the goodness of the King. She chooses to use her massiveness to support a cause that she believes in.

The Dog Woman is not the only female who commits murder in *Sexing the Cherry* or throughout all three of the novels. There are many minor characters that almost always murder men, specifically their husbands. At least half of the twelve dancing princesses, who were forcefully given in marriage, have murdered their husbands. The whores at Spatfields took to murdering the Puritans who visited their brothel. There are also instances of women committing murder in *Nights at the Circus* about which Angela Carter writes:

There are many reasons, most of them good ones, why a woman should want to murder her husband; homicide might be the only way for her to preserve a shred of dignity at a time, in a place, where women were deemed chattel, or, in the famous analogy of Tolstoy, like wine bottles that might conveniently be smashed when their contents were consumed. (210-211)

Is it really empowering to women to have them be murderesses? Some of these women were directly abused by men or generally oppressed by patriarchy, but murder seems too violent of a way for these women to reclaim power in their lives. However, because these

novels are fantastical in nature, the violence does not have to be taken realistically. These murders can be seen as allegories for women revolting from oppression or, more simply, standing up for themselves. There are many feminist moments in these texts, and while neither author condones a belief in an idealized female utopia, they both attempt to empower women in unexpected ways.

Winterson eventually calls into question the very nature of the Dog Woman by jumping the novel forward three hundred years. At the end of the novel we are introduced to an unnamed ecologist who claims: "I am a woman going mad. I am a woman hallucinating. I imagine I am huge, raw, a giant" (*Sexing* 138). This moment complicates the truth of the whole story and could be seen as explaining away some of the more fantastical moments as hallucinatory and imagined. What is real? Is the Dog Woman the ancient alter-ego of the ecologist who feels invisible in her life, are they both separate characters with surprising similarities, or is it the same person existing in more than one place at the same time, as the book claims is possible? By emphasizing the fantastical nature of the book, these connections and their multiple possibilities make it seem as if anything is now possible. If people can exist in multiple realities at the same time, then a woman who embraces her unfeminine features and does not solely perform the female gender is also equally as believable. Moreover, moments such as these help us to read the fantastic as metaphor.

In this instant of simultaneity with the past, the reader learns that the struggles women have endured throughout history have not drastically altered. Though *Sexing the Cherry* is written in 1989 and takes place primarily in the 1600s, the similarity between the woman of the future and the woman of the past is striking. The ecologist dreams of

changing the world, of saving it from the problems caused by men in boardrooms and war rooms who believe too much in overdevelopment and nuclear weapons and not enough in “feminism and ecology” (*Sexing* 139). This desire to purify the world is similar to the ways in which the Dog Woman brutally murders people she believes to be hypocritical or impure. She lets the Great Fire of London burn rather than trying to stop it, because she believes the city has become unclean and needs to be purified. These women are, in a manner of speaking, empowered in their lives and react against patriarchy. The Dog Woman, though clearly an outsider, is powerful because she uses her grandness to steer the course of her life in the direction that she chooses.

Jordan Learns Gender Rules:

Some of the most interesting moments in the novel regarding gender roles and expectations occur not with the Dog Woman, who clearly embodies many masculine characteristics despite being female, but with Jordan. Jordan spends the novel searching for one of the twelve dancing princesses, Fortunata, the woman he met when he spent the night at a house with no floors, only ceilings. He assumes a female disguise in order to safely speak with prostitutes about the location of his beloved. Jordan explains, “I have met a number of people who, anxious to be free of the burdens of their gender, have dressed themselves men as women and women as men” (*Sexing* 28). Winterson is clearly commenting on society’s expectations regarding gender at this moment. She has Jordan adopt a female disguise because it is a way for her to explore the differences between men and women. Jordan, as a man, can comment with an outsider’s perspective on women. When Jordan temporarily adopts a female guise, he begins to better understand

not only the relations between men and women but also women's roles in the world and its history.

The pen of prostitutes belongs to a rich man who keeps them for his pleasure, and while they have every luxury, they are not allowed to go outside. However, Jordan explains that "they were not so confined as it seemed. That through the night they came and went as they pleased" (*Sexing* 27). The women travel along a stream that runs under the house and are scooped out of the water through the aid of nuns living in a convent. It is quite interesting to note how these very different groups of women help one another. The pious nuns assist the allegedly sinful prostitutes in their escape. Winterson is clearly attempting to destabilize the virgin/whore binary and all of the associations attached to those labels. It is the desire to escape from an overbearing man that binds them together. The "selfish man, to whom life was just another commodity, had financed the futures of thousands of women" (*Sexing* 28). Though lesbianism plays a much more minor role in this novel than in *The Passion*, "some of the women had lovers in the convent" (*Sexing* 28). Embracing homosexuality is another way to destabilize assumptions about the accepted norms of society. Throughout her novels, Winterson not only subverts assumptions about gender, but also about heterosexuality, religion, and relationships.

Jordan continues passing as a woman after he leaves the prostitutes and takes a job at a fish stall. Jordan's revelations during this time speak greatly to assumptions about gender differences. It is very interesting that Winterson, who often tries to break down the gender binary, goes into a long tirade about the foolishness of men. Jordan realizes that "women have a private language. A language not dependent on the constructions of men but structured by signs and expressions, and that uses ordinary words as code-words

meaning something other" (*Sexing* 29). By explaining how women do not have to use the language of men, Winterson is giving women their own private world. Women throughout history have been secondary to men, as men have controlled the world, and by claiming their own language, though secretive, Winterson is allowing women to not be dependant on male-constructed society. Jordan realizes that he is a man and does not belong: "In my petticoats I was a traveler in a foreign country. I did not speak the language. I was regarded with suspicion" (*Sexing* 29). Though at times Winterson does allow for a blurring of gender, she also situates some characters within their sex and gender in order to make clear the assumed differences.

When Jordan sees women joke together after cheating and toying with men, he realizes how women are secretly powerful and often have the upper hand, "while the men, all unknowing, felt themselves master of the situation and went off to brag in barrooms and to preach from pulpits the folly of the weaker sex" (*Sexing* 29). These women are aware of the societal expectation of feminine behavior and use it to their advantage. Winterson is saying that men, though seeming to have the power, are really being used by women. Jordan begins to have an understanding of the world of women: "This conspiracy of women shocked me...I never guessed how much they hate us or how deeply they pity us" (*Sexing* 29). Winterson, being a female author, but using a male character to comment on women's views on men makes for interesting complications. Basically, Jordan is beginning to become more aware of the struggles of women and the ways in which they are secretly empowered. Women are not shown as innocent or meek, but as rather strong and even devious.

It is while Jordan is dressed as woman that men are explained to him. At a clearly feminist moment in the text, Winterson uses the opportunity to list the flaws of men and how women can exploit them:

Thinking to teach me about men, worrying that I knew nothing, she wrote me a rule book of which I will list the first page.

1. Men are easy to please but are not pleased for long before some new novelty must delight them.
2. Men are easy to make passionate but are unable to sustain it.
3. Men are always seeking soft women but find their lives in ruins without strong women.
4. Men must be occupied at all times otherwise they make mischief.
5. Men deem themselves weighty and women light. Therefore it is simple to tie a stone round their necks and drown them should they become too troublesome.
6. Men are best left in groups by themselves where they will entirely wear themselves out in drunkenness and competition. While this is taking place a woman may carry on with her own life unhindered.
7. Men are never never to be trusted with what is closest to your heart, and if it is they who are closest to your heart, do not tell them.
8. If a man asks you for money, do not give it to him.
9. If you ask a man for money and he does not give it to you, sell his richest possession and leave at once.
10. Your greatest strength is that every man believes he knows the sum and possibility of every woman. (*Sexing* 30)

In this list of rules, Winterson is clearly presenting women as a secretly empowered sex. She writes women as the ones who are powerful behind the scenes. While there may be some truth in these statements, they are, of course, very broad and stereotypical. These rules do not need to be taken as Winterson's strict version of the truth about the differences between men and women. Rather, because they are humorous they are more of a social commentary that is meant to reveal some of the differences between men and women. She is not forcefully criticizing men, but rather amusingly pointing out some of their flaws.

Winterson uses this novel to point out how women have historically been treated and to reclaim solidarity and power. It is important to note how Jordan reacts when he receives these guidelines: "I was much upset when I read this first page, but observing my own heart and the behaviour of those around me I conceded it to be true" (*Sexing* 30). Not surprisingly, Winterson, a female author, writes the male character as seeing truth in these statements. This lends some clout to the humorous statements and allows for women to repossess some of their traditionally denied rights.

Though Jordan most clearly learns about gender during his time disguised as a woman, while working in the garden he explores the nature of sex. The title of the novel comes from grafting a cherry stem, an act that is done by fusing a weaker member to a hardier member of its strain to produce a third kind "without seed or parent" (*Sexing* 84). Thus, from the very title of the novel, Winterson calls into question the nature of gender and sex and whether they are learned, created or innate. The Dog Woman sees the botany experiments as amoral and Jordan "tried to explain to her that the tree would still be female although it had not been born from seed, but she said such things had no gender

and were a confusion to themselves...But the cherry grew, and we have sexed it and it is female" (*Sexing* 85). This seems to be a humorous argument for society's need to define sex as inherent since the cherry tree is not born from seed or parent but is, in fact, still given a sex. Winterson constantly raises issues, particularly in relation to sex and gender, in order to challenge the accepted norms. Here, though, she seems to be supporting a belief in sex being innate. It is a somewhat absurd statement, however, because a tree is not subject to the same gender expectations that people are. This discussion about its nature only highlights the human need to define sex and gender.

This novel offers no clear answer to whether sex and gender are born or created, especially when one considers this moment in which Jordan says that the tree stays female while his mother claims a lack of gender. It is appropriate that the Dog Woman is the one commenting on the confusion and absence of gender since throughout the novel she is one who does not fully embrace her female sex but rather enacts both gender qualities. It is also noteworthy to point out the rather lewd pun here in having the tree be a cherry tree. Likely referring to nickname of a woman's virginity, *Sexing the Cherry* is commenting on the very nature of sexuality. While the title of the book could have been something like *Sexing the Oak*, having the tree be a cherry tree emphasizes the sexual overtones of the novel.

Jordan's storyline and the storyline of the Dog Woman work in concert to reveal the many assumptions inherent in our perceptions of gender and its possible link to one's sense of identity. Just as the Dog Woman has a twentieth century alter ego, so does Jordan. The existence of Nicolas Jordan, who is interested in seafaring explorers and eventually befriends the unnamed ecologist, emphasizes the multiple paths of the

character of Jordan. This connection between various times emphasizes the novel's attention to multiple conceptions of self.

Both the Dog Woman and Jordan explore the nature of gender throughout the novel. The Dog Woman embraces her masculine characteristics and breaks with assumptions about how a woman should behave. Though the Dog Woman embodies a blurring of gender roles, Jordan learns about gender differences. The irony, of course, is that he learns about presumed gender differences while dressed as a woman. His crossdressing is not like Villanelle's, in which she actively explores different sides of herself. Jordan uses it merely as a disguise but, as a result, learns about gender roles. What is complicated about these novels is that while they spend a lot of time breaking down assumptions about masculinity and femininity and attempting to disrupt the binary, they also, at times, seem to be in support of gender differences. Nonetheless, because these recognized distinctions are written about in humorous and fantastical ways, they are brought to the readers' attention and therefore more easily destabilized.

Rewriting Fairy Tales and Myths:

Winterson not only uses the Dog Woman and Jordan's rulebook to explore gender assumptions, but she also reclaims masculine fairy tales for a female tradition. Within *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson rewrites the story of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," originally printed in the early 1800s by the Brothers Grimm. Winterson's version of the story does not end with the "happily ever after" in which each of the princesses is married off to a prince not of her own choosing. Rather, Winterson takes the time to give each of the daughters her own story beyond the original ending. The initial conclusion of the

fairy tale does not take into account what happens after marriage. As the eldest sister explains, “It says [we] lived happily ever after. We did, but not with our husbands” (*Sexing* 48). Instead of just allowing the fairy tale to stand on its own, Winterson reclaims it and gives each princess a voice.

In Winterson’s account, the twelve dancing princesses were all forced into marriage and were all eventually freed from those marriages. Though not every one of the husbands was excessively cruel and some of the unions were eventually seen as desirable, for the most part the husbands did not love them enough and often physically and emotionally hurt them. Each of the women ultimately left her husband; five of the princesses packed their bags and left their husbands at various times under differing circumstances; the other six murdered their husbands (and one husband turned into a frog). Despite the fact that one of the murders was done out of love and one at the husband’s request, most of these murders were committed as acts of vengeance or as liberation from an unwanted and harmful relationship.

Likewise, in the story of the goddess Artemis told at the end of the novel, she is raped by Orion and kills him. Many of the women in this story, whether they are fictional, mythological or from fairy tales, are abused by men. Almost every man in this novel that rapes or tortures a woman is killed by that woman or by another vengeful female. Winterson makes murder seem like one of the only options that women have in order to escape from oppression. Though there are redeemable men in her novels, like Henri and Jordan, more often than not Winterson presents men as cruel and deviant. The cook rapes and harms Villanelle; some of the husbands of the princesses chain them to beds and cheat on them; Orion rapes Artemis. These women are beaten down and only

through the death (murder) of their oppressors can they be freed. However, as mentioned previously, because these novels are fantastical in nature these murders do not need to be taken as overly literal. Rather, the murders are emblematic of the need for women to stand up to their oppressors and fight for their own rights.

As Angela Smith claims, “the humor of the re-told fairy tales in *Sexing the Cherry* demythologizes power structures and dominant categories, especially those of gender” (27). The princesses leave the marriages in which they have been forced to be submissive to their husbands and are therefore not confined to acting like meek, passive women. These women commit murder for survival. The Dog Woman murders because she believes she is ridding the world of amoral and unworthy men; the princesses and Artemis commit murder in order to reclaim their freedom and purity. They have to rid themselves of their persecutors in order to endure.

Within these fairy tales and myths the women have to violently and physically take control of their own lives. Whether it is through murder or deceit, each woman (though one or two with regret) leaves the man she has been given to or that took her. Smith explains Winterson’s reasons for incorporating these tales: “These tales’ strategies of reversal and humor reconfigure power structures: The women violently reclaim their right to freedom and to self-narrative, and their narratives question mythical norms” (28). Similarly, Winterson is also forcefully reclaiming a woman’s right to narrate her own life. Rather than being given in marriage or being written by a male, Winterson gives these women their own voices, both by being a female author and by continuing their stories. The point, as Michael Wood explains, “is not to cheat nature but to escape imprisoning mythologies, of nature or of anything else” (195).

* * * * *

Midway through the novel Jordan comments, “The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once” (*Sexing* 87). All of the characters within this novel are searching for themselves. Whether it is the zealous ecologist or the lovelorn boy, the enormous Dog Woman or one of the twelve dancing princesses, each of the characters explores his/her identity during the course of the novel. By being forced to react against oppressive men or hypocritical preachers, the characters unconsciously discover themselves. As Smith explains, “*Sexing the Cherry* does more than parody or disrupt patriarchal and heterosexist discourses, depicting a creative and political act that opens up multiple conceptions of self and sexuality” (39). Winterson, a proponent of ambiguity, does not conclude the novel by neatly defining each of the characters discussed. Rather, she explores the relationships they have with others and their views on gender. Identity, like gender, is fluid and changeable and Winterson allows her characters to develop and adapt. All of these characters’ search for identity through their rethinking of gender roles.

Chapter Three: *Nights at the Circus*

The New Woman?

Sophie Fevvers is often considered to be an example of the New Woman, a woman on the cusp of the 1900s who will no longer be encumbered by her gender. The figure of a winged woman, which refers to the “New Age in which no woman will be bound to the ground,” is a clear metaphor for a person who longs to be free (Carter 25). Nicola Pitchford explains that Carter is “creating female characters who can cast off their oppression and soar heavenward as winged giantesses” (413). Fevvers is a prime example of this.

Fevvers, however, is a complex symbol since she embodies a blurring of masculine and feminine characteristics. She is not traditionally female in her physical nature or actions. She is objectified by the way that others view her, but uses the nature of her spectacle to her own advantage. Fevvers is aware of the power her body has over others, and though at times it gets her into dangerous situations, she uses her appearance for her own monetary benefit. Her empowerment, though, is counteracted at times, especially by the moments in which she seems to be an old-fashioned romantic. This, therefore, leads to a complication regarding the image of Carter’s New Woman. Is the New Woman one who is not restricted by assumptions about femininity? One that embodies both masculine and feminine characteristics? Is she one who seemingly owns her body and how it is viewed? Though these are all possibilities, with Carter the answer is never a simple one. Fevvers is a multilayered symbol who presents no decisive answer for what the New Woman in the New Age will be. Throughout the novel, Carter includes

many questions about Fevvers' true identity in order to bring to light how we define being human and being a woman.

The reader's first impression of Fevvers is one of chaos and disrepair. She is shown to have a huge appetite in order to support her massive body with its "notorious and much-debated wings" (Carter 7). She is messy and gassy but also grand and powerful. She has intimidating size, sharp intelligence, fierce physical strength, an unapologetic appetite and a love of champagne. She is not exceptionally pretty; her face was "thrown on the common wheel out of coarse clay" (Carter 12). Though she is female, she has learned to embrace her more unfeminine characteristics. Jack Walser, an American reporter, views her skeptically, just as a reader newly immersed in this magical world does. He wonders for a brief moment, "Is she really a man?" (Carter 35) Because of her large size and uncouth habits, not only are the truth of her wings questioned, but also the genuineness of her sex. Walser "briefly contemplate[s] the unimaginable- that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief" (Carter 17). Just as Walser needs to believe, the reader is overtaken by the magic of the story. Carter creates a fantastic, but believable world, that allows for unexpected ideas to emerge. Believing in this winged giantess breaks a reader's attachment to traditional views of masculinity and femininity, as well as expectations regarding female roles.

One question that is pervasive throughout the book is who or what is Fevvers. Is she just a woman? A bird woman? A freak? A celebrity? A symbolic woman? In many ways, Fevvers occupies numerous roles. She embodies a little bit of each of these categories depending upon how she presents herself. Most of all, she is one who needs an audience. She thrives by embodying the spectacle that others view her as. During the

retelling of her life story, Fevvers makes it clear that her body has always been on display as an object of gaze. As Walser comments, "She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled" (Carter 15). What is unique about Fevvers is that she does not passively occupy this role of spectacle. She intentionally performs her blurring of gender for the benefit of others. Though as a child it was foisted upon her, she has learned to embrace her visual allure and use it to her advantage. Fevvers first portrays Cupid and Winged Victory, and then later continues to be a visual object at the museum of women monsters and as an *aerialiste*. Her body is always being used for profit, at first by others and then eventually by herself. Though Laura Mulvey is referring to film, her analysis of why men objectify and sexualize women through sight is quite relevant: "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (2186). The difference between Mulvey's argument and Fevvers is that in most filmic cases the female characters are not actively choosing to be objects of visual adulation. Fevvers, on the other hand, has embraced the spectacle that is her body and used it to her advantage.

Ma Nelson, the crossdressing madame of the brothel Fevvers was raised in, is the first to put her on display. Fevvers explains to Walser, "I served my apprenticeship in *being looked at* – at being the object of the eye of the beholder" (Carter 23). As Cupid, Fevvers is the symbol of love. Though many often think of Cupid as an innocent cherub, in Roman mythology, Cupid is the god of erotic love. This is an appropriate persona for Fevvers because she eventually learns to use her body as an erotic entity. As Alison Lee explains, "Her first role there implies that she has an active role to play in the creation of desire" (98). This is still, however, only the creation of desire resulting from being seen,

not touched. Later, Fevvers is still an object to be viewed and admired but now as Winged Victory. Fevvers goes from being a symbol of eroticism to the symbol of an empowered woman. Winged Victory is a sculpture of the Greek goddess Nike, or Victory. Just as portraying Cupid prepares her for later life roles, embodying Winged Victory, a powerful and victorious woman, also prepares her for her eventual domination over her audiences and Walser. Also, it is worthwhile to note that as a child Fevvers comments with admiration and curiosity on the painting of Leda and the Swan that hangs in the brothel. From the very beginning, therefore, Fevvers is associated with divine and mythological images.

Always being on display as a visual object in the brothel prepares Fevvers for her later roles as an attraction at the museum of women monsters and as an aerialist. Madame Schreck's museum of women monsters is a complex concept. Here, Fevvers is on display as the tombstone angel, or the Angel of Death. For a brief time, the power of her visual stimulation does not come from embodying the images of heavenly beings, but rather the direct opposite. Instead of symbolizing love or victory, she is now associated with death. Even though a woman runs it, this museum is still a patriarchal symbol; it is, in effect, a different sort of brothel. Surprisingly, many women in this book are oppressors of other women. It is interesting that this is strictly a museum of *women* monsters, with no inclusion of men on display. Is this because women are more often objects of gaze, while men are more likely to do the looking? Going back to Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze/female object in film, the man gains "pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (2185). Similar to the men who visit brothels in Winterson's novels, these men are often portrayed as being sexually perverse. Their

desires are atypical and they go to places like this museum in order to have them satisfied. Men, too, are therefore “freaks” of a sort and Fevvers’ visual stimulation is one form of desire that is fulfilled for them.

Fevvers’ livelihood is threatened more than once by men who do not want to just view her but think that taking her body will give them power. It is her greed, her love of money and jewels, that often gets her into these dangerous situations. Christian Rosencreutz¹ calls her Azrael, another name for the Angel of Death in Western religions, and buys her from Madame Schreck in order to ritually murder her and give himself eternal life. Carter is clearly referring to some quasi-Satanic mythology here. Rosencreutz must have convoluted views towards women since he wears a medallion and owns a statue that represents complicated symbols of masculinity and femininity. The image is of a phallus with wings that is entwined by a rose stem. Fevvers explains the symbol: “The penis, represented by itself, aspires upwards, represented by the wings, but is dragged downwards, represented by the twining stem, by the female part, represented by the rose” (Carter 77). Thus, the man is held down by the woman. This is in stark opposition to the symbol of Fevvers; she is a *woman* with wings who stands for all women who have been held down by patriarchy and will now rise above the oppression. Rosencreutz’s attempt to kill her is one of the few times when the spectator desires to move beyond the look. There is inherent danger in being an object of gaze, because while looking can substitute for touching, at times men are not satisfied with visual pleasure. When Fevvers is not just an object to be viewed, she is vulnerable.

¹ Christian Rosencreutz’s name, beliefs and symbols are references to the Rosicrucians, a legendary esoteric order that has its roots in Western mystery tradition.

Later in the novel, Fevvers is again threatened by a man who believes that possessing her body will give him power. The Grand Duke is also in awe of her being and tries to add her to his collection of exotic toys by fantastically shrinking her to fit on the empty perch inside one of his jeweled eggs. Interestingly, an egg is an archetypal symbol of fertility and womanhood which is complicated in this story by the existence of Fevvers' wings and her claim of being born from an egg. As she ponders life as a toy, Fevvers attributes her mistakes in judgment to her own greed, but for these men it is her exceptional body and their desire to possess it that really causes the danger. Fevvers, though almost always a self-controlled spectacle, has experienced times when she is not in control of her own well-being. Despite the fact that she escapes from these perilous situations, her body, the cause of her notoriety and her wealth, is also the cause of much of her trouble; men seek to possess her because of her atypical grandness. Being an object of gaze, though clearly monetarily beneficial, is also quite dangerous. Voyeurism and objectification do not often have positive outcomes, even if the one being looked at is usually in control of the situation.

Fevvers' identity is questioned from the very beginning of the novel. Walser shows up with the intent of proving her to be one of the "Great Humbugs of the World" (Carter 11). He does not believe that her wings are real and interviews her with the aim of revealing her falsehood. The tagline for her circus attraction reads, "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (Carter 7) This is a question that the novel leaves unresolved. Her identity is one full of ambiguity and uncertainty. In the first section, the reader learns about Fevvers' tragic and eventful youth along with Walser and it is clear that Fevvers undergoes "the construction of [her] identity through performance" (Cella 58). Her truth is always a

complicated issue because on one level she is obviously a fiction, Carter's creation, but also within the story her genuineness is never certain to other characters. It is impossible to know exactly what is true in Fevvers' stories, but she casts a great exhibition, creating her wondrous image as she goes. Buffo, the most notable clown, later says, "'We can invent our own faces! We *make* ourselves'" (Carter 121). Though Fevvers is not a clown, she also wears a costume and creates herself through spectacle.

The truth of Fevvers' stories and the authenticity of her wings are just some of the questions that others ask about her. As a result, Fevvers' formation of identity is multifaceted. For Fevvers, like Villanelle, physically "there is no clear separation between the animal and the human, so what it means to have an identity in the first place is a troubled but unresolved question" (Lee 109). She is immediately disconnected from the rest of humanity from birth because of her wings. This complicated sense of self is not just the case in regards to animal versus human, but also in regards to masculine versus feminine. Fevvers is conflictingly described as "a perfect lady" (Carter 88) and as having "a disturbingly masculine fashion" (Carter 166). Fevvers, therefore, embodies a middle ground regarding many aspects of the self; she is "queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species" (Carter 81).

Eventually, Fevvers' sense of identity is questioned to the utmost degree. While Walser had previously wondered about the truth of her sex, the circus proprietor, the Colonel, now creates a newspaper article that "claims that Fevvers is not a woman at all but a cunningly constructed automaton made up of whalebone, india-rubber and springs" (Carter 147). Fevvers' identity is questioned right to the root of her humanness as a result of this publicity stunt; the article wonders if she is, in fact, inorganic. Around the

historical time in which this novel takes place, Edison and others were trying to perfect their automata. Through the Colonel's claims, Carter is clearly referring to the concerns of the time and the subsequent curiosity about what defines a human. As mentioned previously, Carter emphasizes these possibilities regarding Fevvers' true identity in order to question how we define being human and being a woman. Fevvers is different from the average person because of her nature and this makes her, literally, unbelievable.

Even Fevvers herself is unsure of her being as she progresses through the novel. When her audience reappears after the train wreck in Siberia, Fevvers "felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection of Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?'" (Carter 290) Just like Villanelle, Fevvers questions the very core of her identity. She sees herself in the eyes of Walser and lives the questions others have asked of her throughout the novel.

Fevvers is not the only one whose identity is questioned in the novel. Because of the setting being a circus, there is constant attention to spectacle, creation and the underlying pretense of truth versus magic. Walser himself gets lost in the identity formation that the circus allows: "When Walser first put on his make-up, he looked in the mirror and did not recognize himself...Walser's very self, as he had known it, departed from him, he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask" (Carter 103). Many of the circus characters, especially the clowns as Buffo points out, embrace the liberty that the performative aspects of the circus allow. They are able to create themselves. This ability to decide how they will act, especially in regards to Fevvers, embodies Butler's views on performative gender. Like the gender trouble that she claims drag causes,

choosing a mask troubles the notion of identity. Is Walser now hiding his true self or is he liberated because he now has the ability to create himself freely?

Fevvers' sense of self being based on the attention of others is reinforced after the train wreck when she has lost both Walser and any audience. Stranded in Siberia, Fevvers is "fading away, as if it was only always nothing but the discipline of the audience that kept [her] in trim" (Carter 280). Fevvers needs "that silent demand to be *looked* at that had once made her stand out" (Carter 277). She has spent so much time perfecting her self as a visual spectacle, that when she does not have an impressed audience, she does not know how to exist.

After reuniting with Walser, his love and attention start to revive Fevvers, but it is the admiration of his new people that really enlivens her: "She cocked her head to relish the shine of the lamps, like footlights, like stage-lights;...and, beyond them, the eyes fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes told her who she was" (Carter 290). It is the awed gasp of the people of the woods that truly reinvigorates her. She sees her identity firmly in their admiration; she is a person to be looked at. Fevvers at first believes that it is the eyes of her beloved that will bring her back to life, that will make her into the blondest of blondes once again; but, in fact, it is the eyes of an entire audience, the astonished look of a group of people that gives her hope and purpose: "Their eyes restored her soul" (Carter 291).

These novels make the case that one's sense of self is a fluid notion that constantly changes. Villanelle explores her character through crossdressing and taking various lovers; the Dog Woman discovers aspects of her self through her love for Jordan and her embracing of her atypical characteristics. These women do not have a singular,

true identity that underlies their existence. Rather, they explore their multiple possibilities for identity throughout the course of their lives. Each adventure causes them to reevaluate their selves and each gender performance allows them to explore their various qualities. For Fevvers, though, this identity exploration is somewhat less positive. She does not seem to explore her sense of self on a personal level but rather is forced to reconsider her identity when she has no more audience. As Laurie Cella explains, "With the admiration of a fresh audience to inspire her, Fevvers gains the confidence she needs to manufacture an image - for herself and her audience" (59). Fevvers has spent her life creating her persona for the admiration of others and she therefore is forced to consider her character when the audience disappears: who is she without people to admire her? The novel seems to make the case that Fevvers is so dependent upon the eyes of others that instead of using the lack of an audience as a chance to explore different aspects of her self, as the Dog Woman or Villanelle might have done, she loses any sense of self until an audience reappears. Without others' gazes, Fevvers does not view herself as anyone.

The ending of the novel, when Walser and Fevvers unite sexually, lends renewed skepticism to the truth of Fevvers. Walser asks, "Why did you go to such lengths...to convince me you were the 'only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world'?" and Fevvers responds by laughing uncontrollably and commenting on her ability to fool him (Carter 294). Is Fevvers laughing out of an appreciation of the joyous sexual encounter she is having with Walser? Is she thrilled to be controlling this man and manipulating him as she desires? Whatever the case, she laughs uncontrollably because of her ability to fool him. It is never clear, though, what exactly she deceives him about. Is it her virginity or the truth of her wings? It is possible that these questions are versions of the same

concern. The “patriarchal” desire to know if one’s wife is a virgin is like the voyeuristic desire to know if the wings are real. Both deal with concerns about the honesty of women and, moreover, speak to women being seen as men’s property because traditionally women have not had this same concern. Either way, this moment reinforces the performative nature of Fevvers. She is always on display, creating a self for others.

While Fevvers’ identity is never clearly defined, it is repeatedly mentioned throughout the novel that she is the symbol of the New Woman. However, the ending of the novel does not definitively answer what Carter intends by labeling Fevvers the New Woman. Fevvers rescues Walser from his delirium and claims him as her lover just as the clock strikes for the twentieth century to begin. Prior to reuniting with him, she discusses with Lizzie her impending reunion with Walser and the possibility of turning him into her New Man. She contemplates “turning from a freak into a woman” and embracing the feminine roles of mother and wife (Carter 283). But she is Carter’s New Woman, and her grandeur cannot be satisfied by typical feminine roles; rather, she must have joyous sexual pleasure and possess a man, instead of being possessed.

While debating Fevvers’ impending relationship with Walser, Lizzie jealously comments on the customary ending of comedies, especially Shakespeare’s, where the separated lovers unite in marriage at the conclusion of the play. Fevvers is frightened by the possibility of losing her individuality by being in a relationship:

But it is not possible that I should give myself...My being, my me-ness, is unique and indivisible. To sell the use of myself for the enjoyment of another is one thing; I might even offer freely, out of gratitude or in the expectation of pleasure – and pleasure alone is my expectation from the young American. But the essence

of myself may not be given or taken, or what would there be left of me? (Carter 280-281)

Fevvers views marriage as a woman losing her self to the man. She does not long even for a relationship of minds, only a relationship of the body. It is only her body that she knows how to give. She fears losing any fleeting sense of self that she has if she is asked to give more than just her body.

Fevvers perks up at the prospect of marriage, however, when she considers Walser's "malleable look. As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he'll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, not expect the vice versa!...I will transform him...I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century-" (Carter 281). This is where Carter might be beginning to explain the symbol of the New Woman. Rather than being possessed by a man, the woman will control the man. However, there is clearly some historical irony in this claim. Though the New Century saw gains for women, it did not deliver the promised utopia. Carter is obviously aware of this and therefore comments throughout the novel on the folly of women believing in the possibility of an idealized female existence.

Despite the irony, Fevvers sees her symbolic role as being the first woman to break the bonds of patriarchy. She looks forward to the day when other women will follow her example:

The new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! all the women will have wings, the same as I...[They] will tear off [their] mind forg'd manacles, will rise up and fly away. The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the

cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed - (Carter 285)

Fevvers longs for women to be freed from their oppressed roles and take charge of their lives. She believes that women are prisoners in their binary positions as either wife and mother (the doll's house) or as whore (the brothel). Maybe the New Woman is one who cannot be easily categorized into the typically expected roles for women: virgin, wife/mother, whore. The women with wings will be free to fly above these labels. Of course, though, with Carter the symbol is always complicated. While wings imply a sense of freedom, in Fevvers' case the same wings that give her power also make her the object of voyeurism and, in turn, place her in dangerous situations.

Fevvers wants Walser not just to be her sexual playmate but also to observe her role and the newfound freedom of all women. She longs for "that bright day, when I am no more a singular being but, warts and all the female paradigm, no longer an imagined fiction but a plain fact – then he will slap down his notebooks, bear witness to me and my prophetic role" (Carter 286). Fevvers cannot do anything, whether it is performing as an aerialist or being a visionary symbol, without someone to admire her performance. She validates her own existence by the admiration of others.

Because of all of the roles that Fevvers embraces or disregards, there is no clear critical consensus regarding Carter's symbolic meaning of Fevvers as the New Woman. Through the voice of Walser, Carter herself addresses Fevvers' emblematic purpose: "As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly none" (161). Nicola Pitchford believes that "it is hard to see Fevvers as anything but a wholly feminist icon, a winged

symbol of the New Woman and the new century itself" (413). This, however, is too simple of an explanation. Fevvers is not just a feminist icon; she has undergone emotional and physical devastation and has been used and abused by many men, and some women, over the course of her life. Though she questions her identity at times, she seems rather secure in the spectacle of her self and uses it to her advantage.

Sara Martin, however, does not see Fevvers as solely a feminist icon. Martin writes, "Fevvers' wings never let her fly in complete freedom, thus being an oddly defective symbol of woman's liberation; they enable her, though, to exploit herself as a very successful circus attraction. The limitations of her wings might thus be taken as a metaphor for the limitations of woman's aspiration to soar beyond patriarchy" (196). Though Carter is often not seen as a traditional feminist due to her moments of sexual violence towards women, she does often empower women. Carter seems to embrace a sort of new feminism that has room for sexual eccentricities and even masochism. Carter's feminism is not overly idealized as feminisms of the past have been. As Martin explains, Fevvers is a limited symbol for feminism. She has the power of flight but is not able to completely free herself from the constraints society has put on her gender.

Thus, it seems that Michael Wood sums up Fevvers as the New Woman most accurately: "Fevvers is a metaphor for the New Woman, or, rather, a blatant but sympathetic parody of the idea of the New Woman" (139). Fevvers is a distortion of the idea of a liberated woman because she is not an idealized feminist icon who stands independent from others; she longs for an audience and a man to admire her. She is not typically feminine and is flawed and tragic. Fevvers also prostitutes the sight of her own

body, and, although she is claiming ownership over it rather than letting others possess her, she is still objectifying herself as a woman and as a freak.

So, is Fevvers really a New Woman freed from the bonds of patriarchy? Not exactly. Fevvers ends up in a man's arms, a man she desires to turn into her own idealized version of a man. She is empowered at the end of the novel because she is claiming her own sexual pleasure and has spent the novel using her body to her own advantage. However, she needs an audience to flourish. Walser and his woodland community are her new audience and she only thrives again once in their presence. Her wings are a complicated symbol because while they metaphorically symbolize an ability to soar above the constraints of the world, she is not independent from the rest of the world (or even a man) and does not want to be. Fevvers is empowered in her life and has embraced her atypical femininity, but she does not stand on her own. What, then, is the image of the New Woman? Like Winterson, Carter uses postmodern ambiguity to leave the ending of her novel inconclusive. The New Woman is intentionally indefinable.

Conclusion

Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter use a fantastical form in order to challenge normative ideas of gender. The use of a magical motif suspends one's disbelief and allows for complexities that a realistic narrative could not. As discussed in the introduction, this form more accurately allows women to express their possibilities. For these authors, a rejection of patriarchy works in conjunction with a rejection of realism. The realist novel of the white, masculine tradition does not easily lend itself to the experiences of oppressed women. In novels that utilize magical realism, Winterson and Carter are able to explore issues of gender in a new manner. Only through the employment of fantasy can gender be reimagined.

The Passion, Sexing the Cherry and *Nights at the Circus* constantly question the assumptions that are made about gender. Though the debate about sex, gender and sexuality being intrinsically linked and innate is complex, Winterson and Carter use this debate to their advantage to explore the possibilities of gender. As Joan Mellen explains, one "can dramatize larger, abstract ideas through the surprising conjunction of the real and the fantastic" (6). As a result, Winterson and Carter rethink gender at the same time as they rework genre.

Identity, like gender, is fluid. Almost every one of the characters in these novels is neither static nor easily definable. Identity and gender are constantly explored and reevaluated. Rethinking gender is key to all these characters' searches for identity or selfhood. Masculinity and femininity, as well as virgin and whore, are binaries that should not be easily accepted. Winterson and Carter challenge the assumptions inherent in believing in differences at face value. By having female protagonists that blur gender

roles and explore different aspects of their characters, these authors reveal that the beauty is in the search, not the answer. The link between a "postmodern" idea of self and the notion of gender as performance reveals that identity is not stable and that through performance one can explore various aspects of the self. Carter and Winterson repeatedly challenge the distinctions of masculine and feminine and explore the possibility of multiple gendered identities.

A reader often has to participate in the fantasy of a novel and, in turn, becomes immersed in that fictional world. Just as "Miss Fevvers is asking us to suspend disbelief" when she relates the tale of her life, so are Carter and Winterson (Carter 15). Once entranced, the readers' mind is opened to non-normative ideas of gender and his/her perspective can be changed. Kathryn Hume explains that "when a fiction offers us a world whose values basically agree with our own, we feel no pressure to review our assumptions about reality" (84). But, when a novel, as is the case with Winterson and Carter, presents a world with an altered view of reality, a world where women can be born with wings and a living heart can be kept in a jar, then the reader is forced to reconsider expectations.

These novels prompt one to consider what it means to be a woman and, moreover, what it means to be human. Winterson and Carter explore gender through the utilization of the fantastic. They present us with alternative views of reality, not just by using the fantastic but also by rewriting gender roles. They show that a blurring of gender is possible and that all sorts of binaries should be broken down. Winterson and Carter demonstrate that only in a fictional and fantastical world can normative beliefs really be rethought.

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