

**Identity and Disguise:  
The Grotesque Body in Jeanette Winterson's Novels**

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**Abstract**

The article focuses on the representation of the queer and grotesque body in Jeanette Winterson's works, in particular *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry*, *The PowerBook*, and *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*. Starting from Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque body – linked to Earth, ab-normal, deviated, dangerous – it analyses Winterson's hybrid female characters who rebel against the patriarchal order. Virtual reality and real life overlap, the cities in which the stories are set are changeable as the characters who challenge the limits of space and time, through the exciting experience of cross-dressing. Nothing is 'fixed', especially gender: through the performativity of gender, in fact, these fluid identities live in disguise, exceed, risk, construct and de-construct their own bodies. Because of their 'anormality', they are linked to deviance: subvert all social structures, do not care about people's gaze, cannot be 'contained' and controlled, so they are perceived as monsters, but reveal to be strong women and loving mothers.

**Keywords**

Identity, disguise, gender, cross-dressing, grotesque, Winterson

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## Kimlik ve Maske: Jeanette Winterson'ın Romanlarında Grotesk Beden

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### Özet

Makale, Jeanette Winterson'ın eserlerinde, özellikle *The Passion, Sexing the Cherry, The PowerBook*, ve *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* adlı romanlarında grotesk ve queer bedenin temsili üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Bakhtin'in Dünya ile bağlantılı, anormal, sapkın ve tehlikeli olan grotesk beden tanımıyla başlayarak Winterson'ın erkek egemen düzene karşı isyan eden melez kadın karakterleri incenmektedir. Karşı cinsin kıyafetlerini giyme tecrübesi ile zaman-mekân sınırlarına meydan okuyan karakterler gibi değişken olan öykülerin geçtiği şehirlerde sanal gerçeklik ve gerçek yaşam üst üste binmektedir. Hiçbir şey, özellikle toplumsal cinsiyet, sabit değildir: aslında toplumsal cinsiyetin edimselliği yoluyla bu sabit olmayan kimlikler maske altında yaşayıp, kendi bedenlerini aşarak riske atmakta, inşa etmekte ve yapı-söküme uğratmaktadır. 'Anormalliklerinden' ötürü sapkınlıkla eşleştirilirler: bütün sosyal yapıları yıkarak insanların bakışına aldırılmaz, 'sınırlandırılıp' kontrol altına alınamazlar. Bu yüzden canavar olarak algılanırlar ama güçlü kadın kadın kimliğine sahip sevgi dolu anneler oldukları ortaya çıkar.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Kimlik, maske, toplumsal cinsiyet, karşı cinsin kıyafetini giyme, Winterson

In 1928 the Hogarth Press published the novel *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf. It is a marvelous story of a poet who travels throughout centuries and changes sex at the age of thirty. The performativity of gender is one of the main features of the novel: the androgynous Orlando rebels against the patriarchal order, firmly refuses any possibilities of marriage and, after a seven days sleep, wakes up as a woman. From now on, Orlando is Lady Orlando – she joins a Gipsy company and, back to England, evades archduchess Harriet's marriage proposal, who now shows to be the archduke Harry. She dresses both as a man and a woman and finally marries a sea captain

who, like her, has no fixed gender. Orlando embodies the boundary between genders: he/she was born as a male, but is transformed into a woman, and cross-dresses alternatively.

While 'sex' is "either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions", 'gender' is defined as "the state of being male or female (typically used referring to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones)" (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998). Regarding sex and gender categories, Judith Butler states:

"If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical dis-continuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. [...] When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one." (Butler, 1990, p. 10)

Therefore, if sex is related to biology, while gender is culturally constructed, performing gender can be a political act aimed at subverting the binary structures established by the patriarchal order. Cross-dressing, in fact, allows a person to 'embody' his/her real bent and/or to perform gender beyond boundaries. From this perspective, disguise is not simply a 'masquerade', but it becomes a way to conceive identity as a not-fixed construction and to claim the body as a site of countless possibilities.

The article focuses on the representation of the queer and grotesque body in Jeanette Winterson's works. Starting from the definition of 'grotesque', it analyses the hybrid female characters in *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry*, *The PowerBook*, and *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*. Concerning Woolf's novel, Winterson defines Orlando "brave, funny, vulnerable and proud", and with "the unusual advantage of being both a man and a woman" (1995, p. 67). As Orlando, Winterson's female characters rebel against the patriarchal order and, through the exciting experience of cross-dressing, they challenge the limits of space and time. Because of their

'excesses', they are depicted as monsters: they are "eccentric subjects" (De Lauretis, 1990) living on the margins, they have a distorted perception of reality and are perceived as abject, but they also are strong women and loving mothers.

The term 'grotesque' is a derivative of 'grotto', cave. It comes from Italian *grotta*, via Latin from Greek *kruptē* 'a vault', from *kruptos* 'hidden' (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 8th Edition) and it is often related to the body that is "low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral" (Russo, 1995, p. 1). In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin defines the grotesque body as "a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (1968, p. 335). As the Giants, the Sphinx, Medusa, the Mermaids, it is ab-normal, changeable, hybrid and, for this reason, dangerous. It is not accidentally that the grotesque body is usually compared to the woman's body. In fact, "as a bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like [...] the cavernous anatomical female body" (Russo, 1995, p. 1): it is able to give birth and destroy, mysterious, 'moved inward', linked to Earth and to primary needs. According to Bakhtin, acts as eating, pregnancy, swallowing up by another body "are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events, the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven" (1968, p. 317).

The dual feelings of repulsion and attraction towards women, considered as 'mutilated men', have ancient origins. Aristotle, in *Generation of Animals*, argues that female is "weaker and colder in nature" and this state represents a "deficiency" (book IV, par. 6). Moreover, in *History of Animals*, he explains that the woman "is softer in disposition than the male, [...] more mischievous, less simple, more impulsive" (book IX, par. 1) and, in particular, she is "more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, [...] more jealous, more querulous, [...] more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive" (book IX, par. 1). The philosopher deduces woman's inferiority by nature and 'analyses' her in relation to her perfect counterpart: man. From this perspective, every woman who evades the established roles of mother and 'docile' wife is considered as excessive, uncontrollable, even insane. Her rebellious, hidden, uncontainable attitude is linked to danger. The mythological *vagina dentata*, toothed vagina, is just one of the projections of man's fear of woman's hidden side. As Jill Raitt states (1980), "the *vagina dentata* visualizes [...] the fear of entry into the unknown, of the dark

dangers that must be controlled in the ambivalent mystery that is woman" (p. 416), and Barbara Creed (1993) adds, "the *vagina dentata* is the mouth of hell - a terrifying symbol of woman as the 'devil's gateway'... The *vagina dentata* also points to the duplicitous nature of woman, who promises paradise in order to ensnare her victims" (p. 106). So, this classical symbol seems to be related to man's need to control and preserve himself from the 'dark continent' and to his fear of being 'incorporated' by the monstrous womb from which he has been generated. The pregnant body, in fact, is connected to the grotesque body because it contains another body and represents the site of horror par excellence. Its deformity inspires both fear and fascination because it is changeable, ab-normal, and constantly 'dislocated' (Braidotti, 2005).

Villanelle and the Dog Woman are the grotesque characters of *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* by Winterson. *The Passion* is set in France, Russia and Italy during the Napoleonic wars and narrates the interwoven stories of Henri, a soldier of Napoleon's army, and Villanelle, a Venetian gondolier's daughter with webbed feet. This peculiarity usually belongs to gondoliers' sons, but Villanelle is a woman, the reason why she cannot work as a gondolier and is perceived as a monster by her own father. Dog Woman, instead, is the gigantic character of *Sexing the Cherry*, who lives surrounded by her dogs. The novel is divided into two temporal levels: the events, set in London during the Civil War (1630-1666) and told alternatively by Dog Woman and her adoptive son, Jordan, interweave with the XX century story of a young ecologist and Nicholas Jordan (*alter ego* of Dog Woman and Jordan). Villanelle and Dog Woman evade social conventions and rebel against the patriarchal order: Villanelle abhors marriage even though she is pregnant, while Dog Woman chooses to take care of her adoptive son despite her impossibility to generate a child because of her corporeity. Both are strong women for nature. Villanelle tells that when she was born her feet "were webbed [...]. The midwife [...] proposed to cut off the offending parts straight away. [...] She tried again and again [...]. She bent the point of the knife, but that was all" (Winterson, 1997, pp. 51-52). As regards Dog Woman, she reminds:

"When I was born I was tiny enough to sleep in my father's shoe; it was only later that I began to grow, and to grow to such proportions that my father had the idea of exhibiting me. [...] One night my father tried to steal

me and sell me to a man with one leg. They had a barrel ready to put me in, but no sooner had they slammed on the lid than I burst the bonds of the barrel and came flying out at my father's throat. This was my first murder." (Winterson, 2001, p. 107)

Dog Woman refuses to be treated as a 'freak' and, when her father tries to steal her in order to exhibit her body, she rebels against him and literally silences the patriarchal authority. While Villanelle hides her physical monstrosity in a pair of boots, Dog Woman's body is terribly huge. Margins are her place, she enjoyed singing but she renounced because, as the parson said, "the gargoyles must remain on the outside", so now she sings "inside the mountain of [her] flesh [...], and [her] voice has no lard in it" (Winterson, 2001, p. 14). Dog Woman is aware of her corporeity, but she wonders about it:

"How hideous am I?

My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas. [...] I know that people are afraid of me [...]. When I was a child my father swung me up on to his knees to tell a story and I broke both his legs. He never touched me again, except with the point of the whip he used for the dogs. But my mother [...] could swung me on her back and carry me for miles. There was talk of witchcraft but what is stronger than love?" (pp. 24-25)

Dog Woman's mother was a tiny woman, but she was able to bear her daughter despite her weight. In the same way, Dog Woman's adoptive son, Jordan, does not care about his mother's abnormality: he knows she is weird, but he loves her deeply and wants to be like his "rip-roaring mother who cares nothing for how she looks, only for what she does. She has never been in love, no, and never wanted to be either. She is self-sufficient and without self-doubt" (p. 101).

Cross-dressing and disguise define Villanelle's figure: she wears a moustache while she is working in the Casino, steals an officer's uniform and visits her female lover dressed in it, acts as a man to please her male lover, dresses as a *vivandière* after she has been sold to the Napoleon's army by her husband. Villanelle's identity is not fixed:

she risks, exceeds, explores herself and her body. She tells that when she went to work in the Casino she “dressed as a boy because that’s what the visitors liked to see. It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste...” (Winterson, 1997, p. 54). The first time she meets the Queen of Spades is dressed as a boy, the second one wears a uniform, and when she confesses to be a woman, the lady does not care about it. Passion bursts and they stayed at the lady’s house, in their ‘private universe’, for nine days and nights. Villanelle does not only love the Queen of Spades, she belongs to her: she constructs her identity through her. She confesses:

“When I fell in love it was as though I looked into a mirror for the first time and saw myself. I lifted my hand in wonderment and felt my cheeks, my neck. This was me. And when I had looked at myself and grown accustomed to who I was, I was not afraid to hate parts of me because I wanted to be worthy of the mirror bearer.” (pp. 154-155)

Villanelle’s words recall Lacan’s mirror stage which “describes the formation of the EGO via the process of identification; the ego is the result of identifying with one’s own SPECULAR IMAGE. The moment of identification [coincides with] a moment of jubilation” (Evans, 1996, p. 118). The Queen of Spades reveals to be Villanelle’s counterpart: she identifies herself in the lady she loves, but the Queen of Spades does not return Villanelle’s veneration because she is married and collects the hearts of her lovers.

The city of Venice represents Villanelle’s identity and, more generically, the female body: it is “a changeable city. It is not always the same size. Streets appear and disappear overnight, new waterways force themselves over dry land” (Winterson, 1997, p. 97). Water, symbol of birth and regeneration, connects Venice to Villanelle. As the boatmen with webbed feet, she is able to walk on water and when she reflects her face in it she realizes: “On the lagoon this morning, [...] I see the future glittering on the water. I catch sight of myself in the water and see in the distortion of my face what I might become” (p. 62). For Winterson, according to Judith Seaboyer (1997), “Venice is a 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" (p. 484). This labyrinth-like city "is the city of disguises" (Winterson, 1997, p. 56) where "There are women of every kind and not of them are women" (p. 58), but it is also "the city of mazes. You may set off from the same place to the same place every day and never go by the same route" (p. 49).

Identity and disguise are also key concepts of *The PowerBook* (Winterson, 2001). The narrator, Ali/Alix, offers to her clients, by e-mail, the chance to be "free just for one night" (p. 4). Cyberspace is the place where characters' stories are set and interweave in a virtual reality. As Ali explains:

"This is where the story starts. Here, in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex. This is an unvented world. You can be free just for one night. Undress. Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them behind the door. Tonight we can go deeper than disguise." (p. 4)

Echoing *The Passion's* mantra-like sentence "I'm telling you stories. Trust me." (Winterson, 1997, p. 5), Ali establishes a trust relationship with her readers. She writes for her clients whatever they like, but asks them to be prepared to enter the story as themselves and to leave it as someone else. The novel, where love and risk prevail, combines fiction and myth: the tragedy of Lancelot and Guinevere intersects with the story of a Turkish girl travelling to Holland and the troubled love of two female lovers. Ali is immersed so deeply in her stories that she becomes the author and the victim of a relationship with a red-hair woman she calls Tulip. She seems to be Ali's counterpart, and vice versa. Their words interweave as they were spilled out of single mouth, their bodies join beyond space and time. Virtual reality overlaps real life, so Ali begins to construct her identity through her lover, but, as in *The Passion*, disillusion comes: the woman has a husband. Anyway, passion burns out of marriage dimension where there are "too many clocks and not enough time. Too much furniture and too little space" (Winterson, 2001, p. 39). Their love affair begins in the chapter NEW DOCUMENT: in this virtual dimension, they meet for the first time on a Friday night in Paris where they eat together, and talk about boundaries and desire (pp. 31-52). The story is interrupted, but it is not ended, and after a break, Ali imagines the



two women talking and walking towards a hotel where they will make love (pp. 54-59). After a second encounter in Capri, an island where “the weather is so changeable” (p. 110) as love, the story develops beyond space and time where Ali and her lover construct their own reality.

In *The PowerBook* disguise does not only regard love affairs and the places in which they are set, but it is strongly related also to gender and its performativity. The first story Ali writes is about a tulip she carried herself from Turkey to Holland in the sixteenth century. She tells: “when I was born, my mother dressed me as a boy because she could not afford to feed any more daughters” and “my father wanted to drown me, but my mother persuaded him to let me live in disguise, to see if I could bring any wealth to the household” (pp. 10-11). Confusion between genders is fulfilled when Ali has to bring a tulip to Holland between her legs and has a sexual intercourse with a young princess (pp. 21-22). An unusual grafting between a human being and a vegetal occurs:

“This was my centrepiece. About eight inches long, plump, with a nice weight to it. We secured it to my person and inspected the result. There are many legends of men being turned into beasts and women into trees, but none I think, till now, of a woman who becomes a man by means of a little horticultural grafting.” (p. 12)

As Lidia Curti argues (1998), grafting “is about giving strength to the weak and about metamorphosis and transformation; it is also [...] about travels and love; [...] about the hybridity of sexual identities” (pp. 129-130). Moreover, Winterson explains in *Sexing the Cherry*, grafting is “the transformation from one element to another, from waste matter into best gold, is a process that cannot be documented” (2001, p. 131). Winterson’s characters are hybrid, not fixed, their identity is fluid and they are open to go over boundaries. Their ambiguity is perceived as a negative aspect, so they are considered monsters, ‘out of the norm’. These “female monstrous bodies can be multiple gigantic, fragmented, sexually ambiguous, the product of artificial grafting and mechanistic (de)constructions” (Curti, 1998, p. 120).

In *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* (Winterson, 2012) monstrosity is represented by lesbianism. Winterson writes about her female lovers and her adoptive mother’s reaction to homosexuality.

One night, Mrs Winterson allows Helen, Jeanette's friend, to sleep with her daughter because she is looking for a proof and when she gets it, she hardly speaks to her daughter (pp. 78-79). Jeanette tries to explain that she loves Helen, but "Nobody could believe that anyone as faithful as [she] was could have sex – and with another woman – unless there was a demon involved" (p. 80). Mrs Winterson organizes an exorcism and Jeanette is forced to stay in the darkness with no food or heat for three days. She tells:

"At the end of this ordeal, because I was still stubborn, I was beaten repeatedly by one of the elders. Didn't I understand that I was perverting God's plan for normal sexual relationships?

I said, my mother won't sleep in the same bed as my father – is that a normal relationship?

He shoved me onto my knees to repent those words and I felt the bulge in his suit trousers. He tried to kiss me. He said it would be better than with a girl. A lot better. He put his tongue in my mouth. I bit it. Blood. A lot of blood. Blackout." (p.81)

Of course, neither the exorcism nor the punishment changes Jeanette who, some years later, confesses to her mother she is in love with another girl, Janey. Again, Mrs Winterson tries to convince her daughter that she is "back with the Devil" (p. 113) and urges her to get out of the house, so Jeanette packs her things but before leaving her mother asks, "Why be happy when you could be normal?" (p. 114). This sentence reveals the neat opposition between what is believed straight and what is not: queerness coincides with happiness, heterosexuality with normality. Jeanette will never be accepted by Mrs Winterson and she is aware of it, but she loves her mother. She describes her as an unhappy woman. According to Jeanette, her mother "had lost something. [...] She had lost/was losing life. [...] I had lost the warm safe place, however chaotic, of the first person I loved. I had lost my name and my identity. Adopted children are dislodged" (p. 23). When Jeanette finds her biological mother, Ann, is so glad but, when she hears her criticising Mrs Winterson she feels hate. For sure Mrs Winterson is not a loving mother but, as Jeanette states, "She was a monster, but she was my monster" (p. 229).

Risk, excess, love, love's lack and its possibilities are the great themes of Winterson's novels. Her 'monsters' are loving characters

looking for happiness beyond the oppressive boundaries of space, time, and sex. Ambiguity acquires a positive connotation, so cross-dressing and disguise are strongly connected to the performativity of gender. Dog Woman, Villanelle, Ali, and Jeanette herself reveal the fluid identities of such hybrid figures who are free from patriarchal domination and so deeply linked to the Earth from which they have been generated.

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