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# Gender in Winterson's Sexing the Cherry

Paul Kintzele
*University of Houston-Downtown*

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**Paul Kintzele,**
**"Gender in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*"**
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**Abstract:** In his article "Gender in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*" Paul Kintzele examines the ways in which Jeanette Winterson's 1989 novel explores and critiques aspects of gender and sexuality. While acknowledging the importance of the performance theory of gender that derives from the work of Judith Butler, Kintzele contends that such an approach must be complemented with a psychoanalytic approach that insists on a particular distinction between sex and gender. Although some scholars map the sex/gender distinction onto the perennial nature/nurture binary and thus reduce sex to biology or anatomy, scholars of psychoanalysis such as Joan Copjec and Charles Shepherdson, read sex as the consequence of a person being a subject of language in a permanent state of incompletion. Kintzele argues that both the performance theory of gender and the psychoanalytic theory of sex, despite their differences, are united in their opposition to naïve gender essentialism and that both theories can offer insights into *Sexing the Cherry*, a text about politics of gender, the ambiguities of gendered performance, and the harsh realities of sex.

**Paul KINTZELE**

## Gender in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*

Jeanette Winterson, one of the best known contemporary British "postmodern" novelists, has made the interrogation of the categories of gender a central feature of her work. Winterson's novels are engaged in a project of resistance; they critique long-standing gender stereotypes and the allocations of power those stereotypes legitimate. Battling against normative heterosexuality, which retains its centrality in modern culture through a massive and multifaceted ideological inertia, Winterson explores a range of oppositional and alternative gender identities as well as the way normative gender categories slip or undo themselves. This aspect of her writing operates according to the principles of emancipatory pluralism, which aims at freeing the subject from the prefabricated molds of dominant social categories. Gender, in such a political model, becomes simply one more way in which the subject chooses a sexual identity. "Chooses" is the important word here, for pluralism implies a subject who can assume an abstract or external attitude towards his or her identity and re-choose at will. It is, ultimately, a supremely abstract model of subjectivity, in which the subject stands apart from all social determinants. While the emphasis on performativity has proved to be highly productive and clarifying in contemporary queer and feminist criticism, and while performance theory is of obvious relevance in any investigation of Winterson's writing, I would argue that her work also demands a reading that relies on a psychoanalytic, and specifically Lacanian, model of sexuality that emphasizes a permanently incomplete subject that is split within itself.

In her 1989 novel, *Sexing the Cherry*, a disaffected ecologist declares her commitment to a performative subjectivity, and at the same moment demonstrates how that kind of subjectivity depends on a singularity — the self — that shape-shifts and inhabits various guises: "If I have a spirit, a soul, any name will do, then it won't be single, it will be multiple. Its dimension will not be one of confinement but one of space. It may inhabit numerous changing decaying bodies in the future and in the past" (144). If such a position relegates gender to a mere subjective accessory, there is another dimension to Winterson's work that also emerges in *Sexing the Cherry* that places the furtive, even frustrating, experience of living a gendered role at the very core of the subject. According to this perspective, gender (or rather, sex) is not an article of clothing, but is rather an inscrutable commandment that the subject cannot resist; it is an experience of finitude, limitation, and longing. It is between these two subjective positions (the first characterized by freedom, choice, plurality; the second characterized by compulsion, fatality, and romantic desperation) that Winterson unfolds her narrative.

Recent critical work on the subject of sexuality and gender has, by and large, founded itself on anti-foundationalism. The rejection of essentialist categories (that is, male and female as two complimentary, though hierarchically related, types) has resulted in the establishment of two more or less antagonistic, but not opposing, theoretical positions. The first position, what we could call constructivism or historicism, contends that sexual identity is a construct, that it is variable, pliable, and radically unstable; that it is, ultimately, reducible to signification. The second position, which takes its bearings from psychoanalysis, also eschews essentialism (though this is contested), but it also resists equating sex with signification or some calculable set of social determinants; rather, according to this line of argument, sex is an ahistorical kernel, an inescapable impasse arising from the subject's immersion within the inconsistent and incomplete field of language. As one of the most forceful proponents of the psychoanalytical model of sexuality, Joan Copjec, writes, "Sex is the stumbling block of sense. This is not to say that sex is prediscursive; we have no intention of denying that human sexuality is a product of signification, but intend, rather, to refine this position by arguing that sex is produced by the internal limit, the failure of signification" ("Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" 18). So the two positions available to us if we want to examine sexuality without resorting to essential categories are that sex is 1) a function of signification or 2) the failure of signification. On the

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one hand, sex is the aggregate of historical practices that have been called sex; on the other hand, sex is the experience of a gap in signified meaning that is the inevitable fate of, in Jacques Lacan's phrase, a "sexed being" (11).

Furthermore, psychoanalytic theory proposes a specific distinction between the terms "gender" and "sex" that makes the former the particular historical response to, or compensation for, the structural impasses of the latter. In other words, all speaking beings are "sexed" (or, more exactly, they are "sexed" because they are speaking beings — the instinctual coupling of animals, according to this terminology, is not "sex"), and "gender" is the way in which sex is integrated into the social field. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, writes of the "discontinuity, the alarming and threatening disjunction, between gender and sex" (140) and Charles Shepherdson, who distinguishes between "the role of gender and the imperative of sex" (158-61). Perhaps it should be emphasized that the sex/gender distinction adduced here is not synonymous with the opposition nature/culture: what makes human sexuality human is that it is, as Shepherdson puts it, "*intrinsically bound to representation*" (159; emphasis in the original), that is, a function of the symbolic order. It is not our purpose here to rehearse, in all its complexity, the debate between psychoanalysis and historicism, but rather to point out that the abandonment of essentialist thinking has resulted in these two perspectives, and that we see both of them reflected in *Sexing the Cherry*.

In a novel that has a certain measure of iconoclasm, it is fitting that we consider Winterson's use of icons — the small pictorial symbols that, as we find out, signify the narrator of each particular section of the novel. Before we begin reading the text itself, we are confronted with a pineapple icon, and, two pages later, a banana (1, 3). Given the fact of the cherry in the novel's title, it is obvious that fruit is being invoked as a symbol, but of what? Fruit may suggest passion and sexual desire; like the apple in Eden, fruit is a sign of abundance and sensuality, as well as being a key link in the cycle of botanical reproduction. Indeed, in the opening pages of the novel we find a piece of fruit causing quite a stir: one of the primary narrators of the novel, a character who has forgotten her name and refers to herself as simply the Dog-Woman witnesses the unveiling of a fruit never before seen in seventeenth-century England — a banana. The Dog-Woman is quite blunt about the phallic qualities of this exotic specimen; she says, "[It resembled] the private parts of an Oriental. It was yellow and livid and long" (5). The banana, by the mere fact of its brazen otherness, provokes both disgust and fascination; it is a token of uninhibitedness in a society on the brink of the Puritan revolution, an event that plays an important role in the novel. So, as Winterson symbolically deploys it, fruit not only suggests sexuality, but also an erotic Beyond to a dull and repressed England. As the title of her first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, suggests, a social norm must squelch difference and dissent if it is to speak the language of hegemonic universality. To say that there are other fruits, exceptions to the norm, is a plea for recognition, perhaps even a challenge. The appearance of the banana at the beginning of *Sexing the Cherry* stages, albeit humorously, the confrontation between a social order and its beyond; it establishes the presence of a force that calls the norm into question.

Interestingly, however, Winterson thwarts the reader's expectations by using the banana icon to announce the Dog-Woman's narration, despite the banana's association with a phallus. But this is not so surprising when the reader becomes acquainted with the Rabelaisian proportions of the Dog-Woman's character. Winterson endows her main character with many of the traditional, patriarchal attributes of masculinity: she is active, assertive, and no-nonsense; moreover, near the end of the novel she declares that she has a "flair for enterprise" (156), indicating that she feels quite at home in the male-dominated public sphere. The Dog-Woman, who is a staunch Royalist, even carries out a brutal campaign against the Puritans, whose hypocrisy she detests. The high point of these efforts is the exceptionally gory murder of two Puritans in a brothel. The Dog-Woman states with equanimity, "there is no person dead at my hand who would be better off alive" (147-48). The fact of the Dog-Woman's royalism is at first perplexing: how could such a character so vigorously resist the patriarchy, without resisting the state's patriarch? It may be better to say that the Dog-Woman's

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support for the king derives mostly from her opposition to the *ressentiment* of the Puritans, who espouse a doctrine of hatred for the body and sexuality. It is the drive toward purity, toward universality, that provokes the Dog-Woman's mistrust of the Roundheads. Winterson's own rebellion against her strict evangelical upbringing, with its doctrinal militancy and its tenets of self-renunciation (Onega 3-4), is quite apparent in those passages in which the Dog-Woman reflects on the political turmoil that culminates in the beheading of the king in 1649: "Not content with the Church of England that good King Henry bequeathed to us all, they wanted what they called 'A Church of God'" (22). The Dog-Woman sees that the treatment of women, however bad it may be under the monarchy, would be far worse under the Puritans, who associate women with the body and all of its drives that they are actively trying to repress and renounce. The Dog-Woman says of Preacher Scroggs, "I heard from his wife that he makes love to her through a hole in the sheet" (23). In her frequent confrontations with the Puritans, the Dog-Woman again demonstrates her affinity with a "masculine" ethos of aggressivity and contention.

Yet, for all this, Winterson does not simply create a male character who happens to have a female anatomy. Although the Dog-Woman, in her opposition to male dominance, must adopt a "masculine" mode of behavior, she ultimately does not subscribe to those traditional roles and attitudes ascribed to men; her "masculine" behavior, ironically enough, is in defense of a ethic that exceeds or even contradicts the traditionally masculine. The trap that *Sexing the Cherry* approaches in these moments is that of conflating the traditionally masculine and feminine with the essentially masculine and feminine. It is here that we should consider whether or not Winterson, despite her depictions of a subject that can drift away from the moorings of his or her identity, has recourse to the notion that there are male and female "essences" and whether *Sexing the Cherry* keeps the same traditional categories while arguing for a mere leveling or reversal of the gender hierarchy. Does the novel offer just another variation on the essentialist thinking that feminism has endeavored to challenge? With this question in mind, let us examine a passage in the novel, in which the Dog-Woman, who has just vividly demonstrated the extraordinary weight of her body, reminisces about her past: "When I was a child my father swung me up on to his knees to tell me 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, who lived only a while and was so light that she dared not go out in a wind, could swing me on her back and carry me for miles" (21).

Why is it that the Dog-Woman breaks her father's legs (thereby incurring his lifelong wrath) while her mother can easily carry her along on her shoulders? It would seem that this passage illustrates a kind of special women's bond inaccessible to men; the Dog-Woman's father is literally unable to understand her—that is, stand under her; he is crushed by her weight. Further evidence of a sweeping indictment of all men can be found in the "rule book" that the Dog-Woman's adopted son, Jordan, reads; in it, men are portrayed as basically shallow, unreliable, and selfish. Is this not a prime example of the kind of dismissive, totalizing thinking that hampered the efficacy of the feminist movement in past decades? Should we recall the interpretive injunction that no matter how prominently displayed, the utterances of a character are not necessarily to be taken as the final position of the text as a whole, or of the author behind it? Is Winterson simply describing a character and that character's attitudes and responses, or is she proposing a new perspective on gender essences? Should we accept Winterson's text at face value but minimize the damage by resorting to the ad hoc concept of "strategic essentialism"? Or is the charge of essentialism off the mark?

In interpreting the "rule book," we should first take into account Jordan's reaction to it. He says, "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" (30). In other words, Jordan acknowledges that in his experience, men can be collectively judged. The whole question regarding essentialism turns on whether these empirical observations translate into statements about the "thing itself." The consistency of masculine behavior might simply be attributable to what we could call the force of tradition, the pervasiveness of

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a certain construct of sexuality, instead of being the manifestation of some predetermined and unchangeable "essence." Simply noting the historical prevalence of a certain norm does not necessarily entail any essentialist or a priori claims whatsoever. Rather, the claim to universality and essentiality is a part of the mode of presentation of ideological constructions, which rhetorically assume the mantle of "second nature." Indeed, in the latter half of the novel, the disaffected ecologist engages in a revolutionary reverie (138-39) that implies that men "as such" are not evil, but rather are products of a corrupted ideology. The unnamed ecologist imagines the repressive patriarchal order swept aside in a single gesture and the powers that be lined up for "compulsory training in feminism and ecology" (139). Despite the ironic context in which this utopian dream is placed (the ecologist is an ostracized loner, and the grandeur of her fantasy is in direct proportion to, and in a certain sense arises out of, her actual impotence to change anything), we can acknowledge that the target of her denunciations is not "men" as such, but rather the patriarchal ideology that passes itself off as second nature. The wry humor of the passage effectively conveys its serious point: the wildness of the revolutionary dream directly corresponds to the entrenchedness of the current belief system. So ultimately we can say that Winterson does not substantialize gender and employ essentialist categories, but instead is simply thorough in her description of actuality. She is not strategically essential, but essentially strategic, attuned to the ways in which the unconscious acceptance of gender essences can be disrupted.

Ever since Judith Butler's influential book *Gender Trouble*, there has been a frequent refrain in critical theory that gender is "performed." In other words, gender is an act that takes place according to, or in violation of, various socio-symbolic scripts; it is a "spectacle"—something seen and imitated, appropriated, and parodied. Although *Sexing the Cherry* certainly does represent gender as something performed, the nature of the act isn't as visual so much as it is literary. In Winterson's novel, the venue for the enactment of gender is not the theater, but rather the novel; gender is not seen so much as it is read. For Winterson, gender is a narrative. It is performed, but not on stage; rather, it unfolds like a story. Jordan, the novel's male protagonist, compares his own furtive desires to lines written in invisible ink; he says, "I discovered that my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts" (2). In one of Jordan's imaginary voyages, he finds himself in a city in which words continue to exist after they are spoken; floating over the city, the words are a permanent inscription of transient emotions and events, more lasting, and perhaps more real, than those who use them. After two lovers have suffocated on their own words, the door to their hideaway is opened, and "the words tumbled over [the sacristan] in their desire to be free, and were seen flying across the city in the shape of doves" (13). Not only are words granted a prominent place in Winterson's novel, but, literally speaking, they encompass the whole of the novel's reality, which elicits some postmodern epistemological playfulness from Winterson. At the beginning of the novel, Jordan's narrative suspends its own reality; he prefaces his account by saying, "These are the journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time" (2). All that is left, Winterson suggests, is the narrative itself, the way in which Jordan, like the river after which he is named, winds through imaginary events, the way he stages his desires and fantasies, the way he narrates his experience as a sexed-and-gendered subject.

Jordan's subsequent career as an explorer highlights his craving for novelty; in his narrative, he is the nomadic, questing male. To the dismay of his mother, Jordan's first glimpse of the exotic banana at the beginning of the novel sparks his imagination and plants the seeds of his wanderlust; the process comes full circle when Jordan introduces another tropical fruit, the pineapple, to England at the end of the novel. The Dog-Woman provides an striking image of the mother-child relationship: "When Jordan was a baby he sat on top of me much as a fly rests on a hill of dung" (4). Eventually, Jordan flies away; in contrast to the earthy, fleshy materiality of the Dog-Woman, Jordan's desire is for disembodiment and escape. The surname of Jordan's mentor and father-figure, John Tradescant, is a near-miss for the transcendence for which Jordan yearns. Jordan's flights of fancy by necessity leave

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his body behind: he says, "To escape from the weight of the world, I leave my body where it is . . ." (11). Jordan's name perhaps also subtly suggests the journeys that he feels compelled to undertake, and the nomadic drifting that he makes into his life's vocation. At first glance, it may seem that Winterson aligns Jordan's desire to travel with a will to mastery, a will to subdue the distant reaches of the globe, to convert the wild unknown into the controllable known. Thus Jordan would seem to enact the dissatisfied straying that, typologically, fuels a masculine drive to dominance. But once the erotic dimension of Jordan's quest has been fully developed, Winterson proposes to distinguish between the journeying of Jordan and his mentor, Tradescant: Jordan says, "For Tradescant, voyages can be completed. They occupy time comfortably. With some leeway, they are predictable. I have set off and found that there is no end to even the simplest journey of the mind" (115). Indeed, just prior to this moment, Jordan reflects on his position in the structure of relations in which he is uncomfortably enmeshed. He describes a conversation with his mother: "We never discussed whether or not I would go; she took it for granted, almost as though she had expected it. I wanted her to ask me to stay, just as now I want Fortunata to ask me to stay. Why do they not?" (114). Jordan longs for a safe mooring somewhere, but it is not to be found. He is searching for a sign of love from another, or the Other, that will cancel his feeling of incompleteness. But we should not characterize this desire (or rather, desire itself) as a masculine privilege. Jordan certainly seems to take up an easily recognizable role (i.e., perpetually unsatisfied lover), accompanied by the appropriate rhetorical flourishes, but the novel offers numerous permutations that ultimately vitiate the gendering of desire as male. Even Jordan provides some productive slippage here, as the name "Jordan" can be either male or female.

The position that Jordan takes up in the novel is that of a courtly lover, and as Lacan noted, the elegance of courtly love, the distance on which it thrives, the disappointment towards which it is irresistibly pulled, is an elaborate way of framing the absence of the sexual relation (see Lacan 69). In courtly love, the Lady is elevated to the position of the lost object, the possession of whom would (so the fantasy goes) fill the void felt by the courtly lover. Slavoj Žižek argues that true love only emerges when the fantasy-image that sustains the courtly love relationship has been destroyed: he writes, "I am truly in love not when I am simply fascinated by the *agalma* in the other, but when I experience the other, the object of love, as frail and lost, as lacking 'it,' and my love nonetheless survives this loss" (104). Žižek goes on to perform a reading of Neil Jordan's film, *The Crying Game*, that shows how courtly love is a structure that can be filled in by any subject: "Herein resides the film's paradox and, at the same time, its irresistible charm: far from denouncing heterosexual love as a product of male repression, it renders the precise circumstances in which this love can retain its absolute, unconditional character" (105). In *Sexing the Cherry*, Jordan never has to undergo the loss of his fantasy — it always remains a fantasy of loss. The last page of the novel emphasizes the "empty space" that surrounds Jordan — he never has to undergo the test of having that space filled in by a real, concrete person; he remains a courtly poet to the end.

The lost/ideal object in Jordan's case is the aptly named Fortunata. Lacan once asserted that "There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital *W* indicating the universal" (72), a proposition that appeared to stand squarely against any notion of progressive sexual politics, but the Woman whose existence he denied was the Woman presumed to stand outside the symbolic order as its complement and completion. Jordan, too, sees in Fortunata the fulfillment of all his desires, but cannot precisely grasp her existence; he says, "Either I am remembering her or I am still imagining her" (104). Once the novel has established its two time frames, the modern Jordan bluntly acknowledges, "She doesn't exist" (129), only to be echoed by the other Jordan, who tells the Dog-Woman that Fortunata is "a woman who does not exist" (149). The fact that a character "who doesn't exist" plays such an important role in Winterson's novel underscores the importance of fantasy and hallucination in *Sexing the Cherry*. The crucial thematic issue here is the relation to the other. Gender, one could say, is the fundamental mode of one's relation to another, and Winterson investigates the hold it has on the subject. Jordan, it seems, is captive to an ideal image of a woman. Is he simply

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demonstrating his dependence on a stereotyped image? Moreover, gender roles place us in relation to each other, but are we actually relating to each other, or are we only relating to our projected images? When is love something other than externally reflected narcissism? Jordan thinks to himself, "Was I searching for a dancer whose name I did not know or was I searching for the dancing part of myself?" (39). The answer to his question appears to be the latter, according to the scene recounted at both the beginning and the end of the novel, in which Jordan meets himself in the fog during his escape from London. The two iterations of this scene aren't exactly symmetrical, however—the first time self-alienation is stressed, and the second time it seems to be something more like self-knowledge, as though Jordan may now be able to break out of his particular role and truly open himself up to another. And sure enough, the Dog-Woman sees someone appear at Jordan's side: "I thought I saw someone standing beside him, a woman, slight and strong" (166). But this apparition quickly vanishes and Jordan is left alone. Fortunata (notwithstanding her "non-existence") also remains alone in the end, although her solitude is one of jubilant absorption in her dancing; when Jordan asks her about love, she gives him "a short lecture on the habits of the starfish" (112). Indeed, all of the main characters are solitaries, to some degree, although there is a tentative union established at the end of the novel between Nicolas Jordan and the crusading ecologist.

Along with this emphasis on singularity, Winterson's novel also treats splitting, division, and doubling on a number of levels. The time of the novel is split between the seventeenth century and the modern day (as signified by the sliced fruit icons, and also by the year 1649, when the king's head was cut off); Jordan has a modern double, Nicolas Jordan; even the first image of the novel is "the sky divided in halves" (1). But of course the most emblematic moment of division is in the passage that provides the title for the novel. In his experiments with grafting cherries, Jordan recalls, "I . . . wondered whether it was an art I could apply to myself." The Dog-Woman looks on this horticultural experiment as a "monster," but Jordan replies: "I 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. 'Let the world mate of its own accord,' she said, 'Or not at all.' But the cherry grew, and we have sexed it and it is female" (85). In this passage we appear to have, fused together ("grafted" even), the two notions that we have been examining: gender as a social script, a locus of power, but subject to "confusion"; and sex as a ineluctable state of incomplete being. The fact that Winterson moves from the former term (gender) to the latter (sex) accords with the terminology we have been employing, even though the novel is not always consistent in this way.

The distinction between sex and gender is not simply between that of a biological or anatomical reality and social construction, although it is all too tempting to think that references to anatomy and the effects of discourse cover all the interpretive possibilities. Take, for example, one critic, who quotes Butler in listing three "dimensions" present in the Dog-Woman's portrayal: "anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance" (Butler qtd. in Langland 102). While these categories are necessary and productive in any analysis of gender in any situation, they are not sufficient to describe sex generally or the nuances of Winterson's novel particularly. If the dimensions of anatomy, identity, and performance are taken to cover the field, the resulting analysis would ultimately be, as Charles Shepherdson states, "pre-Freudian" (166), hearkening back to the well-worn argument between nature and culture. Shepherdson argues that the Freudian account (especially in the light of Lacan's reading of Freud) crucially turns on the recognition that the subject is by definition a linguistic subject: "The *energy* of human sexuality is therefore not a purely biological energy, a 'physics of libido' governed by actual laws — chemistry or biology or mechanics — but is rather an energy regulated by *the laws of language*, the laws of representation" (167, emphasis in the original). If historicist accounts of sexuality focus on what is signified in social scripts, the psychoanalytic account here described focuses on that sexuality is bound up with representation; the former describes the language of law, of norm and transgression; the latter describes the law of language, the effect of the subject having to articulate itself within a differential signifying system. This is an important codicil to

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any historicist theory of sexuality, but it does not, it should be added, change the fact that sexuality unfolds in history. Sexuality is where the subject touches the real (not the biological real, but the Lacanian real, produced by the limitations of language), but it is also where the real reaches out and seizes the subject: as Jordan says with finality, "we have sexed it and it is female." The gender role is the way in which the subject tries to make sense of its sexual inscription. Winterson's text captures both of these moments. The fact that "sexing the cherry" is an artificial process — a "grafting" — highlights the constructedness of the human subject; while at the same time the fact that "sexing the cherry" is an unavoidable and final moment, highlights the predicament of the human subject as a subject of language. Winterson describes a flexible identity, one that oscillates between the single and the multiple, but she also draws the reader's attention to the structure that gives rise to that identity in the first place.

The most memorable way in which Winterson critically maneuvers into the narration of gender roles is through her transformation of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale called "The Dancing Shoes." The effect of such an appropriation is at once playful and analytical; it defamiliarizes the story, and calls attention to the way it configures the relationship between male and female: the wry smile it produces is one that recognizes that politics are everywhere, even in the nursery. Even if the audience is adult, to rewrite a fairy tale is to rewrite childhood; it is to excavate a deep layer of cultural sediment and refashion it. Winterson is not the first author to light on this strategy; ironic quotation is, of course, a hallmark of postmodern narrative. But we can go back a little further to find a strategically placed fairy tale in a novel that resembles *Sexing the Cherry* in more than one way, namely, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Winterson has publicly claimed to be the literary heir of Woolf (see Harzewski 70), and her novel owes a clear debt, thematically and structurally, to Woolf's. Each novel is divided into three sections, and each novel disrupts the continuity among the three sections by means of a traumatic and turbulent event described in the second section (World War I in Woolf's novel, the English Civil War in Winterson's); both novels develop the theme of "fallen time," that is, a present that has become irrevocably detached from the past and drifts uncertainly towards the future. Both novels are explorations of the demands that traditional gender scripts make on the individual, and the possibilities for circumventing them. Lily Briscoe's determination to work on her painting parallels Fortunata's dancing — both characters are driven to assert their self-sufficiency in the face of a patriarchal system that demands their obedience. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily's realization of her freedom to not marry occurs in conjunction with a thought about her painting: "she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle" (102). The two fairy tales employed by each novelist reinforce the theme of the prevalence of normative gender roles.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay reads a Brothers Grimm fairy tale to Cam and James, called "The Fisherman and His Wife." It is a cautionary tale about the consequences of unbridled greed, but more specifically it is about the disastrous consequences of a woman's desire for power and aggrandizement. A woman whose husband has rescued a magical fish demands that he return to the seashore, and ask for a wish as a reward. The fish grants it, but the woman is not satisfied, and orders her husband to return to the seashore to ask for another. This is repeated several times, as the woman becomes more and more powerful — first queen, then empress, then Pope. On each visit to the fish, moreover, the surface of the water becomes more and more turbulent, as the wife's desire for power becomes more and more unbridled; finally, she asks to be made "equal to the Creator," and when her husband reluctantly goes to the seashore to carry out this request, the sea is in a tumult: "Ships were wrecked, boats tossed to and fro, and rocks rolled into the sea" (88). The fisherman's wife has now gone too far: a voice tells him that she has been turned back into her former impoverished self, becoming "an example of the consequences of impious ambition" (89). Woolf cuts up this story, so that the reader only gets it in fragments, but it is a skillfully chosen allusion, as Mrs. Ramsay is considering, at this moment in the novel, whether she, like the fisherman's wife, harbors

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any desire for domination: "Wishing to dominate, wishing to interfere, making people do as she wished — that was the charge against her, and she thought it most unjust" (57). The fairy tale clearly suggests that there is something dangerous about a woman's ambition, but Mrs. Ramsay, who is preoccupied with other thoughts, doesn't realize the significance of what she is reading. It is the reader who must make the connection between the fairy tale and Mrs. Ramsay's reflections; Woolf thereby suggests that what makes the fairy tale so powerful is that it is overlooked—like Poe's purloined letter, the fairy tale escapes critical detection because of its very obviousness. While Mrs. Ramsay reads the story to an attentive James (Cam, however, refuses to sit still and listen — a suggestive detail), she seems not to realize that the story suggests that a woman's desire, if not carefully controlled, threatens to wreak havoc. She is, unwittingly, (re)planting the seeds of the system that is at that same moment producing in her (and in Lily even more so) feelings of guilt for not being unobtrusive enough, for desiring too much.

Winterson's approach to her fairy tale is somewhat different. Instead of allowing, as Woolf does, a critique to emerge by staging the scene in which the traditional fairy tale effortlessly inserts itself and its message into daily life, Winterson changes the details of the story to accommodate a new point of view. The story in question is called "The Dancing Shoes" in the Brothers Grimm, but Winterson even makes a change here: she calls attention to the protagonists of the story, using the title, "The Story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses." The story in the Brothers Grimm is, again, a story about control over women. The twelve princesses wear out their shoes every night dancing in a secret underground world, and their father, the king, has offered the hand of any one of them in marriage to anyone who can discover how they are escaping their bedchambers every night. Eventually a young prince manages to find out, and after he marries one of the princesses, the rest of them are "placed under the spell of enchantment for as many days as they had danced nights with the princes in the enchanted castle" (398). Winterson, however, gives the triumphant prince eleven brothers, and each of them marries one of the princesses. Winterson alters another crucial detail as well — as if to emphasize the freedom of their nightly journeys, instead of traveling down into the earth, the princesses fly out of the window every night up to a floating city. Fortunata, the youngest of the twelve, tells Jordan that when they were caught, their ankles were chained to prevent any more excursions (111).

Winterson's decisive move, however, is simply to extend the story past the seemingly final moment of marriage. If one of the standard conclusions to a fairy tale is marriage, then Winterson, in twelve vignettes, shows that the story does not (and should not) end there. By complicating the closure of the standard fairy tale, Winterson disrupts the complacent manner in which the fairy tale underwrites social roles. But if she adds an element of realism to the fairy tale, she also reveals the fairy tale — that is, the ideological image —that structures reality; by substituting her own tale for it, she proposes a refashioning of gender categories. The very first of the twelve vignettes, for example, tells of a princess who became unsatisfied with her marriage and ends up running off to live with a mermaid. The other eleven husbands are, in turn, either killed, abandoned, or turned into frogs. The youngest princess, Fortunata, doesn't even get married; she escapes town on her wedding day, and continues her dancing. If Winterson's use of "The Dancing Shoes" constitutes a reference to the shaping of gender in the cultural imaginary, her use of the Puritan revolution is a reference to the place of gender in cultural history. The Puritans profess a hatred for the body, and for women. At the same time, such repressive measures do not quench sexual desire so much as force it to seek satisfaction in secret, that is, in the brothel, where the Dog-Woman takes her revenge on the Puritans Scroggs and Firebrace for their hypocrisy. As in the story of the city ravaged by love, the escape from desire is ultimately impossible. The renunciation of *jouissance* only produces more *jouissance*. The Great Fire of 1666, which provides the closing scene of the novel, is interpreted by the Dog-Woman as an act of divine retribution. She acknowledges that a certain kind of Puritanism has crept into her thinking: "'This city should be burned down,' I whispered to myself. 'It should burn and burn until

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there is nothing left but the cooling wind'" (164). When the fire actually breaks out, the Dog-Woman says that it is "the work of God" (165).

This desire for a cleansing fire echoes a remark made by the female ecologist, who proposes to Nicolas Jordan, "'Let's burn it … Let's burn down the factory'" (165). Why this yearning for an apocalypse? On the one hand, it seems to arise from a kind of Puritanism; but it is also, perhaps, a pessimist's recognition of how difficult true social change can be. This is especially true in the modern time-frame, in which the ecologist fights an impossible battle against insurmountable odds. Winterson's own evangelical upbringing seems to assert itself in the closing passages of *Sexing the Cherry*, as though the eschatological form of social protest remains the same, and she has simply changed some of the details, just as she has kept the form of fairy tales while investing them with her own particular content. Unlike *To the Lighthouse*, in which Lily's painting at the end re-establishes contact with the past and attains mastery over it, all sense of temporal continuity is lost in *Sexing the Cherry*. The past becomes "de-realized" by the present (we discover that the Dog-Woman is a figment of the ecologist's imagination), the present gropes blindly outward, and the "glittering city" of the future is "a fake" (167). Notwithstanding this grim conclusion to her story, Winterson's novel does provide a compelling treatment of postmodern gender without falling into the trap of holding out a new gender as a means by which the subject can avoid the trauma of sexuation. At the same time, Winterson expands and deconstructs gender categories, in the realization that social scripts at their most fundamental level must be altered if gender is not to be a perpetual obstacle to enlightened politics. The important task is to critique gender without supposing that one can overcome sex, and it is perhaps here that Winterson's apparent pessimism is perhaps not out of place. The split in contemporary theory between materialist/historicist feminism and psychoanalytic feminism arises out of a desire to attach emancipatory ideals to sexuality. While Winterson certainly celebrates and welcomes the dethroning of compulsory heterosexuality, she is not so quick to make it into a panacea. On the one hand, Winterson seems to acknowledge up-front the historicity, the "constructedness" of gender, but on the other hand, her treatment of desire (as an unfulfillable lack or longing) seems to reinscribe sexuality as compulsive and immovable, and not subject to performative suspension. In this, she comes very close to the kind of thinking done by Copjec and other post-Lacanian theorists who have tried to account for the historicity of sexuality without seeming to suggest that it can be re-invented at will. Like them, Winterson acknowledges that the human subject is characterized by limits, but that there is nothing "natural" from below that necessitates confinement to restrictive gender roles. In other words, *Sexing the Cherry* approaches sexuality by "celebrating ceilings but denying floors" (15).

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Author's profile: Paul Kintzele teaches English literature at the University of Houston-Downtown. His fields of interest include modernist and postmodernist literature, critical theory, and psychoanalysis. His recent publications include "Sacrifice, Inhibition, and Oedipal Fantasy in *Krapp's Last Tape*, "*Modern Drama* (2009) and "Voyaging Out: The Woolfs and Internationalism," *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* (2010). In his current project he explores the connections between modernist literature and various discourses of internationalism. E-mail: <kintzelep@uhd.edu>

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