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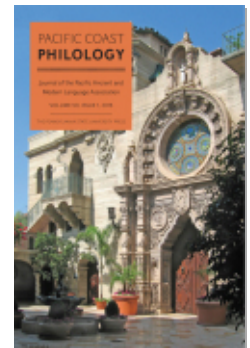
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The Taste of Fairy Tale: Consumption as Theme and Textual  
Strategy in *Sexing the Cherry* by Jeanette Winterson

Natalia Andrievskikh

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# The Taste of Fairy Tale



Consumption as Theme and Textual  
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NATALIA ANDRIEVSKIKH

**Abstract:** This reading of *Sexing the Cherry* focuses on the motif of consumption in its function to represent the female struggle for pleasure, power, and verbal expression. The novel abounds in images of consumption, literal and metaphoric, from innocent scenes of sharing food to suggestive descriptions of literally eating sexual organs, chopping up bodies, hunting, etc. I argue that the motif of consumption in Winterson's text stretches beyond the thematic and into the structural, becoming an integral principle of the narrative construction. The essay particularly discusses Winterson's use of the fairy-tale genre, exploring the function of orality to deliver marginalized experiences.

**Keywords:** gender; consumption; subversive narrative strategies; orality

The critical attention to *Sexing the Cherry* has been split evenly between a heavier emphasis on the structural innovations of the novel, such as its temporality or intertextual strategies,<sup>1</sup> and a heated discussion of its thematic paradoxes and semantic intentions.<sup>2</sup> The focus on destabilization of the gender dichotomy in *Sexing the Cherry* has been especially strong, ranging from praises for the liberating effect of representation of women in the novel (Gonzales, Onega) to allegations of the "inverted sexism" of the narrative (Roessner). Many have expressed concerns about the ideological dangers of the work: Lewis Buzbee refers to it as "a novel of such fine writing and

lofty imagination that it dazzles the reader, yet its underlying theme is an insistent rage against our impossible human condition, a rage that is both personal and political" (9), and Jeffrey Roessner warns: "Winterson depicts lesbianism as a more natural expression of desire than either heterosexuality or male homosexuality. In so doing, she ultimately risks compromising the feminist currents in the novel, particularly by installing desire itself as a new instinctual foundation for identity" (105). Such readings are well grounded in textual evidence: *Sexing the Cherry* certainly contains great destabilizing potential aimed to deconstruct the conventions of gender signification and "to center previously marginalized categories of identity" (Roessner 105). However, it does more than simply create a narrative of female, or exclusively lesbian, resistance to the symbolic order. Winterson problematizes the notion of a strong heroine, positioning her characters above the conventional constraints of sexual identity, and yet struggling to be in control of language and expression of desire. In doing so, she relies on both character representation and narrative strategies of the novel and employs the metaphor of consumption as manifestation of power on several levels of text construction.

In my reading of *Sexing the Cherry*, I focus on the motif of consumption in its function to represent the female struggle for pleasure, power, and expression through language. This approach is justified considering that the novel abounds in images of consumption, literal as well as metaphoric, from innocent scenes of sharing and looking at food to violent and suggestive descriptions of literally eating sexual organs, chopping up bodies, hunting, and the like. Thus, food-related imagery carries out the heaviest semantic function in the world of the novel; this aspect alone provides rich material for analysis, and has been in the center of some critics' explorations of the text.<sup>3</sup> However, I argue that the motif of consumption in *Sexing the Cherry* stretches beyond the thematic and into the structural, becoming an integral principle of the text's construction.

The metaphor of consumption, especially of cannibalism, has rich implications for literary studies. In 1928, poet and polemicist Oswald de Andrade wrote his famous *Manifesto Antropófago*, which uses the metaphor of cannibalism to describe Brazilian artists' capacity to absorb and reconstruct a dominant European culture. De Andrade's theory of cannibalism as a literary practice provides an insight into the development of literary genres and ideas as well as into the generation of literary works through intertextual practices. Indeed, literary creation, like digestion, involves simultaneous processes of destruction and creation: breaking apart "food"—constituents of the preceding cultural context—and growing a new body nourished on the ideas and words of others. As I will demonstrate, consumption is an

ample metaphor to describe the construction of the narrative in *Sexing the Cherry*: the novel itself can best be described as a grotesque and disfigured body that grows its cells and tissues through digesting the bodies of other texts.

I will first look closely at consumptive textual practices of *Sexing the Cherry*, with a special focus on the role of the fairy-tale genre in enhancing structural possibilities of the postmodern fantastic text. I will then analyze in detail semantic functions of food-related imagery in the novel and address implications of consumption as a theme for the critical debates around the role of the protagonist in the destabilizing potential of *Sexing the Cherry*. Finally, I will discuss the symbolic role of language as nurture and erotic pleasure in the novel as part of the focus on consumption and orality. In addition to providing valuable insights into the world of *Sexing the Cherry*, this approach emphasizes continuity between form and content, treating consumption both as a theme and a textual quality.

### **Functions of Orality: The Subversive Potential of Food and Fairy Tales**

Probably the most remarkable characteristic of *Sexing the Cherry* is the multiplicity of ways in which the text appropriates preceding texts, events, and ideas. The novel contains references to history (the main plotline takes place in seventeenth-century London) and Western ideologies (such as the concept of linear time).<sup>4</sup> Some lines remind the reader of well-known poems (for example, the slightly changed first line of “She Walks in Beauty,” by Lord Byron, opens one of the passages in the novel) and children’s rhymes (one of the characters tells a story of poisoning her husband who had a grotesque appetite and whose description reminds us of a ravenous giant from nursery rhymes<sup>5</sup>—note the motif of consumption again). We find references to biblical stories: the novel begins when the protagonist, known to us as the Dog-Woman, finds her son Jordan in the Thames, “caked in mud,” and gives him a river name; for all her simplicity, she is perfectly aware of “his likeness to Moses” (Winterson 7). The list of examples can be as long as the novel itself. What is important about Winterson’s treatment of these references is that the novel does not simply “reuse” stories or images, but consumes and appropriates them to change their meaning and subvert the message of the original source. This is evident when the first line of a traditional romantic poem about heterosexual love appears in the text to describe a homosexual character. The Dog-Woman playing the part of the princess who finds baby Moses in the river is definitely an ironic scene, given the antireligious undertone of the novel. In a similar manner, the author consistently pokes fun at the

conventional norms of gender roles through use of grotesque characters and surreal situations. As Christy Burns explains, “Winterson often encodes an interruption of dominant cultural fantasy within her own fantastic fiction” (Burns 286).

Overwhelmingly, the most often “cannibalized” genre in *Sexing the Cherry* is that of fairy tales. Recent scholarship on fairy tales has emphasized the genre as a site for asserting and subverting ideologies of gender (Bacchilega 7, Armitt 13). Traditionally normative,<sup>6</sup> with prescribed patterns of behavior and cautionary messages, fairy tales at the same time contain significant rebellious potential. In popular imagination, they have a long-standing association with women, especially since society ousted storytelling from public spaces into the nursery and the kitchen. Lois Marin, for example, in his book *Food for Thought* develops a connection between the maternal nurturing figure and the teller of fairy tales and emphasizes that Charles Perrault “explicitly attributes the telling and reciting of the tale . . . to a young child’s mother and, more frequently, his or her grandmother, governess, nurse, or godmother” (31). This connection is evident in language itself, for example, when we say that something “nurtured our imagination” or talk about culturally significant narratives and beliefs “taken in with mother’s milk.” If fairy tales are symbolically associated with food, then pleasure from eating is parallel to pleasure of storytelling/verbal expression, and representations of physical hunger can denote desire. Linked through their locus, the functions of orality—eating, sexual pleasure, and expression through language—are symbolically interchangeable.

While Marin does not emphasize the restrictive (and therefore necessarily subversive) functions of food and fairy tales, feminist critics distinguish the normative as well as liberating potential of both. Many scholars have also pointed out society’s disciplinary uses of food, such as controlling female appetite as symbolic suppression of sexual desire (Jones 141). Similarly, society has often censored fairy tales, infusing them with didactic messages to control the construction of social identities and regulate gender behavior. However, on the other end of the semantic spectrum of both food and fairy tales is the symbolic empowerment of women through giving in to oral pleasures of eating and free expression of desire (think of the association of the fairy-tale genre with erotica, or of fairy tales rewritten with a feminist agenda to foreground the female perspective). It is on the intersection of women’s relations with food and fairy tales that an alternative site for creating meaning opens up that allows women to construct new ways of expression through language.

I find Hélène Cixous’s work especially helpful when theorizing the connection between consumption and fairy tales. In her essay *Coming to Writing*, Cixous also pairs metaphoric images of language as food with multiple direct

and indirect allusions to the world of fairy tales: she speaks of a language that “flows, it is the milk of love, the honey of my unconscious,” a language that “escape[s] the fate reserved for little red riding hoods” (21). Through breaking of the fairy-tale prohibition (“do not go into the forest!”), women storytellers explore the hidden erotic pleasure that resides in orality. In Cixous’s account of the desire to write, the spheres of orality are inseparably blended, solidifying the connection between expression, erotic pleasure, and satisfaction of hunger: “Writing to touch with letters, with lips, with breath, to caress with the tongue, to lick with the soul, to taste the blood of the beloved body, of life in its remoteness; to saturate the distance with desire . . .” (4). In its many symbolic meanings and functions, orality becomes an alternative mode of experiencing the world, a way to create an account of bodily experiences of lack and desire, hunger and fulfillment, innocence and knowledge. Storytelling, then, and especially storytelling mediated through the fantastic, functions to empower the writer to express her desire and her experience that is conditioned by her female body.

Likewise, Jeanette Winterson’s use of the fairy-tale genre allows for exploration of the repressed powers of language and for disruption of the linear, mainstream representation of the world. *Sexing the Cherry* blends fantastic elements with historical events, thus departing from the patriarchal version of history. Jeanette Winterson herself emphasizes the affinity of her fiction with oral storytelling tradition as she announces, “I am telling you stories” in multiple interviews and on her website. As a mode of knowledge, oral storytelling in general and fairy tales in particular provide an alternative account of events different in style and spirit from “official” knowledge. Orality prioritizes experience over information; and, because no experience is universal for everybody, orality invites multiple perspectives. Readers of *Sexing the Cherry* turn into listeners, as the novel is structured as several intertwined first-person narratives that preserve the oral informal style of their tellers. These narratives comprise several alternative perspectives on history, evading conventional constraints of clearly defined time, gender, and identity.

The focus on orality is further sustained in the form of narration itself that foregrounds the corporeality of the novel: the new text consumes the previous cultural narratives with their meanings, imagery, and structures, thus transforming them into a new creation. The multiple stories bleed into each other without transitions: the only way to tell the change of the narrator is through icons that correspond to different characters—a nonverbal element of the novel—images of a pineapple and a banana.<sup>7</sup> In addition to narratives by the main characters, there are inserted stories, lists (such as “Lies,” “Paintings,” “Time”), and author’s short commentaries on various philosophical subjects.

Winterson assembles the corpus of her text through stitching together of intertexts, lists, and stories.

The stories offer marginalized perspectives: that of the Dog-Woman, whose gigantic size and ambiguous gender mark her as queer; of her founding son, Jordan, who cross-dresses and travels through time and various fantastic worlds; and their modern-day counterparts, whose voices appear on the last several pages of the novel. In the middle of the novel, the narration is interrupted by inclusion of stories-within-a-story: tales of twelve dancing princesses from a famous fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. In the original tale, the princesses are locked up by their father, the king, in their room every night; yet they manage to flee from this domestic prison and dance until dawn. Eventually, their secret is discovered and the princesses are given away in marriage that effectively puts an end to their transgression. The Grimms' version of the tale does not differentiate between individual storylines of the twelve princesses; by contrast, each of Winterson's princesses tells her own story. Only *Sexing the Cherry* retains no trace of traditional fairy-tale morals or happy endings, at least as defined by the heterosexual norm. The dancing princesses' perspectives serve to shed light on the oppressive nature of the "norm" that victimizes women, ascribing them the role of prey in the chasing game. These stories are replete with images of rape, violence, hunting, and poisoning, all of which are various manifestations of consumption.

One of the stories, for example, presents a retelling of the well-known fairy tale about Rapunzel; yet in Winterson's version, Rapunzel and the witch are two lovers persecuted by society and their families, while the prince turns from a savior into a cruel torturer who separates them by force. Even in the original, this story has a strong focus on imagery of consumption: during pregnancy, Rapunzel's mother craves an herb that grows in the witch's garden and even promises to give away her own daughter in exchange for a taste of the plant. Hunger is symbolic of desire to control: the newborn girl is named after the plant, and the story turns into a dispute of who will control her fate. Winterson's version exposes the negative role of the society that does not allow Rapunzel to choose her own lover; moreover, the most tragic heroine of the story turns out to be 'the witch' who is falsely demonized and punished for openly expressing lesbian desire.

Most of these stories expose the violent and overpowering position of the male in a heterosexual relationship. For example, one princess tells a story of the revelation she achieved while watching her husband hunting: "Then a stag and five deer came out of the woods. . . . The fields were fenced and the stag jumped over. . . . Just for a second he remained in the air, but in that second of flight I remembered my past, when I had been free to fly, long ago, before . . .

a household of things” (Winterson 48). The storyteller compares herself to a hunted animal and reveals the oppressive character of her marriage. Hunting, usually followed by dismembering and devouring of the prey, is a popular metaphor for power relations between the sexes.

In another marriage, the husband is revealed as a maniac cheater who has his own perverted ritual of taking possession of women: “The women he preferred were inmates of a lunatic asylum. With them he arranged mock marriages in deserted barns. They wore a shroud as their wedding dress and carried a bunch of carrots as a bouquet. He had them straight after on a pig-trough altar. Most were virgins. He liked coming home to me smelling of their blood” (45). The scene is furnished with language of consumption; the patriarchal control is exposed not only as oppressive but morally wrong, approaching madness. In fact, the image of women inmates of a lunatic asylum is an indirect reference to the history of “female hysteria”—society’s labeling women as “mad” for expression of sexual desire. Throughout the novel, when Winterson talks about large groups of women, they often represent stereotypical ideas about women prevalent in the patriarchal society: asylum inmates, nuns, or whores. Surely, these labels are treated ironically in the novel; the categories are revealed as unstable (for example, the communities of nuns and whores are revealed to be one and the same group of women). In the story with the asylum inmates, it is entirely not clear who rather deserves to be labeled mad: the “lunatic” women or the treacherous husband with his maniacal fantasies.

The princesses’ stories do not only expose the cruelty of the oppressive heterosexual norm: they also illuminate how the patriarchal imagination turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy, willing its fears into reality. Here is one of the accounts of how this happens:

He said my nose was sharp and that my eyes had madness in them. He said I would tear him to pieces if he dealt softly with me. . . . He said he had to have me above him, in case I picked his eyes out in the faltering candlelight. *I was none of these things, but I became them.*<sup>8</sup> . . . I flew off his wrist and tore his liver from his body, and bit my chain in pieces and left him on the bed with his eyes open. He looked surprised, I don’t know why. As your lover describes you, so you are. (51)

I believe this testimony is crucial to understanding the underlying philosophy of *Sexing the Cherry*. Society’s dominant discourse on gender positions the sexes in relations of mistrust and power struggle, populating the social imagination with representations of violence. Winterson exposes the power relations between predator and prey through images of consumption, such as fairy-tale motifs of shape-shifting, hunting, eating as empowerment, cannibalism, and being eaten up as going out of existence. Winterson further shows how the



patriarchal imagination can turn against itself, inverting the power dynamics between the sexes. However, the resulting rage against male oppression is not one-dimensionally victorious: women are not only agents of the purifying rage, but also victims of objectification who are turned into monsters by the fear-infused imagination of the society. In this process, one of the major struggles of women is that for expression of their desire and their experiences: a never-ending struggle that is best described through the focus on orality.

### **Male Fears of the Female: The Dog-Woman as Devouring Mother**

No exploration of the theme of consumption would be complete without analysis of the character of the Dog-Woman, whose grotesque body and giant mouth make for dream material for such a case study. The Dog-Woman, indeed, has been in the center of many scholars' readings of *Sexing the Cherry*. Most critics agree in reading her image as a "positive, assertive character," a symbol of female empowerment and agency (Gonzales 283). Simultaneously protective and destructive, nurturing and overpowering, she personifies the Devouring Mother archetype as described by Carl Jung, Erich Neumann, and Joseph Campbell. In the present analysis, I build on Susana Onega's interpretation of the Dog-Woman as Devouring Mother; however, I depart from Onega's view of the liberating potential of this character. The focus on representations of consumption demonstrates that the Dog-Woman does not experience the pleasures of orality (including verbal expression) and therefore remains passive and isolated both from sensual experiences and agency of language, symbolizing instead the male fear of the female monstrous body. While the Dog-Woman's body and especially her unfeminine appearance function as a semantic site of resistance to the societal hierarchies and the symbolic order, the Dog-Woman herself does not find happiness or solace in her solitary position. In her struggle with the male-dominated world, the Dog-Woman is emblematic of the universal female experience of being lost in-between conformity and freedom of self-expression. Not violent by nature, she is turned into a monster that acts out male fears of the overpowering female: to echo the story of the princess who killed her husband because he had imagined her to be murderous, the Dog-Woman "was none of these things, but . . . became them" (Winterson 51).

Camille Paglia, the contemporary feminist who incorporates the Jungian tradition in her theorizing of sexual difference, emphasizes consumption as the most suitable metaphor to explicate the mechanisms of male fears of women:

Nature is a Darwinian spectacle of the eaters and the eaten. All phases of procreation are ruled by appetite: sexual intercourse, from kissing to penetration, consists of

movements of barely controlled cruelty and consumption. The long pregnancy of the human female and the protracted childhood of her infant, who is not self-sustaining for seven years or more, have produced the agony of psychological dependency that burdens the male for a lifetime. Man justifiably fears being devoured by woman, who is nature's proxy. (16)

The Dog-Woman's body is described with multiple references to imagery of both nature and nurturing. So, she herself says about her bond with Jordan: "I nourished him as a hill of dung nourishes a fly, and when he had eaten his fill he left me" (Winterson 4). Even though she is not his biological mother, her relationship with Jordan can be viewed in terms delineated by Paglia, who talks about the psychological dependence of men on their mothers and the related desire to escape this bond. Susan Onega also emphasizes Dog-Woman's affinity to nature, specifically the earth: "her love for Jordan and her mountainous shape clearly identify her with the earth, with its connotations of maternity, cyclical renewal and cosmic regeneration" (Onega 2006; 81). Later, her twentieth-century reincarnation is linked with the earth even more explicitly through her advocacy for the environment. Surrounded by dogs that she breeds to take part in races (hence the nickname), the Dog-Woman is markedly closer to nature than to culture—a distinction often traditionally employed to separate the female and the male spheres. Her repulsive appearance, together with her living conditions (she lives in a hut that she built herself, walks everywhere instead of taking a cab, and feeds off her dogs' winnings), firmly place her on the margins of society.

When the parson bans the Dog-Woman from singing in the church, thus refusing her the validation of the Church as a social institution, he says that, "the gargoyles must remain on the outside, not seek room in the choir stalls" (Winterson 8). Dictionaries define *gargoyle* as "a grotesquely carved figure" or "an ugly human or animal figure with an open mouth"; the word apparently comes from Old French and literally means "throat." The Dog-Woman's huge mouth is one of her features that is constantly emphasized; for instance, Jordan is proud of her because "no other child had a mother who could hold a dozen oranges in her mouth at once" (21). Mikhail Bakhtin, talking about symbolic meanings of body imagery in *Rabelais and His World*, reads the gaping mouth as "the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld . . . [it] is related to the image of swallowing, this ancient symbol of death and destruction" (Bakhtin 325). This reading affirms the Dog-Woman's role as the Devouring Mother who is potentially dangerous, as she has the ability to eat up her offspring, symbolically reversing the process of giving birth. In his seminal work *The Fear of the Feminine*,

Erich Neumann introduces the mythical image of *vagina dentata* to explain the dual nature of the female that gives life and simultaneously presents a threat of consumption:

The positive femininity of the womb appears as a mouth; that is why lips are attributed to female genitals, and on the basis of this positive equation the mouth, as “upper womb,” is the birth-place of the breath and the word, the Logos. Similarly, the destructive side of the Feminine, the destructive and deathly womb, appears most frequently in the archetypal form of a mouth bristling with teeth. (Neumann 1963, 168)

These foundational works have informed feminist analysis of the grotesque female body (Elizabeth Grosz) and of the abject (Julia Kristeva), exploring how corporeality of the female experience is construed in terms of otherness, “aberrations of the male norm” (Grosz 37). Bodily orifices, especially female sexual organs, are experienced as grotesque because they threaten the boundary between self and other and between clean and filthy. Corporeal waste associated with bodily orifices represents “the objective frailty of the symbolic order” (Kristeva 70) as it threatens the symbolic order with pollution and allows for the female, maternal element to prevail over the law of the Father. *Vagina dentata*, combining two orifices in one, is therefore a powerful image that expresses male fears of the destructive female powers.

The most straightforward example of the Dog-Woman’s affinity to the cannibal female figure is the episode of her brief sexual encounter with a man who asks her to “eat” his penis (which the Dog-Woman describes as a cucumber) “as you would a delicious thing to eat,” and she obliges, interpreting the request literally: “I like to broaden my mind when I can and I did as he suggested, swallowing it up entirely and biting it off with a snap. . . . disgusted by the leathery thing filling up my mouth, [I] spat out what I had not eaten and gave it to one of my dogs” (Winterson 40–41). The irony and absurdity of the situation serve as a comic relief for what otherwise is a scene from a male nightmare. In the scenes of her participation in the Civil War, the Dog-Woman embodies *vagina dentata* when she engages in the act of revenge for the execution of the King: in her naïveté, she interprets the biblical saying “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” quite literally and over a short period of time collects “119 eyeballs, one missing on account of a man who had lost one already, and over 2,000 teeth” (Winterson 93), which she proudly presents as trophies. She then feeds the eyeballs to her dogs (which function in the novel as an extension of herself): here we have a classic Freudian example of castration, with eyeballs as a symbolic substitute for testicles. From the teeth the Dog-Woman creates a water-cress bed that Onega refers to as “a huge, parodic version” of *vagina dentata* (Onega 1996; 305). According to Onega, it is not the Dog-Woman herself who

is being parodied and satirized, but the male reaction to a figure that looks and behaves contrary to societal expectations, thus appealing to the deeply hidden psychological phobia that lies at the core of society's system of values.

While I agree that the situational irony of such allusions functions as satire, this only refers to one of the novel's dimensions. The Dog-Woman prevails over Puritans and thus enacts the power attributed to her by male imagination, but in doing so she is objectified and is not acting entirely of her own accord. Feminist scholars have criticized classic psychoanalysis for not addressing the female experience of the power associated with the Devouring Mother archetype. As the Devouring Mother, the Dog-Woman embodies the sacred power of the female, but she does not *experience* it herself. In her analysis of sacred spaces and the female sphere, Kathryn Rabuzzi points out that sacrality is linked to otherness: while the sacred can be described as divine or holy (in its positive form) or demonic or damned (in its negative form), it is always distinct from the norm of familiar human experience (Rabuzzi 56). While we do not know her real name, her nickname reads *God* spelled backward: the first of the many hints, however ironic, to her divine nature. The name of God is taboo in many cultures and has to remain unknown or unpronounced, so the fact that we do not know Dog-Woman's given name reinforces her mythical significance. Jordan also alludes to her godlike qualities: "God is bigger, like my mother, easier to find, even in the dark" (Winterson 116). From Jordan's perspective, the divinity of the Dog-Woman is psychologically justified through his dependency on her as a mother figure. From the perspective of those surrounding her, the Dog-Woman is perceived as distinctly different and, given her giant size and unusual strength, is positioned outside the "normal" human experience. Her representation in the novel is essentially based on understanding of women as Others.

As the Other, the Dog-Woman is not only feared and avoided, but is also sought for and used as instrument to an ideological end. She is depicted as violent and emasculating in the scenes of her carnivorous massacre of Puritans; and yet she is acting unwittingly, because she is approached for help to avenge and reinforce another version of patriarchy—that of the King. Instead of being a revolutionary figure undermining the basis of the existing system that she experiences as oppressive, the Dog-Woman represents a reactionary force. A rebel against the Puritan values and politics, she is even more of an emulator, striving to belong and conform: to the Church, to the patriarchal order symbolized by the King, and even to the gendered norms of public behavior. When approached by the rebels for help, she demonstrates qualities of a good disciple, a diligent follower of an ideology: "I was very taken with this rendering, and could only wonder how it had not come to me

voluntarily before now. It is a thing to have learning and to be able to interpret the Scriptures” (Winterson 92). Her strength and potential easily become instruments to restore the symbolic order, and she complies to go against her good-natured character, confirming the male fear and acting out the fantasy of the terrible female monster.

### **Scenes of the Mouth: Pleasure and the Female Body**

The hyperbolized emphasis on the Dog-Woman’s mouth in the novel symbolizes desire. However, the desire is never actualized: pursued, expressed, shared, or satisfied. As I will demonstrate, the Dog-Woman is consistently ousted from the sphere of pleasure in all of its aspects associated with the mouth—food, sex, and language.

Aside from the episodes alluding to her symbolic status as a cannibal, Winterson depicts her main character in numerous episodes of literal participation in food-related situations (rituals of sharing dinner or looking at exotic foodstuffs), which are elevated to the metaphoric level as they represent gender-inflicted tensions built in the cultural context of food symbolism. Whenever the Dog-Woman’s appearance is referenced in the novel, the text offers its reader a resonance of voices giving ironic commentary on the notions of femininity and the norm. On many occasions she refers to clichés of etiquette, good manners, and “gentleman-like” or “lady-like” behavior, especially when the situation revolves around food. Her body and habits clash with the norm, yet she consistently makes remarks that consciously and explicitly locate her within the social decorum. For instance, when describing her neighbor, the witch who “hardly moves but her hands are never still, scratching her head and her groin and darting out to snatch food and ram it square into her mouth,” the Dog-Woman mentions her own eating habits: “I’m not one for a knife and spoon myself, but I know how to eat in company. I know how to use my bread as a plate and dollop the stew on it without spilling the lot down my dress” (Winterson 7). When the Gardener to the King treats her and Jordan to peaches from the King’s tree, she bites into hers in a “lady-like manner” (17). The contrast between her appearance and these remarks certainly produces a comic effect; the Dog-Woman’s self-referential comments can be read anywhere between naïve and self-ironic.

This is how she describes her own looks: “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” (19). The description is complemented here and there by scattered details about the Dog-Woman’s body, such as her

dislike of washing, the powerful smell of her body, and her elephant weight. Her self-description makes it clear that the Dog-Woman is well aware of the societal standard of beauty that she is measured against; however, throughout the narration she never has any negative or doubtful thoughts about her appearance beyond simply acknowledging the fact of her difference. Elizabeth Langland relies on Butler's notion of drag performance to show that the sheer discrepancy between the Dog-Woman's unusual physical appearance and her delicate "expressions and reflections," between her rebellious actions and her conventional beliefs destabilizes notions of gender and undermines the meaning of "femininity" (101). The concept of drag performance does prove useful in reading the novel, especially taking into consideration Jordan's performance of the female gender as he cross-dresses and infiltrates women's communities to get in touch with the feminine side of his psyche. In the case of the Dog-Woman, however, the conventions of gendered behavior, including eating etiquette, seem to be a stabilizing factor for her identity. She never resents or questions the standard notions of 'the norm', instead readily submitting to the demands and restrictions applied to her. Similar to her devotion to the patriarchal rule of the King, she obeys the cultural discourse that regulates every communicative situation in the patriarchal society.

Historically, consumption of food by women has always been restricted by society as a disciplinary measure. Throughout cultures, the symbolic significance of food as vehicle for expression of bodily experiences and desires is unannounced, but omnipresent; therefore, patriarchal restrictions on female consumption of food simultaneously restrict the expression of female sexuality and desire. The situation has changed little from seventeenth-century England to modern-day American society; for instance, there still is a distinct belief that men always need larger quantities of food because their sexuality requires more substantial nutrition: "Men typically eat more meat than do women, because they expect it as males and because many females think they need it" (Jones 142). On the contrary, women often feel a pressure to downplay their appetite, especially in public. Jones cites cross-cultural research that shows instances when demonstrating healthy appetite in women is interpreted as "acting up" and giving in to passions: "being thin and eating lightly function as social indicators of femininity because of their importance in achieving status, popularity, and sexual partners. . . . Denial of appetite [expresses] an ideal of female perfection and moral superiority" (141). Eating in public is seen as undergoing a test, the results of which influence one's public image and reception by others. The Dog-Woman's self-referential remarks on her eating habits can certainly be read as implicitly critical of and satirizing the restrictive discourse, yet they also give away her willingness and

even desire to conform to these restrictions. This double reading is symptomatic of other tensions inherent in her image, tensions often overlooked by critics who are inclined to view the Dog-Woman as a wholly independent and self-sufficient figure.

Referring to the episodes in which the Dog-Woman is butchering male bodies, Susana Onega claims that “the truculent scenes of her encounters with the Puritans in power show the Dog-Woman as totally self-sufficient, frigid, and a man-hater” (Onega 1996; 305). She argues that “the Dog-Woman’s lack of physical drives, including the sexual, which, according to early Freud, is a basic human drive, prompting human action in general, expresses the Dog-Woman’s perfect autonomy and wholeness. . . . Unlike women under a patriarchal system, she does not need men to achieve self-definition and therefore is not worried about failing to conform to the ideal of corporal beauty devised by men” (304). On the contrary, the Dog-Woman not only does her best to conform to the gender-specific norms of eating behavior, but also mentions her need for love. She herself confesses that she would like “consolation of a lover’s face”, but there is nobody to match her, regardless of sex: “I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared to approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains” (Winterson 32). She has two erotic encounters, but both leave her emotionally and physically unsatisfied. Without access to sensual experiences, she is far from being an empowered and emancipated woman no longer “under the patriarchal system.” Despite her bodily strength and independence, the Dog-Woman is still impotent and cut off from all the sources of pleasure in the novel.

Throughout the novel, we never see the Dog-Woman consuming food with appetite or lust: eating is not a source of pleasure, but an ordinary, and necessary, activity. Similarly, sex does not bring her pleasure either, although both sex and food stir her curiosity. The first of the several scenes centered on fruit imagery—the scene in which the Dog-Woman and Jordan see a banana for the first time—positions fruit as a metaphor for discovery, both of the larger world waiting to be explored and of unknown exotic pleasures of an undoubtedly sexual nature: “I swear that [the banana] had resembled nothing more than the private parts of an Oriental. It was yellow and livid and long. . . . There was no good woman who could put that up to her mouth, and for a man it was the practice of cannibals. We had not gone to church all these years and been washed in the blood of Jesus only to eat ourselves up the way the Heathen do” (Winterson 6). It is at this moment when the difference between her and Jordan’s worldviews becomes apparent: for Jordan, “the scene of the banana” foreshadows his journey of self-discovery and exploration of desire, while for the Dog-Woman this episode only further exoticizes her view of sex.

Along with pleasure from sex, the Dog-Woman is also deprived of the biological experience of pregnancy and giving birth: “I would have liked to pour a child out of my body, but you have to have a man for that and there’s no man who’s a match for me” (Winterson 4). Her dependency on a man to satisfy the hunger for love through childbirth, if not through sex, is a source of tragedy for the Dog-Woman, whose body is physically unmatchable by any man. Unaware of his mother’s feelings, Jordan shares the ill-informed opinion that she does not have emotional needs: “She has never been in love, too, and never wanted to be either. She is self-sufficient and without self-doubt” (114). On the contrary, her love and longing for him and the loneliness she feels in his absence are proof enough that, despite being a hyperbolized figure with monstrous powers, she is not whole. While it sounds all too tempting to read this image as autonomous and strong, she is too human, and therefore too vulnerable, to be truly self-sufficient.

### **Sharing Food, Sharing Language: The Need to Belong**

So far, I have discussed the Dog-Woman’s appetite (or, rather, absence of it) and *how* she eats. But whom she shares food with is of equal importance: eating together is an ancient ritual of community-building, overcoming differences, and establishing a shared set of values and tastes. On several occasions, the Dog-Woman shares dinner with Jordan, usually when she says good-bye to him as she is seeing him off or when she is greeting him upon his return. Once, she is treated to a fruit by the King’s Gardener, who is a friendly character to both her and Jordan. However, these are very rare occasions, especially given the abundance of food imagery in the novel. Notably, she never breaks bread with other women, nor does she have any female friends. I see the Dog-Woman being dangerously isolated from the female community in the novel and therefore from the opportunity to connect and identify with the collective female experience.

Although the Dog-Woman communicates with different women throughout the narrative, such as the whore who comes to ask her for help with removal of Puritans’ bodies, she never identifies with the community of women—or men, for that matter: “Men and women seem sly-mouthed to me, and when they rub against you purring friendship it is often a different thing they have in mind, something to their own advantage” (94). The only female she is often in touch with is the old witch, who tells her and Jordan’s fortune, but she can hardly be described as a companion, either; moreover, the witch is pictured as possessing the characteristics archetypally ascribed to the female that the Dog-Woman lacks: she is intuitive, has healing and fortune-telling powers, and embodies mystery. Due to these qualities, the



Dog-Woman treats the witch as Other and is not able to develop a friendship with her.

Illustrative of the Dog-Woman's exclusion from female companionship is the scene of the broken church stained glass window representing the miracle of the five loaves and two fish. In the scene, the Dog-Woman watches local women gathering the scattered glass to reassemble the picture: "They gathered the broken bread, and the two fishes, and the astonished faces of the hungry, until their baskets overflowed as the baskets of the disciples had overflowed in the original miracle. . . . At evening, their work done, they filed into the little church to pray, and I, not daring to follow, watched them through the hole where the window had been" (66). The physical hunger of the crowd in the picture becomes metaphoric for the Dog-Woman's hunger for love and her need to belong; unfortunately, the hunger is not satisfied as she is separated from the rest of the women and does not partake in the miracle of community-building.

Along with female companionship, the Dog-Woman is isolated from the mythical women's language unmediated by patriarchal restrictions that Jordan witnesses when he spends some time cross-dressed in a company of women:

I noticed 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. In my petticoats I was a traveler in a foreign country. I did not speak the language. (291)

Jordan discovers this secret while he is working at a fish stall whose owner teaches him through the example of lobsters the difference between how men and women communicate; soon thereafter, he continues his journey and finds himself at a marketplace where "exotic fruit and speckled fish" are exhibited, and where he engages with the locals in telling a story of his soul-search. Motifs of language and storytelling are therefore constantly framed by the imagery of food: marketplace is the space for exploration, expression of desire, and seduction.

Conversely, the Dog-Woman never exhibits desire for the exotic fruits of Jordan's fascination; similarly, language, this ultimate form of power and oral pleasure symbolized by the forbidden fruit, also remains an untrodden territory for her. The conversations that she has with all the random interlocutors in her life are far from eloquent; instead, she resorts to the patriarchally coined forms of etiquette and politeness. Her infamous inability to understand language metaphorically is an endless source of humor in the novel; and yet, the humor is lost on her. Singing, which also belongs to the oral realm, is the only

thing that brings the Dog-Woman pleasure, and yet she is forbidden to sing in public:

Singing is my pleasure, but not in church. . . . So I sing inside the mountain of my flesh, and my voice is as slender as a reed and my voice has no lard in it. When I sing the dogs sit quiet and people who pass in the night stop their jabbering and discontent and think of other times, when they were happy. And I sing of other times, when I was happy, though I know that these are figments of my mind and nowhere I have been. (8)

Singing is also the only art that the Dog-Woman engages in throughout the novel and her only involvement in fantasy. While Jordan lives an intense imaginative life that enables him to transgress time and space in search of self and meaning, the Dog-Woman remains rooted in what society—and the symbolic order—delineates as reality. The above description of her singing is the sole occasion in the text that demonstrates her desire to engage in the liberating practices of imagination. Singing can potentially provide her with a venue for artistic expression, for coping with the lack through imagination; however, the pleasure from singing is repressed since she has to sing “inside the mountain of my flesh,” which I see as evidence of repression of fantasy and the Dog-Woman’s conformity to restrictions.

Language as it is, realist, patriarchally controlled, and stiff, proves inadequate to express true, raw, spontaneous feelings. The Dog-Woman, who tries to stay within the confines of the mainstream discourse, does not have access to the creative forces of language and therefore cannot appropriate the discourse for her use to express herself and connect to the world. This is best illustrated by the sad gap in communication between the Dog-Woman and Jordan, the only human being she deeply cares about, and the only real relationship in her life. The juxtaposition of their perspectives provides the reader with a significant insight into Othering that the Dog-Woman is subjected to, even by her son. Jordan’s reflections on his relationship with his mother reveal his complete ignorance of her true feelings and personality: “We never talked much . . . I think she loves me, but I don’t know. She wouldn’t say so; perhaps she does not know herself,” he ponders (114). As readers, we know better as we are allowed to witness the Dog-Woman’s side of the story: “I wanted to tell him things, to tell him I loved him and how much I’d missed him, but thirteen years of words were fighting in my throat and I couldn’t get any of them out. There was too much to say so I said nothing” (123). The failure of signification keeps the female subject outside of the possibility of expression. Thus, the Dog-Woman is a character that ultimately suffers from not having access to the freedom

and agency of language; her function in the novel is truly to embody every-woman's struggle for expression and the tensions existing around female access to pleasure.

Given her strength and overpowering presence in the novel, the conclusion about the Dog-Woman's impotence in regards to oral pleasures can seem unexpected. Indeed, the Dog-Woman's ample body resists being inscribed by the patriarchal forces and practices of cultural subordination. However, this character similarly avoids being stereotyped as one-dimensionally "strong." The Dog-Woman is a tragic as well as comic character, both threatening the existing power paradigm and trying to exist within it. Read together with the stories of the twelve dancing princesses, her story is about an on-going struggle for pleasure and expression. *Sexing the Cherry* undermines the mainstream patriarchal tradition of gender signification and definition of female sexuality, while at the same time emphasizing women's ambivalent position within the symbolic order. The novel maintains a strong focus on consumption as a theme and as a textual strategy, exploring the function of orality to deliver marginalized experiences. Through situating imagery of consumption within the subversive sphere of fantasy while at the same time keeping both history and the modern society in focus, the text becomes a site of struggle for power and meaning.

## NOTES

1. E.g., Christy Burns, Eileen Williams-Wanquet.
2. E.g., Jeffrey Roessner, Susana Onega, Lewis Buzbee.
3. Susana Onega; Suzanne Keen.
4. See Susana Gonzalez for an excellent analysis of the concept of time and history in *Sexing the Cherry*.
5. ROBIN the Bobbin, the big-bellied Ben,  
He ate more meat than fourscore men;  
He ate a cow, he ate a calf,  
He ate a butcher and a half;  
He ate a church, he ate a steeple,  
He ate the priest and all the people!  
A cow and a calf,  
An ox and a half,  
A church and a steeple,  
And all the good people,  
And yet he complained that his stomach wasn't full.  
(The 1897 edition of Nursery Rhyme Book)
6. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill in their edited collection *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* have recently pointed out the possibility of reading fairy

tales transgressively. They rely on queer reading practices to identify semantic tensions in the text that may or may not be present intentionally.

7. Fruit imagery, as I will discuss below, stands for exploration of identity and sense of wonder about the world.
8. My emphasis.

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