

Hooked on Classics: *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* 25 Years On

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Classic *sb.* **1.** A writer, or work, of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence; *esp.* (as originally used) in Greek or Latin literature; in *pl.* The general body of Greek and Latin literature 1711. **2.** A classical scholar 1805. **3.** One who adheres to classical rules and models.

‘Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories; we make them what we will.’ (Winterson *Oranges* 91)

Introduction

Given that *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is one of the more recently published texts discussed in this volume and having just published a book on Winterson’s works myself, it felt slightly odd being asked by the editors to ‘revisit’ it as a ‘classic’ text. Still, it was 25 years ago that Winterson’s debut novel was published, which is older than the average undergraduate student. Moreover, the literary scene was a very different place in 1985, so there must be a good case for reassessment of the text in 2010. The editors’ aim in this volume is to provide ‘new and original interpretations of texts which have established themselves as contemporary classics’. The main problem this poses the contemporary critic is that the novel has always been seen by commentators as ineluctably ‘new’: novel, innovative, experimental, postmodern, as hybridizing forms, challenging boundaries and deconstructing discourses. Its publication coincided with the consolidation of critical theory in academic departments of English and so critical readings of it have always seen it in terms of – and in many ways as an exemplar of – the new (post-structuralist) theories. As a newly minted ‘classic’ text, one which entered the canon almost on its publication, *Oranges* was hailed as a postmodern text, and

Winterson as an exemplary feminist and queer literary practitioner (Morrison) from the very beginning. The novel has been analysed variously as a female and lesbian Bildungsroman (Onega, Andermahr), as a feminist appropriation of the fantastic (Armitt), as an example of the lesbian postmodern (Doan), as biblical reworking (Cosslett, Denby), as quest narrative (Onega, Pykett), and as working class text (O'Rourke). Numerous critics have drawn attention to the novel's intertextual relationship with other canonical texts including D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (Onega), James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Pykett), and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Cosslett and Pyrhönen). Winterson, of course, has always resisted critical appropriation (in any terms) while not necessarily being unsympathetic to theory's ideological aims (she *is* a feminist; she *does* seek to dismantle binaries etc). She has stressed the general and universal reach of her work, quite antithetically to its construction in the academy. And she has a point: her readers are many and various and do pick up on different aspects of the texts; not everyone reads as a post-structuralist literary critic. Now that the postmodern moment seems to have waned somewhat in academic thought – there have been signs of postmodern fatigue in critical discourse and new terms are emerging such as post-post modernism, late or second wave postmodernism¹ – it may be that the time has come to reassess the critical reception of Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*.

Oranges was immediately popular on its publication in 1985, garnering admiring reviews from the print media and winning the Whitbread prize for First Novel². It has remained in print and has sustained high sales figures over 25 years³. One indication of the novel's canonical status is its prevalence on secondary school syllabuses. It has been a recommended text by both AQA and OCR exam boards and has been widely taught since the 1990s as part of a module on 'The struggle for identity in modern literature'. The 1989 TV film version increased its marketability and its lifespan considerably; indeed it was recently rescreened on BBC TV⁴. So, what makes *Oranges* a 'classic'? Firstly, it is a classic quest narrative in the form of a *Bildungsroman* or novel of development, charting the growth of a young person to maturity, which gives it a 'universal' reach and appeal transcending any one cultural location. Secondly, it takes the form of a fictional autobiography, appealing to the reader's fascination for the personal details of an individual's life, and the particulars

of time and place. The novel begins with an emphatically autobiographical opening: ‘Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father’ (*Oranges* 3). This grounds the text in a private history, a personal story, which sets up readerly identification from the start. When discussing the appeal of the text readers frequently emphasize the authenticity of its description of a working class childhood, the humour and warmth of the narrative, and their identification with the young protagonist⁵. Audience members of a recent *Bookclub* interview claimed to recognise and identify with Winterson’s depiction of Accrington in the 1960s and 70s, right down to particular streets and shops. The novel’s enduring success and popularity therefore owes much to its autobiographical framing. As Zekiye Antakyalioglu argues, ‘*Oranges* has proved to be her longest lasting success not only because it has been seen to radiate lesbian viewpoints, postmodern issues of intertextuality, metafiction, and new historicist understandings of the past and the present, but also because it is written in an autobiographical manner (Antakyalioglu 5)’. It is at once specific – based on Winterson’s own experience of growing up as a working class lesbian in fanatically religious community in the North of England—and general, treating universal concepts such as first love, loss, grief, rage, and courage (Winterson *Oranges* xiv). Writing on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the novel’s publication, Winterson stated:

Oranges would not be in print across the world, much less read and taught, 25 years later if it were just about me. I never wanted it to be just about me, and maybe that’s the point. I wanted, through language and through storytelling, to reach something wider than my own circumstances. ..The opening words, “Like most people...” are the clue. Most people have not grown up the way I did, but the struggle to become who you are is for everyone. (*Times* 4)

The story that she tells, a classic *Bildung* narrative, involves the struggle of a young lesbian to assert her sense of difference against the morally oppressive guardians of the community. In revising the narrative of damnation associated with lesbian and gay texts for much of the twentieth century, incorporating a narrative of flight and ‘enabling escape’ (Stimpson)⁶, the novel represents a groundbreaking treatment of lesbian existence, placing the marginal subject at the narrative centre and

inverting the usual privileging of heterosexuality over homosexuality. According to Hilary Hinds, the text's success can be ascribed to its ability to transcend genre categories, which she sees as a function of its lesbian aesthetic. Winterson herself compares the novel to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* in terms of its experimentalism, its blurring of genres, and its radical treatment of sexuality (Winterson *Art* 53). The novel has been an important book for several generations of teenage readers, especially those experiencing similar conflicts around their sexuality. But it speaks more widely to teenagers' sense of marginalization and 'being different', which is a striking feature of post-war society. 'You'll have a different, difficult time' (Winterson *Oranges* 109), Jeanette is told by her orange demon⁷. No doubt its endurance as a text that continues to be read and to circulate in culture may in part be ascribed to this factor. According to John Mullan, writing in *The Guardian* on the popularity of contemporary fiction on A-Level syllabuses, 'tales of oppression, valiantly overcome, are always favourites with A-Level setters' (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2006/oct/23/schools.alevels>).

As a text, it therefore operates –and has been read—on many levels. Commenting on initial reactions to the novel which read it in terms of autobiographical realism or as postmodern experiment, Susana Onega argues that '*Oranges* is both linear and realistic *and* anti-linear and experimental' (Onega 19). This is because it interrupts an autobiographical narrative set in the 1960s and 70s with a series of mythical tales and philosophical interludes. Nevertheless, despite its 'complicated' spiral structure and the diversity of styles and discourses utilized, the novel's language is very accessible, and it has a simplicity of address, which appeals to the majority of readers. In a recent Bookclub interview for Radio 4, Winterson emphasized the way in which she set out, not to write an autobiographical account of her life, but to use herself as a fictional character⁸. In this way, she could escape the limitations of her origins and begin to write her own story and therefore gain power and freedom. In fact the novel enacts this 'battle of the stories'; between the version promulgated by her mother and the Church and her own growing disillusion with religious fundamentalism and need to individuate herself. The two aspects of classical quest and autobiography are united in Winterson's desire to use herself to write both fact and fiction. The text therefore circulates on many levels as a much loved comic novel of growing up, as teaching material, as an aspect of popular/literary culture,

and as part of Winterson's own mythobiography. Its success may be attributed to the ways in which the narrative 'hooks' itself onto classic texts, which circulate in the culture's collective unconscious. This chapter will combine these emphases and consider the novel as a literary classic that both subverts the canon and inscribes the tradition in the process of reworking autobiography as art. It will draw on recent interviews with Winterson to suggest that the novel represents a 'cover story' that conceals the sense of loss intrinsic to Winterson's origin story.

'I can change the story. I am the story'

Winterson herself unsurprisingly ascribes the novel's staying power to its art; its transformation of the raw materials of experience into an aesthetic form. In *Art Objects* and elsewhere Winterson argues strongly against autobiographical readings of her work, claiming that *Oranges*'s importance lies not in its 'wit or warmth' but in its 'new way with words' (*Art* 53). However, her argument in *Art Objects* that 'the intersection between a writer's life and a writer's work is irrelevant to the reader' (27) is not borne out in readers' accounts as revealed in the recent Bookclub interview, where the biggest laughs came when Winterson mimicked her mother pronouncing, 'Why be happy if you could be normal?' There is clearly an ongoing dialogue between fact and fiction in reception of the text, and readers' appetite for the 'real facts' remains undimmed. Another admiring audience member began her question by praising the humour of her depiction of childhood experience, before going on to ask Winterson to confirm whether the sampler episode 'really happened'. Winterson laughed it off but refused to enter into debate about the veracity of particular episodes, saying she could no longer remember which was which. In her *Times* article she takes a stronger line, despairing of approaches to her work which seek to narrow and fix versions of her life: 'I have even had questionnaires asking me to tick which bits of the story are true and which are the bits I made up' (Winterson *Times* 4). Despite Winterson's resistance to readerly attempts to identify the episodes in the text with aspects of her own life, readers undoubtedly do read *Oranges* in this way; they are interested in the minutiae and specificities of Winterson's life experience as well as the 'universal' themes the novel treats; together these aspects constitute the novel's appeal.

Oranges is an exemplary escape narrative. At once rooted in Northern English working class experience, the text also represents an escape from origins. Repeatedly, Winterson represents life as series of narratives, which frame and construct the self and the self's possibilities. Winterson describes her foster mother, whom she always refers to as Mrs Winterson, as a 'flamboyant depressive; a woman who needed an audience, a plot and some very good lines' (*Times* 4). Winterson ascribes to her an innate theatricality which she herself then adopts as a mode of representation and self-representation. Her mother's storytelling powers were so powerful that Winterson risked becoming enmeshed in them, just as the characters Jeanette, the princess and Winnet risk being caught up in more powerful narratives in *Oranges*. As she wrote recently in *The Times*: 'To avoid the narrow mesh of her story about me, I needed a story of my own, and that is how and why I am a writer' (*Times* 4). Authorship becomes part of a struggle to control her own naming. Winterson relates how she finally achieved this on publication of the novel when her mother called her to say that such was her embarrassment, she had to order the book under a pseudonym. 'I knew then that I had won', she states in the *Bookclub* interview. When Mrs Winterson finally read the novel she complained that it wasn't 'true' but, as Winterson points out, truth is a relative concept: 'She had invented me—got a baby, given it a name, told it a story, made it a story, and the baby had invented herself in return' (*Times* 4). All these ideas--of the mother's creative power, the power of naming, and self-invention through storytelling-- are present in *Oranges*.

Winterson rightly resists the novel's categorisation as autobiography; it belongs to the recognised genre of fictional autobiography, in which a constructed narrative persona relates her own history, frequently from a position of hindsight. As Winterson remarks, while the 'facts' may be 'threadbare' or constraining, the 'story' permits endless possibilities for constructing the self (*Times* 4). In *Weight*, Winterson insists that authenticity not autobiography is important, by which she means the achieved vision rather than the original 'facts'. Winterson first expressed this aesthetic credo in the 'Deuteronomy' chapter of *Oranges*, which has since been much quoted by critics in order to establish Winterson as a postmodern practitioner of historiographic metafiction. What stands out now about Winterson's challenging of binary oppositions, especially the distinction between history and

storytelling, is her insistence on the aesthetic transformation of life. The word is the thing; naming is power; language creates reality. Winterson uses the concept of ‘fiction masquerading as memoir’ (*Art* 53) to describe her use of autobiography; she does not ‘clothe herself in a thin veil of fiction but make[s] herself the fiction’ (Antakyalioglu 15). Life writing is a means of both theorizing and fictionalizing the subject as Lucie Armitt has demonstrated in her reading of *Oranges* alongside Caroline Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*, which is itself a classic of feminist historiography. Winterson therefore ‘intentionally position[s] herself in history, culture, and literature with the permanence of art, which enables her to transform her diaries into timeless orations’ (Antakyalioglu 15).

Inscribing the tradition

The novel has the literary tradition written into it in its ongoing engagement with classical and classic texts. Its allusions encompass Greek myth and Athena’s birth from Zeus’s head, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Dante’s *Inferno*, nineteenth century novels, and the modernists Eliot, Joyce and Woolf. Susana Onega points out that *Oranges* adopts a spiral structure, rather than either a linear or a cyclical structure, and that this feature is used by the Western canonical poets from Dante, Milton, Blake and Goethe to Yeats, Graves, and Eliot in order to express the ongoing cycle of human life. In his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, T.S. Eliot, who is one of Winterson’s most admired writers, argues that a sense of the tradition is integral to canonical works of literature, which involves a historical awareness ‘not only of the pastness of the past; but of its presence’. The writer should write

with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his [sic] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (Eliot ‘Tradition’, 38)

Winterson's fusion of autobiographical narrative, allegory, fairy tale and philosophical reflection represents just such a bringing together of the timeless and the temporary. She transforms these diverse forms into an artistic whole, 'which is both something plural in the sense of fragmentation and unique in the sense of authenticity and originality' (Antakyalioglu 11). The novel contains literary allusions to a range of other texts which all have a 'simultaneous existence'. The text operates a structural intertextuality in which the realistic linear narrative is interspersed with biblical, fantastic and mythical tales. Winterson has commented that as a child her house contained only six books: two Bibles, a concordance, two books for children, and Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (Winterson *Art* 153). She has also revealed that *Jane Eyre* was a favourite book of her mother's. Excepting the concordance, Winterson draws extensively on these works to provide the novel's mythical and narrative framework. In fact Winterson adopts what T.S. Eliot, in another essay, calls the 'mythical method' whereby the writer draws 'a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity (Eliot 'Ulysses' 483)' in order to give universal meaning and pattern to contemporary, contingent experience.

She does this, most obviously, with her use of biblical allusion. Structurally, the novel is divided into 8 chapters which accord to the first 8 books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and Ruth. Winterson subverts the books of the Old Testament by inserting them into a lesbian coming-out story. She undertakes a parodic rescripting of the Bible giving her life story a biblical status and resonance. Jeanette's journey represents nothing less than a version of the Creation and Fall, Christ's passion, crucifixion, and redemption through love. In 'Genesis', for example, Jeanette's adoption by Louie is compared to God's creation of the universe and to Christ's birth; Louie chooses Jeanette just as God chooses his subjects as prophets and ultimately his Son as Saviour: 'My mother ... dreamed a dream and sustained it in daylight. She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord' (*Oranges* 10). Louie appropriates masculine powers of creation, using baptism, naming and storytelling. She gives birth not literally but metaphorically to a 'holy child'. Importantly, Louie mother inspires Jeanette with the belief that 'you

can change the world' (10); indeed, it is from her mother and the Bible that Jeanette learns the power of allegorical thinking⁹.

In the second chapter, Winterson draws a parallel between Jeanette's removal from home to the dangerous 'Breeding Ground' of school and the expulsion of the Israelites from Egypt in 'Exodus' (21). In these early sections of the novel, Winterson's use of the mythical method works to emphasize the comic aspects. The use of an adult narrator to focalize the child's viewpoint provides the distance necessary for the humour to emerge. In the hyacinth episode, for example, when Jeanette enters a floral exhibit called 'The Annunciation', the narrator comments: 'I thought it was a very clever marriage of horticulture and theology' (45). The juxtaposition of childish project and high literary culture provides the humour. When her biblically themed work fails to impress, Jeanette switches to popular culture as inspiration, drawing on equally inappropriate Hollywood melodramas such as *Now Voyager*. She proves adept at hybridizing genres just as Winterson as writer draws on diverse discourses to transform autobiography into art. While the biblical book of 'Leviticus' concerns the rules governing religious observance, Winterson's version witnesses Jeanette's first theological disagreement with the Church (58) and her growing awareness of sexuality (52). In 'Numbers' Jeanette falls in love with Melanie and worries if this constitutes 'unnatural passions' (86). 'Deuteronomy' represents a self-reflexive philosophical meditation on the nature of history and storytelling, arguing that the latter represents a 'way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained' (91). In 'Joshua' Jeanette is subjected to an exorcism in an effort to rid her of her 'demons' (105); in 'Judges' she is accused by the Church fathers of 'aping men' and her mother orders her to leave home (125). The final chapter, 'Ruth' is the only female book alluded to. Significantly, it is the chapter in which Jeanette returns home after her forced exile to broker an uneasy truce with her mother. The biblical Book of Ruth represents a plea for tolerance of mixed marriages and foregrounds Ruth's loyalty to another woman, Naomi. However, Jeanette 'chooses the prophetic role of a writer for whom fiction, not the Bible, functions as scripture' (Pyrhonen 58), allowing her to challenge cultural myths of origins.

The archetypal narrative form, which has its Western origins in Greek epic, is the quest. Homer's *Odyssey* narrates the story of Odysseus's 10 year quest to get home after the end of the Trojan wars. The central mythical quest narrative explicitly alluded to in the inset tales is the Quest for the Grail, part of the Arthurian legend, recounted by Sir Thomas Malory in *Morte D'Arthur*, one of the few books in Winterson's childhood home. In Malory's version, Sir Perceval, son of King Pellinore, leaves King Arthur's court where he was a favourite knight to embark on an ultimately successful quest with Galahad and Bors. In the course of his adventures he is attacked by a gang of men and rescued by a red knight; he then saves a lion from being strangled by a serpent. The lion leads him safely to a ship, which enables him to continue his quest for the Grail. The themes of mortal danger, personal courage, and the pursuit of one's vision are all foregrounded in the narrative. Perceval represents an alter ego for Jeanette, a legendary counterpart whose knightly quest is no more or less significant and hazardous than Jeanette's own. In her treatment of the tale, Winterson develops the motifs of disintegration of community (of the Round Table) and Perceval's resulting sense of disillusion; the theme of lost love (between Arthur and Perceval); and Perceval's pursuit of his personal vision. Winterson uses Perceval repeatedly in her novels (see *The Power Book*) in order to symbolize the restless quest for love and happiness, and to evoke a certain homoeroticism. While Perceval experiences the loneliness of being cast out of the circle of love, the quest pushes him onwards. Jeanette's quest is also a quest for love and personal meaning— for something or someone to replace the figures of Arthur/mother and God.

The text also rewrites the nineteenth century Bildungsroman, especially Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, adopting aspects of the plot, characterisation and narrative technique of the form. The plot of the orphan child cast adrift in the world, betrayed by some adults, and nurtured by others works, is adopted by Winterson; Jeanette is in a long line of foundling children, Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Brontë's *Jane*, among them. As in these classic texts, Winterson presents a child's view of the world, mediated by an older, mature narrative consciousness. This creates an ironic distance which both makes possible the humour and renders the adult world strange and grotesque. The novel is peopled with comic grotesques from Jeanette's mother and the squeaky-

voiced Pastor Finch to grumpy Betty in Tricketts and Mrs Arkwright of Arkwright's for Vermin. Louie in *Oranges* bears comparison to the maternal grotesques such as Mrs Joe and Mrs Reed found in Dickens and Brontë. The ineffectual but kindly men like Louie's husband also have their counterpart in Dickens's portraits of weak masculine figures. The novel contains number of male grotesques, notably Pastors Finch and Spratt, who are akin to Dickens's perverted authority figures such as Mr Bumble and Squeers. In Jeanette's dream about marriage, men appear as beasts. Reading fairy tales such as 'Beauty and the Beast' only confirms Jeanette's theory. On one occasion, Jeanette overhears one of the neighbours saying, 'She married a pig' (*Oranges* 69). Winterson now disavows this portrayal but it remains a significant feminist aspect of the text, distinguishing it from mainstream discourse which posits male as norm¹¹. It could be argued that the representation of men as beasts represents a form of heightened realism or cultural mythology, which accords with aspects of working class women's experience.

If the Bible is the novel's primary sacred source, *Jane Eyre* is the foremost secular intertext. As Pyrhonen comments of the novel's two central sources: 'They seduce Winterson, kindling her desire to write. What are they, if not her literary father and mother?' (Pyrhonen 66) The novel functions as a consolatory text for both Jeanette and her mother. Feeling depressed when abandoned in hospital, Jeanette thinks, 'so I was alone. I thought of Jane Eyre, who faced many trials and was always brave' (*Oranges* 27). Both Jeanette and the reader identify with the orphan Jane's struggle for survival. For her mother it is a founding text, one which she has completely rewritten to suit her own worldview. Instead of Jane returning to Thornfield to marry Rochester, Louie has Jane marry the missionary St John Rivers to embark upon 'the Lord's work' together in India. In fact, *Oranges* adopts the plot structure of *Jane Eyre* which enacts a struggle between religious and social duty and self-abnegation and Jane's passionate desire for selfhood. As in *Jane Eyre*, Jeanette is aided in her struggle for selfhood by a series of female figures; Elsie, Miss Jewsbury and the florist are counterparts of Helen Burns, Miss Temple and the Rivers sisters. While both texts emphasize 'the religious and spiritual dimensions of love' (Pyrhonen 50), Winterson's reworking substitutes a lesbian romance for the heterosexual romance of *Jane Eyre*.

While her mother gives her a thorough grounding in the Bible and her revised version of *Jane Eyre*, it is one of Jeanette's surrogate mothers, Elsie Norris, who introduces her to a wide range of English literature including Swinburne, Blake, Christina Rossetti and W.B. Yeats. Elsie also provides her with two of the novel's central insights: 'She said that stories helped you to understand the world' (29) and that 'What looks like one thing ... may well be another' (30), which relate to Winterson's twin concerns with storytelling and epistemological relativism. As this suggests, metaphoric substitution is the principle of both the novel's structure and its philosophical vision. The text transforms everything into something else using repetition and parallelism: character, motif, and story all morph into another version of themselves. Visions are another form of allegorical 'seeing' and Jeanette repeatedly invokes the visionary poet-prophet William Blake to describe her childhood experience. Even the orange demon represents a Blakean vision. As she admits: 'This tendency towards the exotic has brought me many problems, just as it did for William Blake' (41). By adding the reference to Blake Winterson transforms Jeanette's experience of difference from the particular and ordinary to the literary and visionary.

Oranges adopts a particular form of the 'Bildung' genre; it is a *Kunstlerroman*, a novel of artistic development. As Lynn Pykett has shown, the novel has strong links with James Joyce's classic modernist *Kunstlerroman*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Like Stephen Daedalus, Jeanette battles a series of oppressive authorities including the mother, school, Church and society. The novel's ending recapitulates that of *Portrait*; like Stephen, Jeanette chooses exile and independence on 'the other side' of the sea. In the final chapter, a fellow Oxford student, asks Jeanette, 'when did you last see your mother?', which echoes Stephen's conversation about his mother with his fellow student Cranly. Jeanette reflects that 'I could have been a priest instead of a prophet' (156), which provides a parallel with Stephen's rejection of his vocation for the Catholic Church. Jeanette, like Stephen, rejects all the authoritative discourses – family, Church, nation in order to forge his own artistic identity. The narrator of *Oranges* encapsulates their shared visionary role: 'The priest has a book with words set out ... the prophet has no book' (156). As Antakyalioglu comments, Winterson wishes to maintain that 'art not only springs from experience, it also springs from other art'

(Antakyalioglu 7). As many critics have noted, the use of inset stories and fantasy elements are distancing devices to detach the narrative from the authorial persona. It represents a double strategy as Winterson mythicizes the 'real' facts of her/Jeanette's life, and narrates classic tales which serve to eternalize the narrative subject. The multiple discourses add up to more than the sum of their parts, transcending mere autobiography and converting life into art.

Fairy tales are a type of quest narrative in which an innocent hero or heroine is subjected to the power of a betraying adult and has only their imagination and resourcefulness to aid them. Louie conforms to the role of the wicked step-mother and witch, purporting to give life to the heroine but ultimately betraying her, firstly by sending Jeanette's birth mother away and then by siding with the Church fathers against Jeanette. Elsie Norris fulfils the role of fairy godmother and donor who helps the heroine in her quest by offering her guidance and a safe space to be herself. In the parable of the beautiful wise woman, the weight of patriarchal tradition leads the prince to ignore women's wisdom. The Princess, who is certainly not a Sleeping Beauty figure, but a wise and resourceful young woman who saves a village by bringing knowledge and healing, is ultimately killed by the Prince who cannot possess her. Winterson's retelling represents an anti-patriarchal morality tale. In this way, Winterson appropriates the form of the traditional fairy tale and the female archetype of good witch/spinster in order to subvert the canon. The relationship between the main narrative and the inset tales is that of allegory or parable. Winterson speaks about parables as an economic way of telling a story (*Bookclub* interview). The most succinct of the parables used by Winterson is that of the emperor Tetrahedron whose grace is contrasted to the foul Isocetes. Through personification, Winterson converts geometry into story and art. The novel's central parable and most important of the inset tales is the story of Winnet Stonejar, which adopts all the novel's key motifs: a parental sorcerer figure, a protective chalk circle, a talismanic pebble, exile from a community, and a connecting thread back home. In the tale, which is itself a version of Rumpelstiltskin, the sorcerer sets out to guess Winnet's name and thereby have power over her. This episode points to the magical power of naming, just as Louie names Jeanette and creates her as a special child with a magical destiny as a missionary. The sorcerer, disguised as a mouse, subsequently 'ties a thread around her button' (144), which mirrors the thread

Louie has tied around Jeanette. The experience of the characters Jeanette, Winnet, and Perceval is therefore both personal and archetypal, specific and general. Together the characters represent the necessity of exile in the service of their vision. Their ‘simultaneous existence’ in parallel narratives constitutes the act of writing oneself a story, into the story, even when there seems to be no alternative to the present. It enacts the idea that the narrative of one’s life may be changed even as it draws on numerous established narratives. What unites the heterogenous discourses and multiple tales and ‘ties’ them together are the motifs of thread and the stone/heart. Perceval feels himself ‘being pulled like a bobbin of cotton, so that he was dizzy and wanted to give in to the pull and wake up round familiar things’ (168). He dreams he is a spider and a raven ‘came and flew through his thread’, similar to the raven who flies through Winnet’s tale and leaves her its stony heart as a souvenir. The raven is a stand-in for the orange demon who throws Jeanette a pebble (111) and advises Winnet/Jeanette to ‘find a new place’ (143). When Jeanette returns home for Christmas after her first term at Oxford, she comments that her mother ‘had tied a thread around my button, to tug as she pleased’ (171). As Lucie Armitt has argued, these motifs represent emotional attachments, which cannot be simply severed by the quest for autonomous identity. They also, I would argue represent the incorporation of lost objects in a Freudian sense. And it is the theme of loss in relation to primary attachments that I lastly want to consider as a significant aspect of the text.

A dark story--and an unhappy one...

If Jeanette is the novel’s narrator-protagonist, Louie is its other main character. She occupies variously the role of God-like Creator, matriarch, villain, wicked step-mother, Blakean visionary, and failed prophet. It is from her mother and the Bible that Jeanette learns allegorical thinking. She represents maternal omnipotence in an archetypal form and the daughter’s eventual disillusion with that power leads to a profound sense of loss as theorised by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. The mother’s failure as a prophet when she sides with the bigoted Church fathers is the second major loss in Jeanette’s life following the ‘loss’ of her birth mother. As a character Louie is both reprehensible and immensely enjoyable¹². Her larger than life persona contributes a huge amount to the novel’s

success. Winterson gives Louie the best lines including the one that gives the novel its title: ‘oranges are not the only fruit’ (167). It isn’t the case, either, that Winterson constructs the mother in wholly negative terms. As one audience member of the Bookclub interview commented on re-reading the novel 25 years on, Winterson accords Louie a large amount of sympathy and understanding. The novel shows an awareness of Jeanette’s mother’s own ‘losses’ – her lost selves, the possibilities that never materialized, as Percy or Pierre’s wife, as the special ‘friend’ of Eddy’s sister. Winterson’s own mother, a bright, educated and ambitious woman, was cut off by her family for ‘marrying down’ much like Mrs Morel in Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*. Winterson describes her as theatrical woman who created a personal bio-mythology in order escape the mundanity and ordinariness of life, and whose hyperactivity may be read as a symptom of her depression. Perhaps Winterson’s prolific literary output over 25 years may also cover over her losses?

If *Oranges* tells a ‘dark story’ (Winterson *Times* 4), its comedy serves to cover over some of the more destructive aspects of the mother –daughter relationship, most notably maternal neglect. An early example of maternal neglect comes when Jeanette goes deaf for 3 months without any of the adults recognizing that she has a physical illness; rather, they believe she is in a state of holy rapture. The comedy masks the abuse of the child’s right to health and well-being. Even when she is finally admitted to hospital she is left largely alone to build igloos out of orange peel. The novel is also full of images of violence towards the child. When her birth mother comes back for her, a scene that isn’t narrated until page 99, Louie refuses to let her see her. When Jeanette protests, Louie hits her. The narrator tells us that this was the first time in her life that she experienced uncertainty. This episode is followed by the terrifying scene when Jeanette and Melanie are accused of demon possession. Many readers and critics have commented on the violence that attends the exorcism scene; in a protracted episode that is tantamount to torture, Jeanette is physically restrained, and subjected to 36 hours of starvation and light deprivation which is meant to drive the demon out. When Jeanette refuses the Church’s second attempt at exorcism, she is disowned by her mother: ‘She’s no daughter of mine’ (153). The daughter who brings shame to the family and community is a feature of culture throughout history, not least contemporary British society where daughters who dare to choose their own

relationship risk ‘dishonouring’ the family. The motif connects Jeanette to millions of young women who are made to carry the burden of their cultural tradition and are punished with exile or death. No wonder then that Winterson felt the need to write herself another story.

Oranges is a first novel about origins but what is striking revisiting the novel is its preoccupation with death and loss, other people’s and one’s own. Repeatedly, Winterson has used the phrase ‘cover story’ to describe the construction of narrative layers and versions in her work. Going back to *The Power Book*, she talks about ‘changing the story’ and providing alternatives or ‘covers’ to the story. In this context, it takes on a less postmodern meaning about surface play—multiple versions irreducible to a single truth—and a more deep-seated psychoanalytic resonance: the manifest content of fiction overlaying the latent content of life and its losses. Given the author’s adopted status, the idea of a name as ‘disguise’ takes on added resonance and poignancy, suggesting that her name is not her own. In fact, Winterson recently revealed that she had been given another name before being adopted until she was 6 months old: ‘I was and was not “Jeanette”.’ (*Times* 4) In this formulation the assumed name or pseudonym is both an artistic disguise and an ontological consequence of adoption, which becomes an intrinsic part of Winterson’s origin story. Writing on the 25th anniversary of *Oranges*’ publication, Winterson observed:

But it always comes back to the beginning. I realised recently that *Oranges* itself, while a narrative of escape, is also a cover story. It covers the story I haven’t wanted to hear, and haven’t wanted to tell. *Oranges* is a funny novel as well as a painful one, and there are crucial inventions in it that cover with planks the deep drops I needed to pass off as solid ground. (*Times* 5)

We may speculate about the precise nature of the crucial inventions and deep drops Winterson refers to here. No doubt they concern her insecurity about her origins, her sense of the loss of her birth mother, and the relative privation she experienced as a working class child deprived of cultural stimulation other than religious texts. The novel’s humour covers over Jeanette’s melancholy and represents a mechanism to defend against sadness.

The novel attests to the gradual process of disillusion with the mother's version of the world. It depicts a state of original plenitude when she was one with the mother, and there was no division. But this is interrupted firstly by the 'exile' imposed by school and then by the 'Fall' from grace when she sexually transgresses. Her unhappiness at school where she spends hours sitting alone in the cloakroom with liver and gravy down her gymslip. She becomes a pariah at school, is routinely bullied by the other children and then victimized by teachers who accuse her of 'terrorizing' other children. She is forced by the school no less than her mother to inhabit an 'outsider' status, which leaves her feeling isolated: 'If it had not been for the conviction that I was right, I might have been very sad' (42). Elsewhere, Jeanette identifies with Keats's misery (78). In the course of the novel, Jeanette suffers the loss of all of her primary love objects: first her birth mother, then her adopted mother, and the sense of belonging to a community. The loss of God is perhaps the hardest to bear: 'I miss God. I miss the company of someone utterly loyal. [...] I miss God who was my friend. I don't even know if God exists, but I do know that if God is your emotional role model, very few human relationships will match up to it.' (170) Exile brings apostasy, uncertainty and isolation. The text incorporates these losses through the inset fairy tales. While some of the alter egos survive – Winnet – others don't – the flawless woman. Perceval loses Arthur and the company of the knights of the Round Table. Winnet loses her place as the sorcerer's daughter and her budding love for the young stranger. These tales encompass three forms of desire: man for man, woman for man, and woman for woman in Jeanette's own case. Loss therefore affects all subjects regardless of sexuality.

The novel's epistemological relativism may be seen as a consequence of Winterson's sense of lack of identity and loss of primary attachments. Lacking the 'truth' about her origins, and experiencing a series of traumatic losses, the author-narrator foregrounds her own act of artistic creation. What Winterson edits out, by her own admission, are the despairing emotions that appear to have characterised periods of her life. The text therefore serves to cover over her loss. While Winterson admits that she is 'not a Freudian', she recognises how manifest content may conceal a latent meaning. The novel may therefore be seen in terms of Freud's concept of mourning as a response to melancholia. The text is marked by a profound sense of loss and sadness. Concluding his

journey, Perceval admits that it 'seemed fruitless' (168). The tone is melancholy. Wryness emerges with her mother's latest exploits but this doesn't dissipate the uncertainty. Returning home after her exile to Oxford, walking down the hill to the house, Jeanette is overcome with sadness: 'I thought about the dog and was suddenly very sad; sad for her death, for my death, for all the inevitable dying that comes with change. There's no choice that doesn't mean a loss' (169). *Oranges* tells an unfinished story; as Winterson comments, there isn't a happy ending and Jeanette's future remains uncertain. That story continues in Winterson's subsequent works as older characters take on the conflict of personal freedom versus worldly engagement and responsibility.

All Winterson's novels tell a single story: the story of children who are abandoned by their real parents and brought up by adopted ones, of how they are marked by that experience, and how they strive to create their own identity. The thread or hook that connects them is Winterson's reinvention of classic narratives to tell her own story. From *Oranges* to *The Power Book* and *Weight*, her work shows a remarkable continuity of narrative theme across three decades. It represents the construction of an ongoing mythobiography in which a transtextual author-narrator transmutes experience into art. What is the aim of all this fictionalizing? Not only to demonstrate the inherent instability of reality as a generation of post-structuralist oriented critics have argued, but to insert the narrated subject into discourse in order to escape both invisibility and mortality. There has of course been a happy ending for Winterson; *Oranges* inaugurated her writing career and with it she wrote herself into existence as a writer of fiction. It represents a classic 'creation' story in every sense, a creation of the self through storytelling, and a recognition that this self is inevitably constituted by its losses.

Notes

1. In *After Postmodernism* (2001), Jose López and Garry Potter argue that '[theoretical] postmodernism has "gone out of fashion"' (4). Gavin Keulks has analysed the work of both

Jeanette Winterson Martin Amis in terms of a move towards a 'post-postmodern voice,' stating: 'My suggestion of a second, or late-phase postmodernism seeks to mollify the extremism of its radical "first-phase" configuration' (*Martin Amis* 2006: 161).

2. For example, Gore Vidal described Winterson as a 'fresh new voice.'
3. Sales figures for *Oranges*
4. The TV film of *Oranges* was screened in three episodes in March 2010, twenty one years after its first screening.
5. See, for example, the responses given by audience members of the Radio 4 Bookclub interview broadcast on 4 April 2010.
6. Catharine Stimpson instances Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* as the 'narrative of damnation' that has dominated twentieth century lesbian fiction.
7. Winterson rejects the 'gay' label while acknowledging the book's significance in terms of sexual representation: 'Yes, the book has been vital for a lot of gay people struggling with social prejudice and self-hatred, but *Oranges* is a book about becoming who you are by means of a story', she wrote recently in *The Times* (13 March 2010: 4).
8. Early reviewers as well as readers (mis)read the novel as autobiography in large part because of the identity of the protagonist's name with that of the author. On this point, Winterson reveals: 'I felt that "Jeanette" was as good a disguise as any, partly because I did not relate to my name. I don't mean that I wish I was called Esmerelda, but from the first, my close friends have all called me something else, usually JW, or some variant of their own'. (*Times* 4)
9. Another major source of Winterson's canonical rescripting is Greek myth, which she draws on in a number of ways. Most significantly, Louie takes on the role of a Greek god, creating divine beings and orchestrating human affairs. Louie dreams a dream of creating a child of destiny; Jeanette is a product not of Louie's womb but of her 'head' just as Athena springs

fully-formed from Zeus's head in the Greek creation myth. In the Greek pantheon, Athena, Goddess of wisdom and purity is a favourite daughter who represents a threat to the paternal phallus just as Jeanette challenges maternal power.

10. Another feature which *Oranges* exploits to great effect is the Victorian novel's love of mimicry and interpolation of regional accents; like George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* and Dickens in *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Winterson captures the local dialect of her childhood home. At one point Mrs Arkwright of Arkwright's for Vermin opines to Jeanette: 'Tha mother's mad tha knows (60).'
11. The most awkward moment of the *Bookclub* interview came when a male audience member asked about the negative representation of men. Keen to be conciliatory, Winterson laughingly dismissed the portrayal, saying that she had mellowed since she'd written it. Apart from Jim Naughtie's introduction which described the novel as among other things a lesbian coming out story, neither feminism nor lesbian experience were mentioned in the half hour interview. This disavowal is disappointing because it represents a normalization of available reading positions. In the context of *Bookclub* it is acceptable to foreground difference but not to articulate particular differences such as lesbianism or gender inequality.
12. Winterson's portrayal of Louie is fascinating to consider in the context of the two female figures who dominated the 1980s: Princess Diana and Margaret Thatcher. If the novel contains princess archetypes for whom Diana could be the model, Thatcher appears to spring from the same soil as Louie and shares similar features of indomitable strength, self-belief, a domineering personality, being hard-working and evangelical about her beliefs and convictions – and famously not going to bed until the small hours. In the *Bookclub* interview, Winterson talked about her mother wallpapering the ceiling through the night, an account which resonates with a story of Carol Thatcher's about her mother doing the wallpapering in between parliamentary work.

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