

Authorship, Representation and Gendered Discourses in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*

L'auteur, la représentation et le discours de genre dans le roman de Jeanette Winterson, "Le sexe des cerises"

Auctorialitate, reprezentare și discurs de gen în romanul "Sexul cireșelor", de Jeanette Winterson

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Abstract.

This paper tackles the construction of discursive gender identity in Winterson's "Sexing the Cherry", and explores the sophisticated interplays of masculine and feminine voices which deconstruct binary assumptions of power VS weakness, active VS passive, centre VS marginal. By altering the patriarchal structure of fairy-tales and by bringing forth the fantasy of the hermaphrodite, through the tales of Jordan and Dog-Woman, the traditional roles of femininity and masculinity are reversed, upended, and with them, the discursive elements of female and male writing change shape. Dog-Woman's discourse makes use of historical details, and of the bawdy Medieval comic register, while Jordan's tale has a poetic quality, it dwells on the uncertainty of reality and truth, authenticity, identity, chronology, history and clear-cut gender, being infused with a postmodern "distrust of metanarratives."

Résumé

Cet article traite de la construction de l'identité discursive du genre dans le roman "Sexing the Cherry" de Jeanette Winterson, et explore les relations complexes entre les voix masculines et féminines qui déconstruit les hypothèses binaires: pouvoir versus faiblesse, actif versus passif, central versus marginal. En modifiant la structure patriarcale des contes de fées et en engendrant la fantaisie de l'hermaphrodite, à travers les histoires de Jordan et Dog-Woman, les rôles traditionnels de la féminité et de la masculinité sont renversés, bouleversés, et par conséquent, les éléments discursifs de l'écriture masculine et féminine changent de forme. Le discours de Dog-Woman utilise des détails historiques qui tiennent du registre comique médiéval grivois, tandis que l'histoire de Jordan a une qualité poétique; cette histoire s'appuie sur l'incertitude de la réalité et de la vérité, de l'authenticité, de l'identité, de la chronologie, de l'histoire et des genres clairement différenciés, imprégnée de la "méfiance envers le métanarratif" typique du postmodernisme.

Rezumat

Această lucrare abordează construcția identității discursive de gen în romanul lui Jeanette Winterson, "Sexul cireșelor", și explorează interacțiunile vocilor masculine și feminine care deconstruiesc ipotezele binare bazate pe antiteza perechilor: superioritate VS inferioritate, activitate VS pasivitate, centru VS marginal. Prin alterarea structurii patriarhale a basmelor și prin aducerea în prim-plan a fanteziei hermafroditului, prin intermediul narațiunilor lui Jordan și Femeii-Câine, rolurile tradiționale ale feminității și masculinității sunt intervertite, subminate, iar

odată cu ele, scriitura masculină și feminină își schimbă forma. Discursul Femeii-Câine face uz de elemente istorice și de registrul medieval comic, în vreme ce narațiunea lui Jordan are o calitate poetică, insistând asupra incertitudinii realității, adevărului, autenticității, identității, cronologiei, istoriei și distincției dintre genuri, fiind învăluită într-o postmodernă “neîncredere în metanarațiuni.”

Keywords: *gender, discourse, womanspeak, écriture féminine, historiographic metafiction*

Mots clés: *genre, discours, parler femme, écriture féminine, métafiction historiographique*

Cuvinte cheie: *gen, discurs, rostire feminine, écriture feminine, metaficțiune istoriografică*

There are many ways in which society relegates gender-specific, linguistic behaviours to men and women. “Talk like a lady”, mothers and fathers tell little girls in order to train them in “femininity”. Girls are expected to be more delicate, more fragile and more concerned with their self-image than men, for whom it is acceptable to swear, have a more relaxed bodily posture or act violently. Of course, all of this is debatable, these are generalizations, but there is actual support in theory. Gilbert and Gubar famously charged: “The woman who speaks out is branded an “active monster”; the woman who remains silent risks madness” [1]. This paper aims to look at different discursive strategies used in *Sexing the Cherry* in order to highlight the constructiveness of gender and ultimately, the arbitrariness of social behaviours stereotypically ascribed to men and women. The idea of a type of writing that is specific to men or women must first be seen in relation to their gender identities. A “woman’s place in language” and in discourse seems to be ornamental, or not serious enough to discuss men’s topics. Otto Jespersen, in his *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, adopted a male-centered, somehow outdated point of view and described women’s language as more conservative, in keeping with the traditional language they learned from their parents, while men are innovative [2]. He also pointed out that women’s language is more euphemistic, “shrinking from coarse and gross expressions”, preferring instead “refined (and in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions” [3]. Years later, Robin Lakoff argued that the language which is allowed to women constrains their identities, it limits them to a less powerful discourse, that is, if they want to preserve their femininity:

If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion; in some sense, as less than fully human. These two choices which a woman has – to be less than a woman or less than a person – are highly painful. [4]

If this is the patriarchal standpoint on women’s discourse, then Jeanette Winterson upends this order by reversing gender-specific expectations. Hence, it is Dog-Woman who uses stronger words than Jordan, and whose general style of story-telling is more tomboyish, as she is fascinated by gruesome details and takes morbid pleasure in describing them. One such repugnant scene is Dog-Woman’s visit to the brothel, where her description of sexual perversions can be associated with the Medieval comic register: “I put my eyes back to the flap and saw that the man had been branded with the sign of a rutting pig [...] I heard a snorting, and a pig was driven into the room, wild with fright. The man leaped at it and, holding it between his legs, continued his pleasure with deep thrusts while the dwarf heated up the iron again” [5].

The bawdy tone is reminiscent of Medieval literature, but the element that truly draws attention to the reworking of the canon is the fact that her tale questions the centrality of antifeminism in the literature of the Middle Ages. During that time, the anonymous authors or the first authors who used their names were male and indulged in such clichés of femininity as the insubordinate wife or the talkative and sexually aggressive woman. The woman narrator of *Sexing the Cherry* is an example of this type of Medieval woman, but she is not the object of representation

or mockery of men, since she is in control of her tale. Dog Woman's unruly attitude and style of account might be explained in terms of popular theories during the Middle Ages related to laughter, excess, the four humors and a woman's body. Thus, women were seen as more prone to excess and to laughter, because their humors tended to shift more, because they found themselves under the dominion of their bodily passions, which is why they were associated with the body itself [6]. However, this laughter might be interpreted at a symbolical level as a defiance of men; after all, Hélène Cixous sees women's laughter in terms of its connection to Medusa, the Greek mythological creature whose writhing snakes turned men into stone. The sexual connotations of stiffness and her writhing snakes make her a symbol of the quintessential monstrous woman, a threat to patriarchy. In the male imaginary, the Medusa is a representation of a castrated male, but this is only because of men's failure to see her only as a castrated male; her laughter is thus a way of proving men wrong: "Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? [...] You have only to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing"[7].

Jordan himself muses on women's conspiracy against men and their Janus-faced attitude that allows them to pretend men are in power just to "laugh" at men's deceit: "I watched women flirting with men, pleasing men, doing business with men, and then I watched them collapsing into laughter, sharing the joke, while the men, all unknowing, felt themselves master of the situation and went off to brag in bar rooms and to preach from pulpits the folly of the weaker sex" [8].

Other than women's generalized laughter, further arguments in favour of the idea that Dog-Woman's discourse is far from Jespersen's model and closer to Cixous's laughter can be found throughout the whole episode of the Spitalfields brothel. Her violence against Firebrace and Scroggs brings her closer to a warrior than to a delicate woman and the imagery of dismemberment and necrophilia point to the type of woman that men fear. As Toril Moi puts it: "The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her"[9]. Dog-Woman rebels against patriarchy first by using bodily force, by reversing the natural balance according to which man is more powerful than woman and secondly by choosing not to censor or euphemize the horrid aspects of bodily functions that she witnesses in the brothel.

As if coming out of a nightmare, Dog-Woman murders the men responsible for the wrongs in her own society; it is not coincidental that they are Puritans, a community linked to repression, conventionalism, asceticism and the condemnation of the worldly, of the flesh. According to Makinen, Dog-Woman's immense body is a form of power, agency, assertiveness, even suggesting some sort of political revolt: "Her textual violence castigates the hypocrisy of the Puritan's denouncement of the flesh and stands instead as a transgressive and self-sufficient magnified body"[10]. In other words, through her unusual proportions, she opposes standards of Puritan composure and decorum, in the same way that she fails to conform to more general feminine norms of behaviour. She is a paragon of female braveness and her discourse constantly makes itself "male" through the preoccupations for physical force, blunt words and politics. Dog-Woman is an embodiment that thwarts expectations and social regulations regarding the "weak" female body and translates this physical strength onto the discourse.

Feminist phenomenologists view embodiment as encapsulated in the lived experience of daily life and postulate theories that seem to confirm the idea that women live their bodies according to the reflection that society sends back. As Iris Marion Young suggests in her article, "Throwing Like a Girl", women see their bodies as objects "to be looked at and acted upon"[11]. In her analysis of the difference in throwing a ball among men and women, Iris Marion Young combines Merleau-Ponty's insights regarding the relationship between the lived body and the world with Beauvoir's account of woman's struggle between immanence and transcendence in a patriarchal society. According to a study conducted by Straus, girls, unlike boys, do not tend to move their bodies, twist, lean back or forward. They remain relatively immobile, not using their full bodily potential, which is a general manifestation in other physical activities as well. Moreover,

when confronted with tasks like lifting, pulling or pushing, women do not see themselves as capable of performing them, and they tend to move less than men because they sense the imaginary space around them as limited. The general point Young is making is that women are much less confident in their physical potential and approach their bodies with caution, because they are self-conscious and do not wish to appear awkward or overly strong [12]. Interestingly, Dog Woman does not “throw like a girl”, yet feels very self-conscious about social regulations of gender and is very interested in performing them.

According to Lisa Moore, in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, “the protagonists either move between and among gender and sexual identifications (Jordan), or simply exceed them (Dog Woman)”[13]. In the interplays of gender and the body, Dog Woman situates herself neither within the male or female sex, just like she is neither masculine nor feminine as a gender. Her transgressive body is sexed female, yet possesses the attributes of maleness because of its astounding strength. She is able to send an elephant up in the air and unscrupulously behead her enemies just through a single stroke, yet she is aware of female gender prerequisites and complies with them religiously. She performs gender like an act, from wearing a “ribbon in her hair” and understanding what it means to be a “good woman” to ways of eating: “And then he bit into his and spurted juice right over himself. Cautiously I bit into mine, but in a more ladylike fashion”[14]. This paints an awkward picture of gender imbalance and demystifies the idea of a clear-cut line between genders, or even the idea of a gender binary.

The reinterpretation of the assigned discursive roles of male and female is a conspicuous anti-patriarchal strategy with a double edge: the feminization of Jordan and the empowerment of Dog-Woman. However, this is rather paradoxical and it opens up this treacherous question: does Dog-Woman need to make herself male in order to become empowered? Does Jordan need to use “womanspeak”, in spite of his gender, in order to seem less of a man? Lidia Curti argues that in *Sexing the Cherry*, the female voice is grounded in historical events and in the mundane details of everyday life, whereas the male voice is dreamy, it has a poetic quality and speaks of interiority, search for identity and the theme of writing, which engenders some sort of reversal of sexual identities [15].

Indeed, the dialectics inside/outside, interiority/exteriority marks the relationship between Jordan and Dog-Woman. Jordan is concerned with abstract issues and his voice expresses the basic challenges of postmodernism: Is there an origin? What is reality? What is gender? The fruit symbolism of each chapter also serves the same purpose of gender reversal: Jordan and Nicholas Jordan's discourses are identified with the pineapple, a female fruit, while Dog-Woman and her alter ego, the bulimic ecologist, are associated with the banana, a phallic fruit *par excellence* [16]. Jordan delves into the self-conscious nature of writing and, quite paradoxically, his ideas about writing echo Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* as being an expression of the female body, many of her ideas in this essay finding a correspondent in Jordan's tale of maternal nostalgia: “For the Greeks, the hidden life demanded invisible ink. They wrote an ordinary letter and in between the lines set out another letter, written in milk [...] what mattered was the life flaring up undetected...till now”[17]. This is reminiscent of Cixous's assertion that “There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink”[18].

Jordan continues by bringing forward the question of invisibility that has been a favourite among feminists and links this to the story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses, whose mythical dimension serves as a backdrop for the general feminist framework of the novel: “I discovered that my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts, was flying without me like the Twelve Dancing Princesses who shot from their every night and returned home every morning with torn dresses and worn-out slippers and remembered nothing”[19].

Memory and myth intertwine in Jordan's representation of the world, making him a postmodern skeptical self, in line with Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarratives. What transpires from his attitude towards writing is an anxiety about the possibility of discourse to preserve identity, to write and remember the self. Patricia Waugh refers to this very aspect when she

argues that, if individuals now occupy “roles” rather than selves, then the study of characters in novels provide a model for the understanding of the constructions of subjectivity. That is, since language mediates our knowledge of the world, then fiction, which is made entirely of language becomes a model for the construction of “reality” itself. The problem that arises is that

The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and “objective” world is no longer tenable. Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own meanings. Its relationship to the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic and regulated by convention. “Meta” terms, therefore, are required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers. In fiction they are required in order to explore the relationship between the world *of* the fiction and the world *outside* the fiction. [20]

Commenting on Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, Linda Hutcheon argues that “postmodern art works to contest the “simulacration” process of mass culture—not by denying it or lamenting it—but by problematizing the entire notion of the representation of reality”[21]. She contests Baudrillard’s idea that the real is imploding into a hyperreal without origin and advocates the fact that postmodernism presupposes a questioning of what “real” means and the ways in which we can know it. The seven lies that Jordan outlines testify to his incredulity and inquisitive nature, as he seems to refer to most of the tenets of postmodernism: the problem of representation, the questioning of history, chronology, authenticity and truth.

Lies 1: There is only the present and nothing to remember

Lies 2: Time is a straight line.

Lies 3: The difference between the past and the future is that one happened while the other has not.

Lies 4: We can only be in one place at a time

Lies 5: Any proposition that contains the word “finite”(the world, the universe, experience, ourselves...)

Lies 6: Reality as something which can be agreed upon.

Lies 7: Reality as truth. [22]

The ultimate difference that can be identified between Jordan and Dog-Woman’s discourse is their degree of skepticism and their versatility: Jordan breaks down all sorts of barriers, between the sexes, between the ages, between reality and lie, whereas Dog-Woman is a sort of long-standing rock, a conservative force that keeps reality grounded. In her theory about what historiographicmetafiction involves, Linda Hutcheon asserts that this genre “keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing, problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here – just unresolved contradiction”[23]. And this is perfectly illustrated in the forceful ending of the novel, where Jordan builds a lyrical portrait of time as continuous, flowing, unchained, not dependent upon chronology and he alludes to Plato’s allegory of the cave, claiming that everything that seems real is actually nothing but a shadow on the wall:

The future lies ahead like a glittering city, but like the cities of the desert disappears when approached [...] We speak of it with longing and with love. *The future*. But the city is a fake. The future and the present and the past exist only in our minds, and from a distance the borders of each shrink and fade[...] The river runs from one country to another without stopping. And even the most solid of things and the most real, the best-loved and the well-known, are only hand-shadows on the wall. Empty space and points of light.[24]

Jordan’s writing is filled with uncertainty and infused with a poetical quality that enables its association with what several feminists identified as the type of language spoken by women. For instance, Luce Irigaray introduces the concept of “speaking(as)woman” or *parler femme*

(womanspeak) to define women's speech as polymorphous, as complex, rejecting the monolithic regime of maleness, precisely because of their bodies; bodies stand in connection to writing, and women's bodies represent "the sex which is not one":

That having been said, what a feminine syntax might be is not simple nor easy to state, because in that syntax there would no longer be either subject or object, "oneness" would no longer be privileged, there would no longer be proper meanings, proper names, "proper" attributes. ... Instead, that "syntax" would involve nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation.[25]

Parler femme is precisely Jordan's discourse, which is permeated by multiplicity regarding reality, sexuality, history, and challenges phallogocentric unity. Lidia Curti argues that Luce Irigaray "sees female writing as the instrument to break the unity of subject and object, on which the definition of what is female is based. [...] women's writing breaks the phallogocentric order of writing, in denying its unitary character, its emphasis on oneness"[26]. Actually, this avoidance of oneness, which Irigaray considers an advantage, turns against the feminism she defends by reiterating female writing as a bearer of the tenets of Romanticism: woman's writing is multiple, therefore exuberant, effusive, it is an outpouring of emotion, it resists the "rationality" of male dictates, but it also reinforces the same patriarchal, time-honoured stereotypes of woman as myth and essence.

As Jordan admits, the language of women is a special language that excludes men and that privileges the so-called Derridian "différance", the permanent sliding and shifting of signifiers, the deferral of meaning: "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"[27]. Hélène Cixous similarly states "that there is such a thing as marked writing"[28] and that women's language possesses a certain music that goes back to their relationship to the mothers: "In women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we've been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us – that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman"[29].

This music might be interpreted as a woman's inborn quality of emotional exuberance, which is handed on from mother to daughter and which populates women's texts in the form of lyrical sensibility to words and to women's experiences. But it is also marked by a more complex sexuality: a woman's writing is bisexual. In fact, a woman's whole being is bisexual: "In a certain way, "woman is bisexual"; man – it's a secret to no one – being poised to keep glorious phallic monosexuality in view"[30]. Contrary to the argument that his discourse is marked by the qualities of femininity, there are hints in *Sexing the Cherry* pointing to Jordan's reenactment of male values. He does pursue, after all, the colonial male dream of conquering other spaces and he incorporates the stereotypes of travelling, fighting, searching for love in the model of the male hero. "What I would like to have is to have some of Tradescant grafted on to me so that I could be a hero like him. He will flourish in any climate, pack his ships with precious things and be welcomed with full honours when the King is restored. England is a land of heroes, every boy knows that"[31].

However, one of his constant preoccupations is his rejection of clear distinctions between the sexes through grafting and crossdressing. His search is not so much for the missing dancer, Fortunata, but for the fantasy of androgyny, symbolized by the very metaphor of grafting in the title. In this concern, Jordan's writing is indeed feminine:

Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self (*répérage en soi*) of the presence - variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female / of both sexes, nonexclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and from this self-permission", multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body.[32]

The transgression of gender stereotypes and the open embrace of bisexuality is only ascribed to Jordan; Dog-Woman remains a conservative being who sticks to clear-cut distinctions and the cast-iron certainties of matter. She cringes in horror at Jordan's sexed cherry, dismissing its ambiguous origin and gender: "Of what sex is the monster you are making?"[33]. From this point of view, *Sexing the Cherry* reverts the traditional assumptions of women's language as sentimental and men's language as clear, scientific, pragmatic. Dog-Woman's discourse becomes highly-unfeminine in its emphasis on grotesque details of the body; its monstrosity resides in its capacity to speak out, to refuse the passivity that society assigns to women.

Winterson's novelfocuses on the monstrosity of female marked writing: Dog-Woman uses the "unfeminine" register and the bawdy, comic tones of Medieval literature, which point to laughter as an anti-patriarchal strategy. On the other hand, the characteristics of Jordan's tale cover aspects of feminine writing, as described by Cixous and Irigaray: plurality, a concern for sensibility rather than pragmatism, androgyny and bisexuality, uncertainty about time, history, sequence, truth and most importantly, reality.

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