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# Earthly Men and Other Worldly Women: Gender Types and Religious Types in Jeanette Winterson's "Atlantic Crossing" and Other Short Fiction

Carla A. Arnell

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- 1 Among critics of high culture and pundits of popular trends, it is a truth almost universally acknowledged that twentieth-century art reflects an "age of secularism" or an "age of unbelief." In the literary culture of the Western world there is ample evidence of such secularism: a glance at the *New York Times* summer fiction lists from the 1990s—featuring reading delights ranging from Ian McEwan to Doris Lessing—illustrates how little such fiction focuses on anything explicitly or implicitly religious. But as twentieth-century historical events often dramatized, religion has remained a significant force in human lives, for better or for worse. And though religion may now be more ubiquitous in life than in art, a small cadre of twentieth-century writers have continued to reflect upon religious matters, despite the relative dearth of complementary criticism about religion in literature.
- 2 The British writer Jeanette Winterson is one popular twentieth-century author whose fictions have frequently focused on religion, a topic clearly inspired by the significant role of religion in her young life. It is well known by now that Winterson grew up in a Pentecostal Evangelical family, was well schooled in the Bible and Evangelical rituals, and was destined by her mother to be a church missionary. Her early novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* recounts, in quasi-autobiographical fashion, the story of her rejection of that tradition and her self-awakening. But despite the prevalence of religious themes, motifs, and allusions in this and other Winterson fictions, most criticism about Winterson's work has largely ignored the topic of religion *per se*,<sup>1</sup> perhaps on the assumption that Winterson's relation to religion is simply a given: she grew up in a

Pentecostal Evangelical family that was rigidly repressive, and her fiction, when it treats religion, simply satirizes a world she has wholly rejected. In fact, though, I would argue that Winterson's representation of religion is more complicated than it might at first seem, and her first short story collection cleverly captures that complexity.

- 3 Winterson first made a literary name for herself with her 1987 autobiographical fiction, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, a novel for which she won the Whitbread Prize for the year's best first novel. Since then, she has continued to focus on novelistic fiction, ranging from her fairy-tale-like historical fiction *The Passion* to *The PowerBook*, a metafictional love affair between author and reader, mediated by the metaphor of Macintosh computing mechanics. But with the 1998 publication of *The World and Other Places*, readers of Winterson's novels were finally able to see a sustained example of her work within another fictional genre, the short story. The short stories in this collection are imaginatively varied, but they also revisit themes and motifs familiar from her novels: storytelling, truth and lies, passion, religion, and gender identity. "Atlantic Crossing" is one short story that illuminates Winterson's thematic preoccupations, especially her interest in how gender identity conforms to or clashes with religious identity.
- 4 This story tells the tale of two characters who coincidentally cross paths while traversing the Atlantic on an ocean liner. The main character, Duncan Stewart, is a homebound man on his way back to London, and it is he who narrates the ship story and interprets its events. The other character, Gabriel Angel, a nineteen-year-old black girl, is leaving home rather than returning, and she both unsettles Stewart's conventional expectations and inspires his desire to domesticate her. In this respect, "Atlantic Crossing" replays the antinomy between Henri and Villanelle in Winterson's 1987 novel, *The Passion*, another story about the chance meeting and inevitable clash between a hidebound male narrator who longs for home, and an otherworldly, free-spirited female, who cannot be bound anywhere. In "Atlantic Crossing," however, Winterson juxtaposes the religious and the spiritual or otherworldly to distinguish her characters, using this distinction to mark their gender and disposition. Although this story critiques a narrow, rule-bound religiosity, gendered male, I shall argue that Winterson's story supports an alternative religious perspective, a renovated Blakean spirituality that is gendered female. Ultimately, the gender types that emerge in "Atlantic Crossing" not only replay gender patterns from *The Passion*, but they also link this short story with others in Winterson's short story collection.
- 5 The plot of "Atlantic Crossing" is simple and, even, clichéd: An older man meets an attractive younger woman on a trip, he falls in love with her, she is uninterested in a romantic liaison, and he must head home with his passion unrequited. The story takes place in 1956, "[t]he year Arthur Miller married Marilyn Monroe" (19). This incidental detail situates the story in an era known for its conventional character—a time when men were men, women were wives, and children were everywhere. The popular cultural reference to Miller and Monroe gives some context to Duncan's romantic dreams, for the Miller/Monroe romance seems to make real the age-old male fantasy of Beauty and the Beast.
- 6 But the significance of "Atlantic Crossing" is to be found less in its plotline and setting than in its character portraiture. Duncan is one of a growing number of Winterson's male narrators who are hindered in their self-fulfillment by a belief in conventional

mores that borders almost on religious faith. It is this hidebound state that Winterson uses Duncan to critique.

- 7 Perhaps Duncan's most distinctive characteristic is his nervousness, and in some sense, his conventionality springs from this basic anxiety about himself and the world. The critic Michael Wood has linked nervousness with Winterson's early female characters in referring to "the nervous, passionate young lesbians of Jeanette Winterson's fiction" (983). I would argue, however, that it is typically Winterson's male narrators, rather than her female characters, who manifest a marked nervousness. Though Duncan has chosen this transatlantic trip as a diversion from his everyday life, he admits, "Journeys make me nervous, so I was up too early on the morning of my leaving, opening and shutting my trunk and bothering the porters about safe storage" (19). Moreover, when he notices the young woman Gabriel Angel and her friend laughing and pointing at the ship, her conviviality disturbs him: "Whatever it was, they both laughed, which did nothing for my nerves. I wanted to be reassured by the imposing vessel before me, not have it picked at like a cotton bale" (20). Duncan's nervousness before the ship voyage suggests that he has traveled little and is more comfortable safe at home than sailing forth on a journey during which anything might happen.
- 8 In this respect, Duncan is akin to the male narrator in Winterson's short story "The Green Man." This story echoes Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," mirroring the prosaic and circumscribed domestic world that Rossetti contrasted to a colorful, supernatural goblin marketplace. In Winterson's story, the male narrator is imprisoned by his suburban green lawn, confined out of timidity to one small square of a much larger and more mysterious world. The strange gypsies who come to town once a year, peddling their exotic wares, signify this mysteriousness, representing the world of license and strangeness that the narrator both yearns for and fears. The coming Midsummer holiday, with its tradition of "visions" and "strange dreams" and "lawlessness," also reminds him of his fears (141). In contrasting himself to his ancestors who used the holiday "to celebrate what they feared," he admits, "What I fear I avoid. What I fear I pretend does not exist. What I fear is quietly killing me. Would there were a festival for my fears, a ritual burning of what is coward in me, what is lost in me. Let the light in before it is too late" (141-2). These comments, coupled with his initial resistance to the gypsies' siren song, betray the same kind of nervousness that Duncan experiences before his ship sets sail: a fear of the mysterious, the unknown, and the unpredictable. And this disposition later contributes to Duncan's inability to connect with Gabriel Angel.
- 9 Perhaps as a manifestation of his nervousness, Duncan is almost obsessively controlling and orderly, a characteristic that is reflected superficially in his physical appearance. He reflects, "It is early in the morning, not yet six o'clock. I have dressed carefully. My tie is even and my shoes are well polished and double knotted. Anyone can look at me now" (29). In addition to this fastidiousness about his clothes, Duncan also worries about order on the ship. So, when the young woman, Gabriel Angel, is booked to share his cabin, he immediately resolves to "straighten [the matter] out" (23). He had expected a man for a cabin mate, "some tough guy who wanted late night Scotch and a pack of cards" (23). And both the disruption of his conventional expectations as well as his belief in the proper order of things for men and woman make him uncomfortable. As he says, in a comment that reflects his concern with keeping things properly

separated and categorized, “When you dig under the surface, past the necessities, men and women don’t mix” (23).

- 10 Duncan’s preference for a careful, orderly life connects him with two other Winterson narrators, both men and both gardeners. In “The Green Man,” the narrator describes how much time he spends on horticulture in his circumscribed suburban world. He explains, “I have taken great pains to neaten the garden. It is a triumph of restraint. Although it is summer and clematis and rose would garland my head if I let them I have clipped their easy virtue into something finer. They climb, they decorate, they do not spread” (135). Here the natural beauty of the clematis and rose would be his, if only he gave them license; he prefers, however, to keep them as controlled and confined as he himself is in his green square of world. Similarly, in Winterson’s *The Passion*, after the French soldier Henri is imprisoned in an island insane asylum for a crime of passion, his female friend, Villanelle, encourages him to escape and be free. Henri refuses partly because Villanelle will not allow him to marry her or control her life, and, unable to possess her with his passion, he prefers to stay in the island asylum (152).<sup>2</sup> So, instead of joining Villanelle in freedom, he works away at an asylum garden that gives him the controlled contentment he was unable to find in the rough-and-tumble, war-torn world at large.
- 11 Henri’s choice to stay on his safe island sanctuary leads Villanelle to wonder if “perhaps he has lost himself” (150), and this lack of self-identity plagues Duncan as well. Early in the story, Duncan admits to a penchant for “invisible worlds” and adds tellingly, “mostly I’m part of the invisible world myself” (20). Then also, for some odd reason, perhaps fear, perhaps to aid his voyeurism, before the ship sets sail he sits near its gangway “hunched up in a roll of rope” (20), observing passers-by. This role of rope serves as a metaphor for the way in which his self is bound and hidden. Duncan himself is vaguely aware of his insubstantial self-identity. In contrasting his ever-disappearing self to the vibrant self he sees in Gabriel, he generalizes about the nature of selfhood by saying, “You thought you were going to be somebody until you slip down into the nobody that you are. I’m telling you because I know” (25).
- 12 Indeed, Duncan’s self has slipped down beneath layers of convention. This conventionality is especially evident in his choice of work. Despite his attraction to stories (19) and to “invisible worlds” (20), he has chosen a profession that values neither of those things. Introducing himself to Gabriel Angel, he blandly reports: “I’m a business man. I do business” (24). In choosing a conventional profession that ill-suits his temperament, Duncan once again bears a resemblance to *The Passion*’s Henri. A gentle, sensitive soul, Henri nonetheless joins Napoleon’s army when, amidst the ennui of ordinary life in the French countryside, his village is hit by an epidemic-like passion for Napoleon. Once he gets to the army, he wants “to be a drummer” (5), but these musical inclinations are quickly quashed when he is assigned to be Napoleon’s cook. Even this job at first inspires his creative instincts, as he “imagine[s] a training as a pastry cook building delicate towers of sugar and cream” (5). Unfortunately, though, the army world, like Duncan’s business world, offers no outlet for his creative aspirations, and he is assigned to an undesirable role wringing chickens’ necks for Napoleon’s dinner. Thus, Henri’s profession ends up being as grotesque as Duncan’s is bland, and both jobs constrain each man’s creative instincts like a role of rough rope. Sadly, Duncan, like Henri, is bound by conventions that are at odds with his inner strivings.<sup>3</sup>

- 13 Both Duncan and Henri find their self-identities smothered in part because of the male models they associate with or admire. In reflecting on the ideal male, Duncan thinks to himself, "A man shouldn't be too introspective. It weakens him" (21). But when Duncan applies that male model to himself, one realizes how ill it suits him. After all, the entire story represents an effort, however halting and restrained, to search out his self-identity. Duncan's ill-fated male modeling is further exemplified when he thinks to himself, "[Lack of introspection] is the difference between Tennessee Williams and Ernest Hemingway. I'm a Hemingway man myself although I don't believe it is right to hunt lions" (21). Here Duncan models himself upon Hemingway, even though Hemingway's trademark qualities are not his own. For, he ethically objects to Hemingway's passion for hunting.
- 14 In a similar way, *The Passion's* Henri admires and follows Napoleon, despite the fact that Napoleon's warmongering is deeply antithetical to his sensitive soul. But Henri is smitten by a romantic passion for Napoleon out of a desire to have something or someone in which to believe.<sup>4</sup> He explains, "We're more or less religious in our village and we honour the priest who tramps seven miles to bring us the wafer, but it doesn't pierce our hearts" (9). Napoleon does pierce their hearts. Indeed, before the war a priest friend predicts to Henri, "[Napoleon will] call you... like God called Samuel and you'll go" (17). The priest's prediction proves true, and when Henri is called, he feels graced by a "miracle" for having been "chosen" (19). But the godlike Napoleon turns out to be self-centered, power-hungry, and brutal, whereas Henri's own character is such that even in the agricultural fields at home, he can kill troublesome moles only "by looking the other way" (31). And in the killing fields of Napoleon's war, Henri spends more time dragging bodies off the battleground than adding bodies to it; as Villanelle reports, "he had been in the army eight years without so much as wounding another man. Eight years of battle and the worst he'd done was to kill more chickens than he could count (147). The male models that guide Duncan and Henri hold particular power perhaps because those models add drama to their ordinary lives. As Henri says of Napoleon, "He made sense out of dullness" (20). But the order and meaning that Napoleon and Hemingway offer carries with it the cost of each man's self. This cost is made clear by both Henri's eventual insanity and Duncan's emotional outburst at the end of the story. As Duncan surveys the ship's deck in his isolation, he remarks, "I wish the wind would drop. A man looks silly with tears in his eyes" (30). By the end of the story, one senses that Duncan is suffering for his self-suppression, and this reaction to the wind is natural both physically and emotionally. Yet, Duncan wants to suppress his self-expression out of a conventional fear of what men should and should not do in public.
- 15 As with Henri in *The Passion*, Duncan's conventionality is linked in subtle ways with his religious upbringing. Duncan comes from a religious background and is still guided by literal "facts" from the Bible. When he first meets Gabriel Angel, he believes she "should be a man" because in the Bible "Angels are men. Look at Raphael and Michael" (22). "Gabriel is a man's name," he insists (22). To which she replies, "Gabriel is an angel's name" (22). Duncan also relies on his biblical framework to explain why the ship's staff put a female in his cabin in the first place. He says, "The Purser, like me, like any normal person guided by Bible basics, had assumed Gabriel's name was a man's name. That's why we had been yoked together" (23). And later, as Duncan is trying to

resist Gabriel's attractiveness, he reflects on the biblical Fall story, using it as a life lesson to beware of women bearing fruit. He says:

Eight days at sea. One day longer than God needed to invent the whole world, including its holiday pattern. Two days longer than he took to make [Gabriel's] Grandmother Eve and my Grandfather Adam. This time I am not falling for the apple. (24)

- 16 All of these examples show how Duncan's narrow biblical perspective limits his sense of what is possible and constrains him to an undue cautiousness.
- 17 But just as Duncan's biblical religious perspective defines his conventionality, so Gabriel's spiritual and otherworldly nature plays a subversive role, unsettling the conventional order of things. Her name alone illustrates this otherworldly freedom. For, if Gabriel "is an angel's name," it goes beyond traditional male/female categories; her supernatural nature, implied by her name, allows her to straddle the worlds of male and female, slipping into and out of those worlds as deftly as the web-footed woman Villanelle navigates from one Venetian canal to another. In commenting on Winterson's disruption of customary or normal categories such as gender, Laura Doan suggests, "[Winterson's] fiction is a serious invitation to readers to imagine the emancipation of 'normal' and 'natural' from the exclusive and totalizing domain of patriarchal and heterosexual authority. The emergence of new paradigms throughout Winterson's work reverses, relativizes, and problematizes notions of normal and natural in order to 'naturalize' cultural oddities, monstrosities, abnormalities, and conformities..." (154). In "Atlantic Crossing," Winterson undermines ordinary conventions for the normal or natural through the supernatural woman Gabriel Angel.
- 18 As an example of Gabriel's supernatural or otherworldly character, she, unlike Duncan, seems to be attuned to something other than the materialist world. As she and Duncan are chatting on the deck together about love and other things, "she start[s] talking about a man with stars in his hair and arms stretched out like wings to hold her" (25). At this talk of a reality beyond the ordinary, Duncan is frightened. He says, "I moved away as soon as I could" (25). Ironically, although the religiously-schooled Duncan seems to know the facts of the Bible—the details of the Fall story (24) or the gender of Raphael and Michael (21)—he seems to have no apprehension of a living spiritual reality. But Gabriel Angel, whose name tags her as a spiritual being, speaks of a vision that could easily have come from the Bible's Book of Revelation, though it is a personal variation on John's vision of the "Son of Man" (Rev. 1: 12-16). This vision has a vivid presence in her life, which enlivens and fulfills her. As Duncan comments at the end of the story in imagining Gabriel's future contrasted to his own, "The sun is rising now, but it is 93,000,000 miles away and I can't get warm. Soon Gabriel Angel will come on deck in her short sleeved blouse and carrying a pair of borrowed binoculars. She won't be cold. She has the sun inside her" (29-30). This second "sun," I would suggest, refers metaphorically to the Son of God, but in the heterodox Blakean sense of Jesus Christ the Imagination. For the "sun inside" Gabriel enables her to see the world, even with "borrowed binoculars," as a place enchanted by romantic possibilities (25).
- 19 Duncan's perception of the "sun inside" Gabriel also points to the transparency of her vibrant soul and its harmony with her psyche. In contrast to Duncan and other hidebound male narrators, Gabriel's self is unbound by ordinary conventions. She is an "aviator" by profession (24), a job that is unorthodox for a woman, but symbolic of her free-spiritedness. And she seems to have been uniquely destined for the aviator's



life. Duncan explains, “She told me she was born in 1937, the day that Amelia Earhart had become the first woman to complete the Atlantic crossing, solo flight. Her granddaddy, as she calls him, told her it was an omen, and that’s why they called her Gabriel, ‘bringer of Good News,’ a bright flying thing” (24). Significantly, one of the few male characters in Winterson’s stories who seems to have found happiness is also a pilot. In “The World and Other Places,” the male narrator spends his childhood days building “model aeroplanes” (89), and when he grows up and joins the Air Force, he returns to his parents’ home feeling “like an angel on a visit. I felt like Gabriel come to tell the shepherds the Good News” (94). His exuberance and joy match that of Gabriel Angel and contrast with Duncan’s resigned unhappiness. Both aviators represent the joy that springs from fulfilling one’s authentic dreams and, in Blakean fashion, acting on one’s desires.

- 20 In addition to Gabriel’s self-integrity, she has a romantic faith in the way of the world that differs from Duncan’s nervousness. As she assures Duncan, transfiguring the Bible’s Sermon on the Mount to suit herself, “I am poor but even the poorest inherit something, their daddy’s eyes, their mother’s courage. I inherited the dreams” (25). By contrast, as Duncan sees things, “the world isn’t interested in a little black girl’s dreams” (25). Here Gabriel’s faith contrasts with Duncan’s fundamental skepticism, illustrating a key difference between Gabriel’s spirituality and Duncan’s literal-minded religiosity. Whereas Gabriel’s faith seems to make all things possible, Duncan’s “Bible basics” realism hobbles and hinders him.
- 21 Gabriel’s faith in the world manifests itself in her comfort with change and risk, again a contrast to Duncan’s controlling orderliness. As if to emphasize Gabriel’s risk-taking and inclination to aspire, when she and Duncan divvy up the cabin bunks, she immediately chooses the top one, explaining simply, “I like heights” (23). In this respect, Gabriel parallels *The Passion’s* Villanelle, who chooses life as a gambler, a risk-taking profession that ties her to nothing but the wheel of fortune. This female comfort with change and risk, according to another Winterson story “Orion,” represents a realistic apprehension of the nature of things. In that story, the Greek goddess Artemis is contrasted with the god/hunter Orion. Artemis’s comfort with hanging in the stars amidst an ever-evolving universe reflects her acceptance of metamorphosis as a metaphysical state of the universe (61). Describing a universe of Heraclitean change, the narrator says,

The fiery circle that surrounded [Artemis] contained all the clues she needed to recognize that life is for a moment in one shape, then released into another. Monuments and cities would fade away like the people who had built them. No resting place or palace could survive the light years that lay ahead. There was no history that would not be rewritten, and the earliest days were already too far away to see. (61)
- 22 With this cosmic vision, Artemis is able to be at home with homelessness:

The stars show her how to hang in space supported by nothing at all. Without medals or certificates or territories she owns, she can burn as they do, travelling through time until time stops and eternity changes things again. She has noticed that change doesn’t hurt her. (61)
- 23 Here Artemis dramatically differs from Orion, who becomes a monument in the skies, but “isn’t always at home. Dazzling as he is, like some fighter pilot riding the sky, he glows very faint, if at all, in November” (63). Artemis’s brilliance illustrates that Gabriel’s and Villanelle’s love of change, chance, and risk is not just a romantic illusion,



but a profound way of apprehending the world's fundamental being. Indeed, such otherworldly wisdom may contribute to the glowing presence of the "sun inside" Gabriel Angel.

- 24 Winterson's female characters, then, differ significantly from the traditional Victorian "angel in the house." In place of that familiar figure, Winterson's fiction typically features a resident demon—the male spirit, caged and bound and struggling to possess his free-spirited female counterpart. Paulina Palmer has observed this plot pattern in *The Passion*, which frequently demonstrates "[t]he oppressive effect which heterosexual conventions and expectations have on women" (168). Similarly, "Atlantic Crossing" shows Duncan, possessed by heterosexual conventions of courtship and marriage, and driven by the desire to make Gabriel Angel his own. He imagines "running away" with her on a trip laced with romantic vagaries: "I could have held her hand through Martinique, Las Palmas, Tenerife. I could have put my arm around her waist through the straights of Gibraltar" (27). Here, Duncan's language reveals his desire to hold and confine Gabriel. And ultimately, he tries to tie her down to marriage (29), confident that he is a suitable mate. He explains, "I am materially comfortable. I can provide. I could protect. I have a lot to offer a young woman in a strange place" (29). What Duncan fails to realize, as he wonders why Gabriel does not want him (29), is that Gabriel is quite comfortable in strange places, and though Duncan is materially sufficient, he is spiritually inadequate as a soul mate.
- 25 Duncan's spiritual emptiness links him with yet another male narrator in Winterson's short story collection. In "Disappearance II," the narrator, Samuel Wisbech, has lived in the same house, in Orlando-like fashion, for "three hundred and thirty years" (124), despite his fifty-three years of age. As Samuel explains, "It was my father's house, and his father's before him, and so on, back through history as though history were a family album" (119). Both Samuel and his house, however, suffer from a state of dilapidation. When a tourist at the house begs him to "be himself" and put aside his formal posturing, Samuel says, "Myself? Itself? The house, me, me, the house. My voice sounds like the wind at the window. My skin is the texture of flaking plaster. I am upholstered like an old man, an old house, there is decay on us both" (126). In contrast to Samuel, his mother and the other women who once inhabited the house have long fled from it, his mother having found the horse stables more suitable to her "wild thing's nature" (121). At the end of the story, he tries to recover the women's vanished voices but he realizes that "they are all in there [on the other side of the wall] and I am here, caught in my house, room by room, unable to find the only room where there is peace" (130). Samuel is comfortable and "safe" in his house (128), but he lacks peace. And perhaps he also lacks a living soul, for the story begins and ends with the disconcerting discovery that his house has "one room missing" (119). Samuel's housebound state, therefore, serves as a metaphor for the barren state of his soul. Both he and Duncan are materially fulfilled, but spiritually empty. And that emptiness may well explain why the female tourist talks less and less the longer she stays in Samuel's house (129) and why Gabriel Angel never answers Duncan's marriage proposals.
- 26 With the portrait of hidebound, religious men and unconventional, otherworldly women in "Atlantic Crossing" and other Winterson fictions, one might ask whether or not Winterson is simply—and even simplistically—reinforcing familiar binaries, such as male and female or religion and spirituality. From one perspective, she seems to do just that. In the case of gender, the reviewer Rosellen Brown once went so far as to assert

that Winterson's "stories feel like pretexts" for her "vengeful hostility to men and marriage... and her compensatory vision of women as the stronger, more sane and even physically dominating sex" (10). And inasmuch as it is often the male characters in Winterson's short stories who need salvation from conventional conformity, and the female characters who construct more flexible and creative alternatives for self-fulfillment, there may be some truth to Brown's criticism.<sup>5</sup>

- 27 An analogous privileging of spirituality over religion is evident in Winterson's fiction as well as in *Art [Objects]*, her collection of nonfiction essays on art.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Winterson cites "lack of spirituality" as a major defect of the "Realist" worldview inherited from Victorian thinkers (AO 137-8), her attitude towards "religion" is sometimes ambivalent, but often directly critical. Simply calling to mind a list of religious figures from her fiction—Pastor Spratt, Jeanette's mother, Georgiana, and Duncan—illustrates the degree to which characters representative of conventional religious institutions are humorously mocked or implicitly criticized. By contrast, those Winterson characters, such as Villanelle, who ignore roles dictated by scripture, dogma, ritual, or religious tradition find fulfillment. For, the author seems to suggest that traditional religious trappings constrain the individual and hinder him or her from plumbing the sacred depths of subjective experience. Thus, even as Winterson continues to borrow from Christian religious tradition, for instance in her use of Scriptural language and narratives, "she also resists the Christian institutions that derive from those same Biblical texts..." (Eide 288).

- 28 What she does credit religion with, however, is opening our vision to other realities. In *Art [Objects]*, she writes,

We think we live in a world of sense-experience and what we can touch and feel, see and hear, is the sum of our reality. Although neither physics nor philosophy accepts this, neither physics nor philosophy has been as successful as religion used to be at persuading us of the doubtfulness of the seeming-solid world. This is a pity if only because while religion was a matter of course, the awareness of other realities was also a matter of course. (Winterson 135-6)

- 29 For this reason, she asserts, "the arts fare much better alongside religion than alongside either capitalism or communism. The god-instinct and the art-instinct both apprehend more than the physical biological material world" (AO 136). In this sense, she believes that religion once opened up imaginative spaces that the "Realist" worldview has since closed.
- 30 And indeed, the title of Winterson's short story collection—*The World and Other Places*—hints at the importance of recognizing realities beyond this world, with its fragmented bodies, warring opposites, and "dead vision" (AO 145). Therefore, I would ultimately argue that Winterson's stories offer a double perspective—the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. For Winterson, seeing things in terms of simple binaries is seeing them with the fractured, "dead vision" of a fallen world—through Napoleon's monocular stare rather than Villanelle's kaleidoscopic vision. To the extent that Winterson critiques such "dead vision," such fallenness, her fictional worlds retain traces of binaristic alienation.
- 31 But if art necessarily begins from the fractured "world as it is," Winterson thinks that it must transform the world as well; critic Louise Humphries captures this aesthetic credo in saying that for Winterson "art springs from life, but transcends it" (6). And Winterson herself notes, "Art is a way into other realities, other personalities... Strong

texts work along the borders of our minds and alter what already exists. They could not do this if they merely reflected what already exists" (26). Like the "strong texts" she describes, Winterson's own fictions push beyond binaries that "already exist," offering a transcendent vision of freer or fuller realities. That sense of the transcendent leads her to create character ideals who, at their best, are neither male nor female, or who comprehend both in their complexity: the androgynous creature Winterson admired in Woolf's *Orlando* and recapitulated in characters such as Villanelle and Gabriel Angel.

- 32 Furthermore, if readers shake the kaleidoscope of their own critical vision ever so slightly, they might see how distinctions between even religion and spirituality shift and ultimately slip away in Winterson's fiction. For Winterson, art itself functions as a kind of religion, offering knowledge of the transcendent, a source of salvation, and a vehicle for human communion. Her sense of the transcendent places faith in a reality beyond what meets the eyes and in a power capable of conjuring such realities. She writes in *Art [Objects]*, "The earth is not flat and neither is reality. Reality is continuous, multiple, simultaneous, complex, abundant and partly invisible. The imagination alone can fathom this and it reveals its fathomings through art" (151). Indeed, because art can fathom such hidden depths, Winterson sees a marked spiritual character in its language. About such language, she confesses, "Now, many years after a secular Reformation, I still think of language as something holy" (AO 153). Moreover, language is not just holy in her view; it is also salvific. Recalling the power of the holy word in her own childhood, she observes, "I used books as Bram Stoker's Van Helsing uses holy wafers, to mark out a charmed place and to save my soul" (AO 122).
- 33 Finally, though, Winterson believes that art goes beyond private consolation or individual salvation, taking one out of oneself and linking individual souls both to other readers and other realities (AO 136); in this sense, art is not limited by the radical subjectivity of "mere" spirituality. Indeed, in its root sense, "religion," from the Latin *religare*, means simply to "bind together." And inasmuch as art binds us together, enabling all human beings to partake of the fruits of the spirit, it offers a kind of religious communion that renders us both whole and holy. Perhaps, then, Winterson does not wholly reject religion. Instead, she has resurrected a religion of art, meant to restore an age of belief not just in this world, but in other places, too.

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## NOTES

1. Two notable exceptions include Laura Bollinger's 1994 essay "Models for Female Loyalty: The Biblical Ruth in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*" and Marian Eide's 2001 essay "Passionate Gods and Desiring Women: Jeanette Winterson, Faith, and Sexuality." Clearly, though, more work needs to be done to understand the role of religion in Winterson's fiction.

2. Given how often Henri himself has been controlled by passion for another (Napoleon, for instance), it may seem odd that he should desire to control someone else. Yet, as Judith Seaboyer suggests, Henri seems to possess a subterranean drive for power and potential for violence, shadowed forth in the figures of the cook and Napoleon, who function as "doubles" for Henri in Seaboyer's interpretation (504). She writes, "The reason Henri gives for his grief, and the ostensible reason for his insanity, is Villanelle's refusal to marry him, her failure to match his passion with her own. His grief is real, as is his love, but his behavior, and his belief that to return to the world would necessitate a return to killing, suggests that his decision is a response to his war experiences. The return of the repressed in the form of the cook triggers in Henri a capacity for violence he had denied, and the asylum, for all its horror,

offers a place of safety within which he is able to contain what he perceives to be *his own terrifying potential*" (Seaboyer 504; italics mine).

3. In this respect, Duncan and Henri resemble Tom, the male narrator who struggles to define an authentic self in Winterson's story "Newton." Because his "Newtonian" neighborhood is bound by stale laws and customs, Tom must hide his true, "quantum" self to avoid ridicule for being abnormal (166). For instance, he has an intellectual's penchant for reading, but because this pastime is so unusual in his hidebound neighborhood, he must hide his Camus in the fridge when his neighbor stops to visit (166).

4. Paulina Palmer accounts for Henri's "hero worship" of Napoleon in Freudian terms, suggesting that his adulation is "oedipal in nature" because he once refers to Napoleon as a "little father" (166). In addition to this psychoanalytic theory, a religious explanation of Henri's adulation is called for, given the explicitly religious language used to describe his passion.

5. Lisa Moore seems to echo Brown's point about Winterson's privileging of female over male in arguing that Winterson uses the male perspective to support lesbian relationships by having the male envy and admire the quality of such relationships. She offers Henri as an example of this, inasmuch as he longs for, but is excluded from, the passionate intensity of Villanelle's relationship with the "Queen of Spades" (112).

6. In using the terms "religion" and "spirituality," I here borrow the recent definitions put forward in Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's 2005 sociological study *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Although Heelas and Woodhead acknowledge that spirituality can be part of religion, they suggest that "religion" emphasizes an external, wholly Other "source of significance and authority to which individuals must conform at the expense of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives," with conformity entailing obedience to a set of "life as" roles dictated by "scriptures, dogmas, rituals, and so on" (6). By contrast, they suggest "spirituality" emphasizes "inner sources of significance and authority and the cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective-lives" (Heelas and Woodhead 6).

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