



Universidad del País Vasco Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA Y ALEMANA Y DE TRADUCCIÓN E INTERPRETACIÓN
INGELES ETA ALEMANIAR FILOLOGI ETA ITZULPENGINTZA ETA INTERPRETAZIOKO SALA

TRASVASES CULTURALES:

LITERATURA
CINE
TRADUCCIÓN

3

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Servicio Editorial
UNIVERSIDAD DEL PAÍS VASCO



Argitalpen Zerbitzua
EUSKAL HERRIKO UNIBERTSITATEA

La publicación de este volumen ha sido posible gracias al patrocinio de:

Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea
Departamento de Cultura de la Diputación Foral de Álava
Departamento de Educación, Universidades e Investigación del Gobierno Vasco
Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana y de Traducción e Interpretación

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Euskal Herriko Unibertsitateko Argitalpen Zerbitzua

Portada/Azala: Sixto González

I.S.B.N.: 84-8373-356-0

Depósito Legal/Lege Gordailua: BI-1569-01

Composición/Konposizioa: Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco
Euskal Herriko Unibertsitateko Argitalpen Zerbitzua

Impresión/Inprimatzea: Itxaropena, S.A.
Araba Kalea, 45 - 20800 Zarautz (Gipuzkoa)

Written words turned into moving Images:
Jeanette Winterson Translates *Oranges Are Not the Only
Fruit for the Screen*

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Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is the title of Jeanette Winterson's first and only «explicitly lesbian text» (Allen 1996: 49) to date¹. Published in 1985, *Oranges* won the Whitebread Award for First Novel and contributed to Winterson's general acclaim as an extremely promising young writer. Being a lesbian herself, many critics were misled by the pretended autobiographical nature of a novel which, apart from using the author's name for its main character, also shares many features with Winterson's private life. This fact might have contributed to a certain extent to the enormous success the book had in Britain.

Five years later Winterson was asked to translate and adapt her book for the small screen. The final outcome, a three-episode television drama, was first broadcast by the BBC in January 1990 and, although *Oranges* «challenges the virtues of the home, the power of the church and the supposed normality of heterosexuality» (Winterson 1994: 81), the screening was a relative success with «an audience of 2.9, 4.4, 3.9 million» (Brooks 1994: 131). It was moreover surprisingly well received by mainstream critics who referred to it as «art television» or «quality drama». Even the academy contributed to this general acclaim² by granting the series two BAFTA awards for best drama and best actress in 1991 (Barr 1991: 30).

¹ *Boating for Beginners* (1985b), *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *Written on the Body* (1992), *Art & Lies* (1994), *Gut Symmetries* (1997) and *The World and Other Places* (1998) show a certain ambiguity in the treatment of lesbianism which has led Lisa Moore (1995: 105) to designate both characters and structures in Winterson's fiction under the category of the «virtual lesbian».

² Hilary Hinds (1991: 129) explains that «Oranges was read in a cultural context where high-cultural 'art' had been established as separable from questions of politics, sexual or

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit exemplifies what Alan Sinfield (1994: x) has called «recuperative manipulations of mainstream culture.» It is commonly agreed that the novel is a postmodern parodic re-writing of one of the most representative literary models of hero development, the Bildungsroman, which rests on the necessary separation from and rejection of the mother, as part of the oedipal phase, if the hero wants to succeed in his process of maturation. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* tells the story of Jeanette's quest for subjectivity and (homo)sexuality but rejects this traditional appropriation of the theory of the subject by the masculine and «parodies Biblical narratives enabling Winterson to construct a maturation narrative that need not reject female/familial loyalty and that can address lesbian maturation» (Bollinger 1994: 375). For Winterson then «maturation consists in the return to, not the flight from, familial and maternal ties» (Bollinger 1994: 374) thus emphasizing the mother-daughter bonding, as a counter-narrative of conventional masculine bondage that highlights female specificity and gender difference.

Talking about the process of transposing her book to the screen, Jeanette Winterson (1994: 71) has said that «Faithful adaptations make bad television» and that «It is better to have a new vision that is faithful to the spirit of the work, without worrying about fitting everything in, or even keeping the same order of events.» Negative remarks coming from gay and lesbian critics accuse Jeanette Winterson of having sacrificed the critical strength of her lesbian narrative text for the sake of the prime-time TV slot. Thus Gina Wisker (1994: 6) argues that

Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* appears much less challenging and radical when televised, the lesbian element seen as one example of a tomboyish rebellion motif. Television in particular, reaching a very large, home-based audience, is clearly in need of some radicalising if stereotypical representations of women and defused versions of alternatives are not to continue to dominate the popular culture.

It is my contention that what Wisker understands as a pitfall is precisely Winterson's strength when translating her narrative text for the small screen. In an interview with Alice Thomson (1992: 5), Winterson explained that this project was an attempt «to subvert the relentless realism of the medium [television] and use it for her own ends.» Taking into account that words and images are two completely different discourses with their own specific rules,

otherwise» and attributes the favourable reception of *Oranges* to a specific socio-cultural context in which freedom of speech had been seriously threatened. Firstly, due to the passing of Section 28 of the Local Government Act banning the 'promotion of homosexuality' in 1988; secondly, due to the death threat against Salman Rushdie by religious fundamentalism on the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1989.

it was to be expected that narrative text and television adaptation might not be too faithful to each other. What this paper aims to demonstrate is that Winterson's adaptation of her novel for television is as experimental and anti linear in form as the novel itself, and that it is equally successful in its attempt both to denounce and undermine the power of such institutions as the Evangelical Church and heterosexuality, which threaten to suffocate the individual within the community, and to create an open space for the coming out of Jess as a mature lesbian subject. To do so I will analyse Winterson's manipulative use of Biblical narratives and her framing each episode of the series with three surrealistic sequences whose function mirrors Winterson's interspersing of fairy tales in the narrative text.

The importance of the Bible as an intertext in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the written text, is undeniable. Jeanette Winterson was raised in a strict religious atmosphere which conditioned her development from childhood into adulthood and which accounts for her choosing the names of the first eight books of the Old Testament as titles for the chapters of her first book³. Laurel Bollinger (1994) and Tess Cosslett (1998) have already dealt with the explicit connection that Winterson establishes between the (hi)story of the people of Israel and the (hi)story of the female character in her fiction. Israel is the people chosen by God much like Jeanette is chosen by her mother, who adopts her as an offering to the Lord⁴. Jeanette, however, will not comply with her mother's patriarchal expectations and her unorthodox sexual preferences will turn her into an exile from religion, home and mother. Especially significant in this respect is the last chapter, «Ruth», which transcends the Biblical story of the Book of Ruth⁵ and defines the key issues of the book:

Winterson can ignore the parts that do not speak to her themes: Ruth's wooing of and marriage to Boaz, and the birth of her son who will ensure the lineage of David. Winterson's story instead circles round themes of exile and return, female bonding, mother/daughter relations, loss and loneliness, female autonomy, in a non-linear order, to produce an ambiguous, open ending. (Cosslett 1998:17)

Some critics argue that biblical echoes seem to have been relegated in the television series to grotesque explicit visual references which, as Marylin

³ Tess Cosslett (1998: 16) analyses «the precise relation of these chapter titles to their contents» and points to an alternation between Winterson's parodic and serious mood while using the contents of the stories told in the Old Testament.

⁴ To a certain extent this may be read as a parodic reference to the story of Abraham who also offers his only son, Isaac, for the sake of his covenant with God.

⁵ For an analysis of the Book of Ruth in feminist psychoanalytic terms see Ward Jouve 1998: 234-238.

Brooks (1994: 131) warns, «establish Jess's world as so bizarre as to normalise her own position as rebel and lesbian, conflating the two issues.» Yet this is only apparent. The intertextual function carried out by the subversive interplay of Biblical title and parodic content of the chapters in the written text is transposed in the television adaptation to the significant change of the main protagonist's name, Jess. This change of names might be read as Winterson's strategy to detach herself from her fiction and to silence any further association between her invented heroine and her own life. But Winterson's move may be explained better by resorting to a double intertextual argument. The importance that the Book of Ruth⁶ has in the written text has already been made manifest. What follows are the last lines of the Book of Ruth, according to the Authorised King James version of *The Bible* (Carrol & Prickett 1998: 330)

And the women her neighbours gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed: he *is* the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4: 17)

This naming of genealogies is a common feature of the Old Testament although its patriarchal significance is somehow subverted by some kind of a reversal of gender and power relations. Traditionally a patriarchal issue, this genealogy is initiated by Naomi in her role of woman *and* mother, and, still more significant in political terms, it comes to an end with the figure of Christ, whom the New Testament refers to as Son of David. The parodic re-writing of this genealogy in Winterson's text is one of the aims behind the changing of the heroine's name from Jeanette into Jess. In the television adaptation Jess becomes the lesbian version of the Biblical Jesse and, consequently, a precursor of a new figure of Christ, one which does not redeem the world from Sin but from Intolerance. By appropriating the Biblical name Jesse, for Jess, Winterson and the television serial very subtly go against the Law-of-the-Father because, as Nicole Ward Jouve (1998: 243) signals, «With the advent of Christ, the Word, comes the Incarnation of the Name. To invoke the name of Christ is to invoke the name of the Father.» Names are of the utmost importance for both Jeanette as author and as protagonist of her novel, since she sees this activity as an exercise in power,

Naming is a difficult and time-consuming process; it concerns essences, and it means power. But on the wild nights who can call you home? Only the one who knows your name. (1990: 165)

⁶ Jess's family is quite unconventional in that respect: William is no conventional pater familias and her mother has to adopt Jess because she refuses to have sex with her husband.

Therefore in the genealogy quoted from the Book of Ruth it is women that have and exercise power –much like the women in Jess’s community– by naming their offspring.

Winterson’s choice of the name Jess for her protagonist has further Biblical resonance. Apart from the Book of Ruth, the Old Testament contains only two other books that bear the name of a woman. These are the Book of Judith and the Book of Esther. Both of them are inspired in Biblical female models which contribute to the liberation of their nation from the oppression of patriarchy. Both of them belong to the Jewish community, which was considered hostile in the ancient world because of the singularity of their behaviour which opposed the system and went against the laws established by the King. Establishing a parallelism between Jewishness and lesbianism, Jess may be read as an acronym for both Judith and Esther and as such would preclude her own victory against the religious and sexual constraints of her own society. Patricia Duncker (1990: 228) has said that «Each time a lesbian woman insists on the truth without fear, she gives another woman the courage to live her life more honestly, and with greater courage.» Like Judith and Esther, Jess fights for the liberation of those who like herself «fall in love with the wrong people». Those are Miss Jewsbury’s words in the television series as she confesses Jess that she is also a lesbian. From that moment of recognition onwards, Jess will try to help Miss Jewsbury to accept her lesbian condition. Again names favour the contrast in attitude between these two characters. Unlike Jess, who is proud of her lesbianism and defies the strict morality of her community, Miss Jewsbury –whose surname makes explicit the connection between lesbianism and Jewishness mentioned above– refuses to fight and accepts her condition as shameful passive Other of society:

Jess: You hate it here. They hate you here. Why don’t you go away?

Miss Jewsbury: Where to? It’s the same wherever you go.

Jess: It’s not! It can’t be! You’ve got to fight.

Miss Jewsbury: Go home now, Jess. They’ll be wondering. (1994: 143)

The re-writing of the Books of Judith and Esther may thus be read as the interplay between two opposed representations of lesbian sexuality: Miss Jewsbury, the deviant lesbian, who posits herself as a victim of her lesbian condition and strives for normalcy; and Jess, the postmodern lesbian, who is proud of her sexual position and defies patriarchal conventions.

Oranges the narrative text, like most of Winterson’s fiction, is an experimental novel that rejects plot, linearity and closure, thus «retaining the high modernist hostility to time and plot» (Wood 1998: 187). The novel is told by a first-person homodiegetic female narrator who talks about her coming-out process in a fairly chronological way. Yet what could be a perfectly linear and

realistic account of the heroine's passage from childhood into adulthood is strangled by the interspersing of personal deconstructed versions of the fairy tale and of allegorical stories such as Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail, which reflect the protagonist's refusal to comply with the strict conventionality of her religious community. These flights into the realm of the fantastic are conscious attempts on the part of Jeanette Winterson to blur the limits between reality and fiction.

In the television adaptation, focalization and voice-over narration substitute the first-person homodiegetic narrator of the written text and the introduction of oneiric sequences at the beginning of each episode fulfils a similar function to that of the interspersing of fairy tales in the book.

Already in the first sequence of the film, the unobtrusive presence of the camera focusing on the action is dominated by a voice-over narrator in order to reinforce the idea that focalization is on the side of the protagonist, Jess. Thus, while the camera focuses on the streets of a small town in the North of England, we listen to Jess's voice uttering the exact words that constitute the beginning of the novel:

Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle. It didn't matter what. She was in the White Corner and that was that. She hung out the largest sheets on the windiest days. She wanted the Mormons to knock on the door. At election time in a Labour mill-town, my mother put a picture of the Conservative candidate in the window. She had never heard of mixed feelings; there were friends and there were enemies... (1994: 86)

This is the first cinematic strategy that Jeanette Winterson uses as a scriptwriter in order to do away with the illusion of reality. By reappearing both at the beginning and at the end of each episode, voice-over narration also helps to endow the serial with a circular pattern. Or rather a spiral pattern because the circle is never completed. Like the written text, the television adaptation shows two parallel presentations of Jess's story. On the one hand, the film is divided for screening purposes into three episodes which follow the pattern of realist narratives, namely: introduction, development and conclusion. None of the chapters is subtitled in an attempt to emphasize the notion of unity. But at the same time each episode is framed by a surrealist sequence, filmed with a hue of orange, which undermines the linearity of the film and opens up the way to a harsher, more threatening and more fantastic version of Jess's story. Its oneiric quality links it with the realm of the unconscious. The rest of this paper will concentrate on the textual analysis of these three sequences in an attempt to show the way in which they compress the most relevant political issues of Jeanette Winterson's agenda.

The first sequence begins with the sound of a fairly repetitive tune, much like that of a music box, and we see the backs of two girls wearing exactly the same clothes. The scene is shot in slow motion, a cinematic technique which helps to emphasize the fantastic nature of the action. Suddenly the camera focuses on the girls' faces and we recognize Emily Aston and Margery Withers, respectively, the two actresses who will play the role of Jess in the story, walking hand in hand through an old-fashioned fairground. This sequence transgresses all textual boundaries by making the flesh and blood actresses coexist with their fictional counterparts. At the same time this scene may be read as a metaphor of adolescence as that period of human development in which childhood and adulthood touch. The close-ups of their faces show an innocent smile fuelled by the illusion of the fairground. They seem to be attracted by the merry-go-round which helps with the presentation of the main characters: Jess's mother, Pastor Finch, Elsie, Jess's father, aunt May, Mrs Arkwright, Mrs Virtue, Cissy, Miss Jewsbury and Mrs Green. They all smile as they recognize Jess.

This presentation of characters is not casual. Rather on the contrary, it is hierarchically ordered and mirrors the actual status that each of the characters will have in the community to which Jess belongs. The strongest and most powerful character will undoubtedly be Jess's mother. She is not given a name in the story because she embodies the negative portrayal of motherhood that feminine experimental fiction uses in the battle against the Name-of-the-Father. Jess's is a mother who is completely on the side of patriarchy as both defender and instrument (Suleiman 1990: 137-138). Pastor Finch, for his part, stands as the main representative of religious authority. He is the Law-of-the-Father and as such he will displace Jess's father, who is a mere accompaniment in the story⁷. Although the whole company is laughing, the music suddenly becomes threatening. A fortune teller separates small Jess from Jess and, as the fortune teller reads the lines in small Jess's hand, she foresees her lesbianism: «You'll never marry», she says, «and you'll never be still.» While small Jess is scared by such a revelation, Jess is attracted by Melanie who is sitting at the entrance of the tunnel of love. She is wearing a black cloak and hood. She seems to be a witch in her hunted Gothic castle, with bats flying around. Yet Jess is fascinated by her and cannot look away from her. In the meantime, small Jess looks back on the people in the merry-go-round, asking for help, but she sees only the manic, whirling figures on the horses and the blinding lights.

The second sequence takes place inside the church. The opening scene is exactly the same as before. Small Jess and Jess, holding hands, walk slowly along the aisle towards the altar. From each side of the aisle hands stretch out to grab them, though none restrains them. Pastor Finch is there, placed at a

⁷ See note number 6.

physically superior position that makes him stand out from the rest of the congregation. There is a cross at his back which makes us think of the figure of Christ as Saviour, and also of Leonardo da Vinci's picture which stands for the humanist symbol that presents man as centre and reflection of the universe. In the meantime, the congregation go on singing a psalm in a frenzied way. Again quite suddenly as they reach the platform and turn back, they realize that all the congregation, Pastor Finch included, have animal heads. Jess begins to scream and the symbolic «anthropos» is completed with Jess's body that stands now as the victim of this religious sacrifice. This sequence reverses the notions of queer and straight because, in contrast to what Patricia Duncker (1990: 227) sees as a protective move among lesbians when she says that «all of us at some time in our lives, use masks and disguises in the straight world,» Jess is the only one in the sequence who is bare faced. It is the rest of the congregation that wear animal masks in an attempt to emphasize the strangeness of this community and their ability to impose their distorted truth on individuals.

Finally the third sequence leads us back to the fairground. Now we see all the characters riding round and round in dodgem cars. Small Jess and Jess share a car. Suddenly Jess's mother bumps Jess's car and she is followed by May and Cissy. Once more it is women that oppress the natural development of Jess's subjectivity and sexuality. Their attack is followed by the Pastor's, Elsie and Miss Jewsbury's, who share a car as the text pinpoints their lesbianism, until it is completed with Melanie's attack. The cars close in and corral Jess. We see all the characters putting on masks that conceal their identities but Jess gets up and walks away without looking back. She leaves small Jess behind to signal that she is ready to walk alone into the world of adulthood, away from the familiar and into the unknown but open space that lies before her. This third sequence shows Jess as a proud lesbian who in order to live her own sexuality freely has to escape from her friends, her home and her community. However, as the real chapter comes to an end, we notice that Jess comes back to her origins, to her home and to her mother so the female bonding that was apparently cut in the opening scene is maintained in the series in like manner as it was maintained in the written text.

In spite of their using completely different discourses, both narrative text and television adaptation share much more than the mere title. Although the translation of written words into moving images forces Winterson to decide on those aspects that have to be modified, nothing is definitely lost on the way for Winterson manages to balance linearity and realism with the circular structure of the series; the camera unobtrusively presents the action but focalization is on the side of the protagonist who appears as a voice over narrator at the beginning and end of the film; religious discourses are parodically re-written in the appropriation Winterson makes of the three Old-Testament books that bear the name of women; and the world of fantasy, represented by the interspersing of fairy

tales in the novel, is alluded to not only by the explicit bent for storytelling that certain characters have in the series but also by the oneiric and surreal sequences that open each of the three episodes. By blurring the limits between reality and fiction, Jeanette Winterson questions and subverts givens: she rejects narrative linearity and experiments with what she has described as a spiral presentation of events which make of her lesbian coming-out story a positive re-writing of lesbian subjectivity. Ultimately written words and moving images turn out to be equally productive if they are used deftly.

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