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Les normes de genre à l'épreuve de la représentation des corps.

'The Poetics of Sex', Jeanette Winterson (1993): A Reappropriation of Eroticism from a Feminine Perspective

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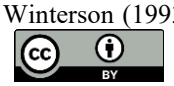
Abstract
Is there such thing as a lesbian canon? Since the poetic works of Sappho, many pieces have celebrated love between two women and constituted a tradition far from being entirely known. Among this literary tradition, it seems inevitable to discuss the work of a writer who has contributed to laud lesbian desire to a great extent. Jeanette Winterson has been a well-established English figure since the publication of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), *The Passion* (1987), as well as *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). Yet it is a less famous piece that I shall consider here. In the short story 'The Poetics of Sex', Winterson proposes a complex reappropriation of eroticism from a feminine point of view. In order to make her contribution to the lesbian canon, Winterson celebrates the lesbian body by resuscitating the voice of the ancient Greek poetess Sappho, modernised under the features of a twentieth-century young writer. Intertextual roots intertwine in the text as Winterson also makes use of the figure of the painter Pablo Picasso, feminised under the traits of a female painter named Picasso, and thus spectacularises this lesbian body, emerging from the short story as an irreducible piece of art.

Keywords
Jeanette Winterson, *jouissance*, eroticism, intertextuality, lesbian body, gender, ekphrasis, Pablo Picasso, Sappho, feminism

LETELLIER Marion, 'The Poetics of Sex', Jeanette Winterson (1993): A Reappropriation of Eroticism from a Feminine Perspective, Cahiers du CRINI n°3, 2023 

Résumé

Existe-t-il un canon lesbien? Depuis l'oeuvre poétique de Sappho, de nombreux textes célèbrent l'amour entre deux femmes et constituent une tradition encore méconnue à maints égards. Dans le cadre de cette tradition il paraît inévitable de s'intéresser à l'oeuvre d'une écrivaine qui a indubitablement contribué à louer le désir lesbien. Jeanette Winterson est une autrice anglaise de premier plan depuis la parution de *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), *The Passion* (1987), et de *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). Toutefois, ce présent article examine un texte moins connu. Dans la nouvelle « Poetics of Sex », Winterson propose une réappropriation complexe de l'érotisme d'un point de vue féminin. Sa contribution au canon lesbien et sa célébration du corps lesbien passent par le choix de ressusciter la voix de la poétesse de la Grèce antique, Sappho, ici actualisée sous les traits d'une jeune autrice du XX^{e} siècle. Le texte repose sur un entrelacs de racines intertextuelles puisque Winterson convoque également la figure de Pablo Picasso qui, dans la nouvelle, devient une artiste peintre nommée Picasso, ce qui spectacularise ce corps lesbien, lequel prend la forme d'une oeuvre d'art irréductible.

Mots clefs

Jeanette Winterson, *jouissance* érotisme, intertextualité, corps lesbien, genre, ekphrasis, Pablo Picasso, Sappho, féminisme

Outline

Introduction: *'Why Do You Sleep with Girls?'*

Coming from the well-known British feminist writer Jeanette Winterson, this question (Winterson 31) is rather problematic. Yet, these are the very first words of 'The Poetics of Sex', a short story published by Winterson in 1993. Born in 1959, Winterson has been a famous figure in the British literary landscape since the publication of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* in 1985. Winterson came out as a lesbian at the age of sixteen and was forced to leave home. She did odd jobs before attending St Catherine's College in Oxford. In addition to being a writer, Winterson is also a journalist and a broadcaster, as well as a former delicatessen owner, and she has been teaching Creative Writing at the University of Manchester since 2012.

'The Poetics of Sex' is one of the first short stories written by Winterson. It won the 'Best of Young British Writer' prize in 1993, attributed by the literary review *Granta* which published the short story thereafter. The story was then re-published, first in the collection *The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories* and then in a collection by Jeanette Winterson entitled *The World and Other Places* in 1998. In 1993, Winterson's career was already well-established: her first success, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), was followed by *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and *Written on the Body* (1992), where Winterson wove a close connection between art, love and identity, but also tried to escape the reductive 'lesbian writer' label. The undetermined gender of the narrator means that the reader cannot be sure whether the love story occurs between a heterosexual couple or a lesbian one. If her refusal of writing an openly lesbian piece would bring upon her the wrath of many lesbian critics (Stowers 1998; Pearce 1994), a year later, Winterson had already changed direction and published 'The Poetics of Sex' which was clearly a blazing tribute to lesbianism. Indeed, in the short story Winterson gives a modern voice to the Greek poetess Sappho, modernised under the features of a young twentieth-century woman, as well as to the painter Pablo Picasso, feminised in the character of the female painter Picasso. The spelling 'Sappho' cohabits with 'Sapho', which is the one used by Winterson. I shall use the spellings 'Sapho' when I comment on the fictional character, and 'Sappho' as I refer to the ancient writer. Through the voice of Sapho, Winterson narrates different episodes of the love relationship between the two women and not only draws an extremely poetic image of love, but also charges her piece with political criticism.

This about-turn can be explained by the growing resentment Winterson felt towards the press. In the 90s, Winterson struggled with a certain number of journalists who focused more on her sexuality than on her work. This phenomenon increased the writer's annoyance at that misplaced obsession with sex, tinged with her irritation with patriarchal, heterosexist and homophobic stereotypes. Her scorn towards such an attitude shows through the sentence 'Under cover of the sheets the tabloid world of lust and vice is useful only in so much as Picasso can wipe her brushes on it' (Winterson 34). If Winterson's intention to put an end to lesbophobic stereotypes is clearer, her affiliation to feminism and lesbianism remains open to discussion. As outlined in *Written on the Body*, Winterson's position regarding feminism and lesbianism is ambivalent, as Sonya Andermahr reminds us:

> She is not a writer whose lesbianism defines her work or whose work is 'by, for and about' women. In this regard, Winterson is not repudiating lesbianism *per se*, merely lesbian identity as a restricting category. She therefore adopts Judith Butler's (2004) theory that identity categories operate as 'regulatory regimes', and follows the practice of many women writers who reject the label 'woman' or 'feminist' writer for similar reasons. (Andermahr 22)

In this paper, I will explore in further detail the link between the questioning of gender in Winterson's writing and Judith Butler's theories, calling into question the boundaries between the feminine and the masculine and establishing gender as a performance instead of a given fact. Winterson's reception by lesbian-feminist criticism and Gender Studies has been analysed by Sonya Andermahr in her chapter 'Critical Reception' (Andermahr 153–169). Andermahr also acknowledges the possibility to address Winterson's relationship with a lesbian aesthetic tradition while also recognising her ambivalence towards the concept. Winterson rejects any label but answers Virginia Woolf's famous call for woman-centred texts in *A Room of One's Own*, texts in which 'heterosexual masculinity' would not be the major theme. It would therefore seem wiser to read her work in the light of the poet and critic Adrienne Rich's concept of a *lesbian continuum*. Rich attempts to bridge the gap between lesbian and feminist by proposing a political affiliation that will unite women (heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian) in a mutual, woman-focused vision: 'I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman' (Rich 239). Interestingly, Rich articulated this new model of lesbian existence based on a shared female identity the same year Winterson published 'The Poetics of Sex'. This resonance induced the word 'feminine' for the title of this paper in order to reflect this continuum as well as to underline Winterson's connection with what Hélène Cixous called *écriture féminine*, a 'simultaneously poetical and political writing that represents the feminine as both an alternative to and a critique of the masculine or phallocentric symbolic order' (Andermahr 24). The meaning given to the noun 'feminine' corresponds fully to the political position of Winterson's text, as Sonya Andermahr states:

> 'the story is called "The *Poetics* of Sex" [her emphasis], but it also explores the *politics* of sex. It demonstrates very clearly Winterson's desire to make an ideological as well as a literary intervention in the writing of sex, to appropriate and transform language so it speaks for all subjects, including, especially, women' (Andermahr 134).

Keeping in mind that a lesbian-feminist reading constitutes one key to Winterson's work but does not exclude many other fascinating aspects, I would like to examine the different facets that contribute to celebrate the lesbian body in her short story. I will first try to understand to what extent Winterson redraws the boundaries of gender and sexuality in order to redefine identity as a fluid notion. A reappropriation of identity and language would hardly be possible without making use of the model of Sappho, 'omnipresent in literature about women loving women' (Marks 356). The presence of the poetess and the island of Lesbos resonates with Winterson's short story both thematically and stylistically and introduces a new space for an infinite variety of Woman' (Winterson 41). By combining the nouns 'variety' and 'Woman', as well as using a capital letter, Winterson highlights the ambiguity of a generic term that ought to refer to a spectrum rather than a homogenous category. The importance of plurality echoes the feminist visions of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray as well as Monique Wittig, who reject fixed categories and remind us it does not make any sense to address 'the' lesbian when only plurality characterises them. The language that articulates these elements will be compared to Cixous' *écriture féminine*; I shall examine how the liberation of language, lesbian subjectivity and sexuality work hand in hand: 'The privileging of Lesbian subjectivity and Lesbian sexuality makes for new images, new language, new space' (Wolfe 32).

Winterson's representation of the lesbian body is complexified by pictorial intertextuality. The writer's deep interest in art stretches out to the work of Pablo Picasso who is present throughout the text. In order to build an irreducible, powerful and non-conventional piece of work that

definitely makes its contribution to the lesbian canon, Winterson merges the polymorphous and polysemic lesbian body with poetic and pictorial art and therefore undertakes to spectacularise the lesbian body.

1. Celebrating the Lesbian Body

a. Redesigning the Boundaries of Gender and Sexuality

In the short story, Jeanette Winterson invites the reader to question categories that they might tend to perceive as fixed. Different strategies contribute to this critique of normative gender roles and a heterosexuality conceived as compulsory: 'Winterson's charge echoes Butler's theory, according to which "sex (biological bodies), gender (cultural attributes) and sexuality (desire and orientation) are not causally linked, natural and innate categories but rather produced in and through discourse and "performativity"' (Andermahr 73). Her text directly addresses heterosexism, which alludes to discrimination or prejudice against non-heterosexual people based on the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality, and conveys a new reflection about the reader's conceptions of gender and sexuality.

A Charge against Heterosexist Stereotypes

The most obvious signs of Winterson's critical position towards heterosexism appear in eight questions, isolated from the body of the text and interspersing the short story. All these questions are 'headings which demonstrate the crass and prurient attitude of mainstream culture to lesbian couples' (Andermahr 133). Winterson's irony is perceptible in '*What Do Lesbians Do in Bed?*' (Winterson 34), '*Why Do You Hate Men?*' (Winterson 38) or '*Were You Born a Lesbian?*' (Winterson 36). Another extract shows how Winterson amplifies some homophobic and heterosexist stereotypes as to turn them around: 'The world is full of blind people. They don't see Picasso and me dignified by our love. They see perverts, inverts, tribades, homosexuals. They see circus freaks and Satan worshippers, girl-catchers and porno turn-ons. Picasso says they don't know how to look at pictures either' (Winterson 37). While this enumeration reflects the very old vision of homosexuality as perversion from a strict religious point of view, the absence of coherence within the segments shows the absurdity of such definition of lesbianism. It therefore encourages the reader to reexamine a stereotyped view of lesbian relationships. The comparison between the 'circus freaks', referring to the deformed/abnormal people who used to be exhibited in fairs, and the 'porno turn-ons', reducing sex between two women to a means to stimulate men's pleasure, can hardly be explained. This simplistic juxtaposition and the semantic gap between the segments highlight the limits of this attitude towards lesbianism: lesbianism cannot assume this degrading accumulation that does not consider love within a lesbian relationship. Winterson uses stereotypes as well as religious censorship as a starting point in her comparison between lesbian desire and art, as will be seen below.

Gender

Winterson challenges the reader's conception of feminine and masculine traits on other levels in the short story. In the very first sentence, Winterson introduces Picasso, a female painter directly inspired from the male artist Pablo Picasso: 'My lover Picasso is going through her Blue Period' (Winterson 34). Winterson shows us that a female character can easily use a masculine name, even the name of an artist reputed for his manhood. This assimilation blurs

the picture the reader may have of the character: Picasso, as well as the love relationship between her and Sapho, will resist formal categorization.

It can be added here that a certain masculinisation is at work in Winterson's metaphoric network. The web of signifiers is very rich and often associates the two women with masculine elements. Sapho thus describes Picasso: 'Squat like a Sumo' (Winterson 31). Winterson not only uses masculine signifiers for feminine signified, she chooses signifiers sometimes extremely distant from a feminist perspective: the allusion to a sumo pertains to an aesthetics of excess, present throughout the whole short story, but also shows how Winterson makes sure to feminise a figure who, usually, can hardly be associated with women at all since sumo matches have always irrevocably rejected women. Another image is part of this important extended metaphor: 'My bull-lover makes a matador out of me' (Winterson 34). Through a play-on-words between 'bull-lover' and 'bulldozer', Winterson compares Picasso to a bull, not the least virile of animals, and Picasso to a matador: Winterson's poetics emerges from a puzzling combinatory logic. As other elements reinforce Picasso's feminine traits, we can see how Winterson forges a space where the feminine and the masculine are no longer divided.

Sexuality

Some questions not only address the fixity of gender roles attributed to lesbianism from a heteronormative perspective but also tackle the question of sexuality. Analysing the question '*Which One of You Is the Man?*' (Winterson 32), Sonya Andermahr reminds us that 'as the story unfolds, Winterson confounds the assumptions behind such questions by thoroughly blurring the boundaries between masculine and feminine roles and referents. In the continuous interchange of sexual roles, identity becomes performative rather than fixed' (Andermahr 133). Other questions mirror the difficulty to consider sexual intercourse without a penis penetration: '*Don't You Find There's Something Missing?*' (Winterson 41). Winterson never gives a formal answer to the superficial questions because questioning the sexual choices and practices of Sapho and, more widely, of all lesbians, cannot define lesbianism. Instead, she disrupts fixed categorization and proposes reversibility of the object and the subject, and of the role-play: on the one hand, representations of lesbian sex tend to be assimilated to role-play, which can imply a masculine-feminine couple, one woman being 'butch', the other being more 'feminine'. On the other hand, equality prevails in other representations where both women are feminine and attracted by the female body. In that case, similarity is at the heart of such mirror-relationships. These representations cohabit in Winterson's text:

> She circles me and in her rough-made ring I am complete. I like the dressing up, the little jackets, the silk tights, I like her shiny hide, the deep tanned leather of her. It is she who gives me the power of the sword. I used it once but when I cut at her it was my close fit flesh that frilled into a hem of blood. She lay beside me slender as a horn. Her little jacket and silk tights impeccable. (Winterson 31–32)

The assimilation of Picasso to a bull and that of Sapho to a matador is an example of sexual postures and contradicts the idea of likeness between the two lovers. Yet, Winterson shows how easily these roles reverse with 'we shall be husbands to each other as well as wives' (Winterson 40) and how multiple role-play becomes compatible with a mirror-like relationship: 'Who's on top depends on where you're standing but as we're lying down it doesn't matter' (Winterson 53). The possible confusion between the two women indicates how their relationship combines the two most popular visions of lesbianism: role-play and similarity. The exploration of the

lesbian body in the text implies a new fluidity but also draws back on a well-known figure, as will reveal the presence of Sapho.

b. The Song of Sappho

'An Infinite Variety of Woman'

In order to shape the lesbian canon, Winterson not only redraws the boundaries between the feminine and the masculine, but she also proposes a poetics which draws on intertextual and artistic sources. The most obvious reference is probably that of Sappho, a key figure for any lesbian-feminist writer. If Winterson has her heart set on paying her tribute to Sappho, it might be because the representation of the poetess has been particularly damaged. In the chapter 'Lesbian Intertextuality', Elaine Marks discusses her omnipresence in a fictitious and non-fictitious feminine corpus and reminds us of the fragmentation and the distortion of the poetess' work:

> A confusion of facts, a profusion of semantic and phonemic connotations emanates from and surrounds the name. The small, ugly, lewd nymphomaniac and the beautiful poetess and muse coexist in the mind of the contemporary reader. They are part of a fragmented tradition through which we can formulate the outlines of a myth intended, like so many others, to domesticate woman's sexuality as well as, in this particular case, her relation to language. (Marks 356)

Winterson seems to reconsider the poetess aside from twisted representations. She does not immediately mention her name but the reader soon learns that both women are artists: 'We are quick change artists we girls' (Winterson 32). With many monosyllabic words and the absence of punctuation, Winterson introduces the two women's status in a very dynamic way. The use of a doubling subject and an informal structure with 'we girls' adds a strong oral dimension to the sentence and echoes how Winterson very often conveys a spoken form in her writings. Other passages allow us to clearly link the character Sapho to the Greek poetess: 'I like to be a hero, like to come back to my island full of girls carrying a net of words forbidden to them. Poor girls, they are locked outside their words just as the words are locked into meaning. Such a lot of locking up goes on the Mainland but here the doors are always open' (Winterson 39). These forbidden words have a double meaning. Sappho was known for teaching the women around her to develop their artistic flair by mastering language and by practicing dancing, singing and music. Just as Sappho aimed at bringing art to the women living with her on Lesbos, so Winterson seems to revive a fresh and renewed language, the only language that can speak for the unconventional lesbian love and the plurality that characterises it: 'On this island where we live, keeping what we do not tell, we have found the infinite variety of Woman. On the Mainland, Woman is largely extinct in all but a couple of obvious forms. She is still cultivated as a cash crop but is nowhere to be found growing wild' (Winterson 40–41). The opposition between these two types of women reflects the absurdity of reducing women to a fixed category. The re-establishing of plurality is at the very heart of feminist demands and the opposition between domestication and wildness can easily be related to eco-feminism. The Mainland geographically differs from the island, but it mainly embodies heterosexuality hegemony and the domination of the masculine, as opposed to Lesbos, on which lesbian women lived shielded from this reign, and in absolute freedom. If Sappho intersperses thematically the short story, she also does so on a more intertextual level, as a glimpse of her poetry will reveal.

Textual Echoes

The intertextuality with the poetess is even more striking if we take a look at her work:

> Stars around the fair moon
> hide away their radiant form
> whenever in fullness she lights
> the earth… (Sappho 45)

> My tongue is broken. A delicate fire
> runs under my skin, my eyes
> see nothing, my ears roar,
> cold sweat (Sappho 44)

The stanza on the left shows how cosmic elements, blended in a harmonious and fluid prose, praise the figure of the loved one, who shines beyond compare. The beloved woman is likened to light through an unusual association of verb and complement ('she lights the earth'). Such hyperbolic elevation resonates with the extract 'As she walked the world froze up behind her' (Winterson 44), itself echoing the fairy tale *The Snow Queen* by Andersen. The second stanza, excerpted from another poem, appeals to a common antithesis between heat and cold in order to convey intensity of feeling. As will be developed further on, Picasso is characterised by an antithetic and symbolical association between red and blue. Winterson calls upon a similar intensity, referring to courtly love and to its allegorical treatment in *Le Roman de la Rose* and echoing the *Song of Solomon*[1]: 'Hang on me my darling like rubies round my neck. Slip onto my finger like a ring. Give me your rose for my buttonhole. Let me leaf through you before I read you out loud' (Winterson 44). Both Winterson and the author of *The Song of Salomon* exalt a sensual association between natural elements (mineral, liquid, vegetal) and body parts in order to sublimate the female body. The fragments written by Sappho are numerous and cannot all be discussed, but many show a frequent and direct address to the figure of the loved one.

A glimpse at Renée Vivien's translation reveals an even more striking correspondence between Winterson and Sappho:

> Mais elle a connu la grave volupté,
> L'effroi de l'amour et l'effort des chimères…
> Une nuit, j'ai bu, d'un baiser irrité,
> Ses lèvres amères. (Vivien 66)

This extract brings us very close to 'The Poetics of Sex': 'When she turned round I kissed her ruby mouth and took a sample of her sea blue eyes. She was salty, well preserved, well made and curved like a wave' (Winterson 34). In a very condensed space, we recognise the association between the lips, the kiss and the liquid. I deliberately quoted Vivien and not Sappho because it is an interesting case of reappropriation through translation. Vivien is known to have relied on the original and to have drawn inspiration from the scattered fragments in a very personal way. This stanza is a perfect example since Sappho simply did not write these words. The resonance therefore also connects Winterson directly to Renée Vivien.

Winterson blurs the boundaries between the feminine and the masculine codes but also plays with literary codes: her piece is defined as a short story but its poetic saturation draws it close to a 'play-poem', an expression used by Virginia Woolf, a writer Winterson knows deeply and

[1] 'Thy cheeks are comely with rows of jewels, thy neck with chains of gold' (*The Bible*, Song of Sol., 1.10), 'Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies' (Song of Sol, 4.5), 'His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires./ His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold' (Song of Sol., 5.14-15).

values very much in order to characterise *The Waves* (1931). This piece corresponds less to a novel than to a long fragment of poetic prose. Similarly, the poetic saturation present in Winterson's short story brings it closer to a prose poem than to a short story.

Literary experimentation in Winterson and Sappho's works respectively reflect the primordial function of language in both women's lives. Winterson closely follows Sappho since the Greek poetess represents a pivot between artistic creation and romantic/sexual relationship. Winterson's short story amplifies this correspondence between romantic/sexual experimentation and literary experimentation, which brings me to explore the exaltation of *jouissance* through feminine writing.

c. Lesbian Subjectivity and the Voice of *jouissance*

In order to make her contribution to the lesbian canon, Winterson wrote lesbian desire and *jouissance* with a corrosive language. Drawing on lesbian and feminist criticism, I use the term as a synonym for aesthetic and sexual pleasure and not with its Lacanian subtext. *Jouissance* was further theorised by Hélène Cixous and others in their writings on *écriture feminine* (Cixous 885), which gave a feminist turn to Barthes' 'texte de jouissance' (Barthes 54) as they connected feminine writing with the female body and female sexuality. Although Winterson claims that it is literature that influences the critique and not the other way round, her affiliation with Cixous' call for a new voice from women and for women, *écriture féminine*, is anchored in her work. Cixous thus characterised this voice in 1975:

> A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor—once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction—will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language. […] Why so few texts? Because so few women have as yet won back their body. Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse. (Cixous 885)

In keeping with Cixous' injunction, Winterson wrote 'The Poetics of Sex' almost as a sexed body:

> She rushes for me bull-subtle, butching at the gate as if she's come to stud. She bellows at the window, bloods the pavement with desire. […] I know the game. I know enough to flick my hind-quarters and skip away. I'm not a flirt. She can smell the dirt on me and that makes her swell. That's what makes my lithe lover bulrush-thin fat me. How she fats me. She plumps me, pats me, squeezes and feeds me. Feeds me up with lust till I'm as fat as she is. We're fat for each other we sapling girls. We neat clean branching girls get thick with sex. (Winterson 31)

The organic body engulfs the text with its materiality and with the sexual contact between the two women. Through a dense and poetic language, Winterson expresses the urgency of desire and the swiftness of the lovemaking with the salience of alliterations and assonances, of monosyllabic words and of verbs of motions. The enumeration of direct transitive verbs also catches the reader's attention. Directly referring to touching, they express the pleasure felt with organic feeding metaphors for hand penetration. This profusion of transitive verbs shows the role-play between the women and the division between the subject and the object. And yet, none of these actions involve any form of dominion, as they tend to with heterosexual intercourse. Never answering the journalists' questions in the short story, Winterson writes

lesbian sex as an interaction which is both vegetal and animal, subtle and violent, sacred and profane, irreducible to one or the other. The role-play I mentioned is nuanced by a certain number of first-person active verbs, showing that both women are equally active in this lovemaking. Such depiction of lesbian desire echoes Teresa de Lauretis and Elaine Marks' wish for a detonating vibrant lesbian language:

> In a superb essay tracing the intertextual weave of a lesbian imagination throughout French literature, the kind of essay that changes the landscape of both literature and reading irreversibly, Elaine Marks proposes that to undomesticate the female body one must dare reinscribing it in excess—as excess—in provocative counterimages sufficiently outrageous, passionate, verbally violent, and formally complex to both destroy the male discourse on love and redesign the universe. (Lauretis 149)

Winterson's text can be read precisely through such aesthetics and political intention. Other images, perhaps at first unsettling, confirm the will to break free from all categorization, gender-wise as well as literary-wise, in order to reclaim feminine eroticism: 'She mixed an ochre wash before taking me like a dog my breasts hanging over the pillow' (Winterson 34).

The depiction of dire desire is reinforced here by the absence of punctuation and shows the inseparability of desire and art, both objects of experimentation in Winterson's work. Celebrating the lesbian body involves redefining feminine-masculine boundaries, weaving sapphic intertextuality through the text as well as exalting a blazing voice of *jouissance*, but it also means binding lesbian desire and art together.

2. Spectacularising the Lesbian Body

In her depiction of the lesbian body, Winterson has often compared sapphic love to art itself. In a way, it can be considered as an *art*-ificial form of love because it is not 'natural', meaning it does not serve humankind reproduction. Art for art's sake and love for love's sake are not very different from this perspective: both exist without a pre-established purpose. The profusion of textual and pictorial references turns the short story into an artistic palimpsest and, by extension, erects lesbianism as irreducible. Many texts shine through 'The Poetics of Sex' but I choose here to focus on the connection with Pablo Picasso. As previously mentioned, the female character of Picasso is inspired from the Spanish painter and sculptor who spent most of his life in France. On an onomastic level, Winterson may also have associated Sapho and Picasso because the two names mirror each other, 'Sapho' echoing 'Picasso' to some extent. I will first analyse how the multiple *ekphrasis*, that is a vivid description of an artwork, contributes to blurring the line between the sacred and the profane in the text. The presence of several well-known periods in Picasso's work is interwoven with an erotic sapphic dimension that gives more depth to the depiction of desire in the short story. Finally, I will explore the poetic intertextuality between Winterson's vibrant and poetic prose and Picasso's notebooks and his sensual surrealistic prose.

a. An Ekphrasis Blurring the Line between the Sacred and the Profane

In the short story, a multiple *ekphrasis* brings the Spanish artist back to life. As the reader discovers the first lines of the text, they can identify a reference to Picasso's Blue Period with 'My lover Picasso is going through her Blue Period' (Winterson 31). This period is named after the colour that prevails in Picasso's paintings from 1901 to 1904, a period marked by

melancholy and introversion for the artist, with blue monochromes such as *Blue Nude* (1901) or *Lady at Eden Concert* (1903), *Tête de Femme* (*Head of a woman* 1903) on display at the Met Museum[2]. These paintings are arch-illustrations of the Blue Period, which critics often associate with deploring misery, hunger and loss. In that sense, it corresponds to the dryness of artistic moderation and sexual chastity: 'I picked you up and carried you to the bed dusty with ill-use. I found a newspaper under the sheets advertising rationing' (Winterson 35). Winterson deeply poeticises this period in the text:

> 'The blue that runs through her is sanguine. One stroke of the knife and she changes colour. Every month and she changes colour. Deep pools of blue silk drop from her. I know her by the lakes she leaves on the way to the bedroom. Her braces cascade over the stair-rail, she wears earrings of lapis lazuli which I have caught cup-handed, chasing her déshabillée' (Winterson 32).

We notice here how Winterson creates a sense of movement to render a liquefaction process. Verbs introducing a sense of movement are omnipresent throughout the extract, as show 'run', 'changes', 'drop', 'leaves', 'cascade' and 'chasing'. The salience of monosyllabic words and the absence of logical connectors make the sentences flow in a melodious prose. The alliterations in [k] ('stroke'-'silk'-'lakes'-'cascade'-'caught cup-handed') and the assonances in [eɪ] ('changes'-'lakes'-'braces cascade'-'cup-handed'-'chasing') reinforce the falling of the water, hyperbolically depicted with 'deep pools' and 'lakes'. Winterson suppresses the boundaries between the elements by merging water and fabric ('pools of blue silk', 'her braces cascade'). The surrealistic character of these expressions comes from the absence of any comparison tool, as well as a semantically destabilising combination between the subject and the verb ('her braces cascade'), between the nouns and their complements ('earrings of lapis lazuli') or between the verb and its complement ('I have caught cup-handed'). This destabilisation is complete with the reference to the French word '*déshabillée*'. Winterson does not refer to the anglicised version of this term, which would be 'dishabille', but introduces a sense of oddness by using a foreign word without using italics. The English reader identifies 'déshabillée' as a noun but it could also correspond to an adjective because of its agreement (as the last syllable, which includes a feminine ending, suggests). In a very short abstract, Winterson therefore conveys a complex expression of liquefaction that conveys the elusiveness of Picasso.

However, Winterson's short story is not monochrome: the reappropriation of the Blue Period is reinforced with many references to Picasso's Rose Period. Between 1904 and 1906 or so, a renewal distinguishes Picasso's paintings and reaches towards colour, life and movement, as in his *Arlequin and Acrobats* series or even in *The Actor* on display at the Met Museum[3]. The name 'Rose Period' is actually composed of many shades of ochre, verging on the red in Winterson's text: 'In the past her periods have always been red. Radish red, bull red, red like rose hips bursting seed. Lava red when she was called Pompeii' (Winterson 31). Once again, the enumeration lifts the reader from the ground thanks to a combination of monosyllables, sound repetitions and quite surrealistic associations. The blue colour is soaked with the aquatic imagery poeticised by Winterson, whereas the ochre colours, from the play-on-word with 'Period', are associated with blood, that is, with a vital fluid and with the source of original energy. This reappropriation explains the liberty Winterson takes with the Blue and Rose Periods and reveals the meaning of her poetics: Winterson's poetics of sex means the assimilation of the sacred (blue) and of the profane (rose), of spiritual love and of raw carnal

[2] https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/489645 (last accessed on 22nd July 2022).
[3] https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/488690 (last accessed on 22nd July 2022).

pleasure, losing all negative connotation since this cohabitation harmonises and poeticises sapphic sexual relations.

The scene by the seaside in the text also echoes Picasso's brushstrokes: 'We were by the sea yesterday and the sea was heavy with salts so that our hair was braided with it. There was salt on our hands and in our wounds where we've been fighting. […] The rocks were reptile blue and the sky that balanced on the top of the cliffs was sheer blue' (Winterson 33). The poetic dimension in this passage also brings the reader back to Picasso, who associated Mediterranean inspiration with different mythological, pastoral, bacchanal elements, as well as to Arcadian themes conveying a great zest for life. The *Baigneuses* series is composed of paintings representing groups of women (sometimes two women) by the seaside or bathing. *Deux Femmes courant sur la plage* (*Two Women Running on the Beach*, 1922) skilfully illustrates the sense of freedom associated with this type of landscape[4]. Winterson not only uses this multiple ekphrasis in order to transform the lesbian body into an extremely sensual and poetic vision, she also clearly draws on the depiction of sapphic desire in Picasso's work in order to eroticise the relationship between Sapho and Picasso.

b. Eroticism, Sapphic Vibes and the Depiction of Desire

Picasso's *ekphrasis* goes even further if we remember that the erotic dimension in Picasso's work has been widely commented since it is almost omnipresent in the painter's work. Picasso's relationship with women is known to be quite ambivalent. On the one hand, Picasso tends to sanctify, almost deify, women. On the other hand, they are sometimes assimilated to much less dignified figures (in his *Minotauromachie* paintings, women become the targets of violence). Picasso was always keen on painting women's pleasure, and these representations include a eulogy of sapphism. The painting of scenes of lesbianism is a turning point in the 1904-1905 years. Furthermore, many erotic drawings are contemporary with the Blue Period, which echoes the collocation between sacred and profane art. Two of his most famous erotic watercolours are a case in point: the female nudes *Les Deux amies (Two Friends* 1904) and *Deux figures et un chat* (*Two Figures and a Cat* 1903).

The sensual poetry of those watercolours vividly illustrates different extracts from the short story: 'I think it right to kneel and the view is good. She does perform miracles but they are of the physical kind and ordered by her Rule of Thumb to the lower regions. She goes among the poor with every kind of salve unmindful of reward. She dresses in blue she tells me so that they will know she is a saint and it is saintly to taste the waters of so many untried wells' (Winterson 31). The sacred dimension is immediately balanced with a profane innuendo, a distinctive feature in Winterson's poetics.

c. Intertextual Resonances with Picasso's Poetic Work

Finally, a more surprising type of reference links Winterson to Picasso. In 1935, the painter was deeply affected by his break-up with his partner, Olga. Unable to paint, he wrote poetry in French and in Spanish. Given the fact that most of his poems have been translated into English and that Winterson knows the painter's work very well, it is very likely she has read them. The omnipresence of colours in the short story echoes of course different paintings by Picasso, but it is worth noticing that painting and colours are also very important themes in his poems: 'A

[4] https://www.museepicassoparis.fr/fr/deux-femmes-courant-sur-la-plage (last accessed on 22nd July 2022).

paint jar overturns the blanket soaked in red' (Picasso 1999, 66). Another fragment from Picasso's poetry reveals an even more striking kinship between the two artists' proses:

> the smooth silk of her body lunges at the nacre and the sword hilt thrust into the honey bun of where she dances – the refrain that makes the jasmine twinkle on the vine sings of a light that blows in from the garden warm with love and with a pinch of blue that dangles from the grapes – the rosy evening flavor whistles up its snail shells in its arms it rocks a drop of dew erupting in the lambkin's fleece. (Picasso 2004, 28)

Here, the brisk flow of words is carried through verbs of movement, light and sound, such as 'lunges at', 'thrust', 'twinkle' or 'whistle', as well as the line breaks. This harmonious rhythm is relayed by a direct association of organic substances and poeticised colours that compose the sensuality of both Picasso's and Winterson's poetic prose. Whether it is conscious or not, the intertextuality between the two writers is real. Winterson's writing echoes Picasso's fluid and freed writing, sensual prose emancipated from punctuation and uncoiling in an unbridled rhythm. Picasso's notebooks resonate with Winterson's prose sometimes very closely: 'the light paving with its blood the hour-glasses' (Picasso 2004, 28). This expression strangely mirrors the expression 'bloods the pavement with desire' (Winterson 31). It is also fascinating to read in Picasso's work 'mocking at the rose the dagger that thrusts its colour' (Picasso 2004 22) when we think of the extract from 'The Poetics of Sex': 'The blue that runs through her is sanguine. One stroke of the knife and she changes colour' (Winterson 32). Both artists go deep into the juxtaposition of the elements in order to offer a lightning dynamic, a poetics that exalts senses and sublimates vital energies. It is through this shift between body and art that the reader can observe how lesbian eroticism is equated with an irreducible piece of art.

Conclusion

In order to show the richness of Winterson's text, I chose to focus on the elements that seemed most prominent, even though many others could have been interesting to study. In order to highlight the *jouissance* that is part of lesbian sex, Winterson invites the reader to celebrate the eroticism of the lesbian body in a very condensed text. In order to assert this body, Winterson does not hesitate to challenge all sorts of boundaries, including the limits between the feminine and the masculine. This exaltation of the lesbian body answers Cixous' call for an *écriture féminine*, a writing shattering censorship and the binary system associated with patriarchy. The reappropriation of the figure of Sappho confirms the place of the short story in the lesbian canon.

Winterson's project extends as she spectacularises the lesbian body, transforming it into a magnificent piece of art. To convey its energy, she calls upon the painter Pablo Picasso. Sharing his vision according to which art should not be censored but should express sexuality in all its violence and poetry, Winterson writes an ekphrasis that gives life again to the different periods that compose Picasso's pictorial work. The equation between the two artists is pushed further by the textual connection between them, rendering desire in blasting and synaesthetic fragments.

The density of the text certainly encourages further study of Winterson's work. The comparison between the profane and the sacred in the short story hints at Athena's birth, born out of her father's head, and representing, like Jesus' birth, a symbol for 'unnatural' birth. As some people still consider homosexuality as unnatural, Winterson gladly reminds us that our culture is filled with patterns that are accepted, yet not valid from a biological point of view. She is not afraid

to borrow from pagan sources as well as well as biblical sources. The text is very much pervaded with the *Song of Songs*, but also alludes to the Four Evangelists. The presence of Saint Mark and his lion links the text to Saint Jerome[5], as well as to Arthurian sources, such as *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, and, one of Winterson's favourite sources, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*. In a reduced space, Winterson shows the intensity and the complexity of the love relationship between Sapho and Picasso. By alluding to ancient sources with renewed words, she uses a language which is unconventional and powerful enough to express the lesbian *jouissance*, and thus magnificently contributes to erect the lesbian canon.

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[5] The Evangelist Saint Mark is symbolised by a generally winged lion with an aureole. The wings and the halo allude to spiritual elevation and holiness. The symbol of the lion links Saint Mark to many representations of Saint Jerome. This Church Father was celebrated for his major contribution to the *Vulgate*, the Catholic Church's officially promulgated Latin version of the Bible. In the 13th century, Jacobus de Voragine imagined the lives of saints in the *Golden Legend*, and he depicted Saint Jerome saving a lion that was injured from a thorn stuck in one of his paws. After the episode, the lion remained on the side of Saint Jerome, who is therefore commonly represented with a lion lying at his feet. The sacred attributes that characterize the lion of Saint Mark differentiate him from the lion of Saint Jerome. The *Golden Legend* is a compilation of various texts and assimilated pagan sources in order to constitute what could be considered as a Christian mythology. Through the symbol of the lion, Winterson therefore uses two religious representations to unite a strictly sacred figure and one tainted with paganism (Voragine 627).

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 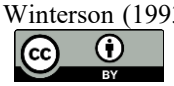

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Marion Letellier has been teaching English at Nantes University at the Faculty of Psychology since 2020. She has studied the feminist dimension in the works of Jeanette Winterson as well as its link with self-reinvention and narrative therapy. In her thesis, entitled *Translating the Reappropriation of Emotions in* The World and Other Places *by Jeanette Winterson* (2020), she studied Winterson's collection of short stories from the perspective of translation studies. Aside teaching at Nantes University, she also leads translation workshops in secondary schools. She conducts experiments combining Psychology and Translation Studies at the Faculty of Psychology in order to study emotional commitment and the practice of translation.