

**POSTMODERN ROMANCE AND THE ILLUSION-MAKING TENDENCIES
OF HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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Abstract: The paper proposes a reading of romance in terms of postmodernism by establishing a connection between feminism and postmodernism's questioning of historical and cultural representation. The aim is to reveal how history, no longer governed by the urge to find the "truth", gives prominence to the uncertain, the extraordinary, the fantastic, which are the main ingredients of romance.

Keywords: history, romance, storytelling, time.

Introduction

Any discussion of romance should start by acknowledging the rather infamous status of the genre, which is generally given by its identification with a love affair. In an age of lost innocence, the rhetoric of love becomes increasingly difficult to approach, since the lover's discourse is extremely marginalised and love needs ironical, obligatory inverted commas. On the other hand, literary theory and criticism have tended to identify romance with texts largely denigrated as genre literature—romantic fiction, detective fiction, fantasy fiction—which most often fall into the category of mass/popular culture. In spite of the fact that romance novels have enjoyed a fabulous success, or perhaps precisely because of this, romance has generally been disregarded as "an unworthy form of literature" (Fuchs 2), sold cheaply in supermarkets or railway stations and addressed to a public consisting of "infantile" female readers. Such considerations have thus given rise to two interrelated debates concerning the "low" status of romance and its implied "feminisation".

These "accusations" have largely been overcome by the advent of postmodernism, which proposes abolishing the division between highbrow and popular culture, between the dominant and the marginal, and ultimately between masculine and feminine. In addition,

postmodernism and its focus on historicity have cleared the space for a new understanding of romance as a postmodern genre which challenges traditional notions of history and its grand strategies of making sense of the past according to one single “truth”. In what follows we shall analyse romance and history as both grounded in or emerging from stories and the implied act of storytelling. Perhaps the most relevant examples for our discussion are provided by Jeanette Winterson’s work, which is focused on the intimate relationship between history and fantasy. In an explanatory note to *The Passion*, which Winterson wrote for the 1996 edition, that is, 10 years after the initial publication of the book, the writer explains how her novel (and her whole work *in extenso*) is neither history nor romance, but rather both history and romance: “*The Passion* is not history, except in so much as all our lives are history. *The Passion* is not romance, except in so much as all our lives are marked by the men and women with whom we fell in love”.

Postmodern Romance

Along the new lines of thought opened up by the postmodern debates, in her *Romancing the Postmodern* Diane Elam suggests a reading of romance in terms of postmodernism, by “revaluing the romance of women’s desire as ‘postmodern’ rather than simply ‘unrealistic’ or ‘foolish’” (2). Her aim is to establish a connection between feminism and postmodernism’s questioning of historical and cultural representation, by arguing that history is no longer governed by the urge to find a clear finality or judgement; instead, it gives prominence to the uncertain, the extraordinary, the fantastic, which are the main ingredients of romance. Elam coins the term “postmodern romance”, which shows romance as a postmodern genre, and postmodernism as romance, in that they emerge from a common excess: “the inability to stay within historical and aesthetic boundaries” (12). Many contemporary writers are turning to romance in order to appear “postmodern”, and this trend is not merely fashionable but reveals the fact that romance, “by virtue of its troubled relation to both history and novelistic realism, has in a sense been postmodern all along” (Elam 3).

By displacing realism, postmodern romance interrogates the problematic nature of the historical event itself. Several questions arise: “What constitutes a historical event? How can we represent it? And why, if the event is indeed historic, does it keep becoming a matter for romance?” (Elam 14). Postmodern romance states the impossibility of knowing the past, since any attempt to assign a meaning to a past event implies a loss of meaning, a loss of representability. As Linda Hutcheon explains:

both history and fiction are discourses, ... both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ... In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past “events” into present historical facts. (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 89)

Or, as Jeanette Winterson states in *Lighthousekeeping*, the meaning emerges from the story itself: “You don’t need to know everything. There is no everything. The stories themselves make the meaning.” (134)

Jeanette Winterson’s work can be inscribed into the feminist theory and practice which have been particularly important in this postmodernist refocusing on historicity. Her novels expose the myth- or illusion-making tendencies of historiography. In the introduction to *Weight* (2005) Winterson explains how, in a world more and more enthralled by mass media, advertising and reality shows, humanity is passing through a crisis of “the inner life, of the sublime, of the poetic, of the non-material, of the contemplative” (XIX). It is therefore the writer’s duty to resort to the power of storytelling and its mythic qualities in order to give voice to the forgotten life of the mind and the soul.

History: Fact or Fiction?

The way in which Winterson approaches history, attempting to modify myths, playing with the fantastic and the utopian, juggling with space and chronology, underlines the fictional nature of history-writing, which constitutes an essential feature of historiographic metafiction. *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* are two texts that exhibit their historical contents as intertwined with folklore, the supernatural, myths and fairytales in order to show how “truth” can be found through various channels, which are not necessarily those of reason or the intellect. Conversely, the irrational can be revealed unexpectedly, even within the most objective historical facts, as when George III addressed the members of the Upper Chamber as “My Lords and peacocks” (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 142). From this perspective, the writer intends to provide a different angle from which historical facts can be regarded, an imaginary one which is characteristic for romance fiction. A suggestive example is provided by the alternation of “real” history with the fairy tales of the twelve dancing princesses in *Sexing the Cherry*, which implies that “history is only another form of the discourses by which we interpret the world, no more privileged than a child’s story” (Wallace 198). On the other hand, by valuing fantasy more than rationality, Winterson attacks mainstream, male-made historiography, and “passion”, the title she chooses for her novel, announces an original way of relating to the past, “emphasising emotions, impulses and affects; in short, all that

historiography, as a field of study, rejects as obstacles in any attempt to establish objective, reliable knowledge” (Letissier 126).

The artifice of history is further revealed in the choice of events: the events which achieve the status of historical facts are the ones that the writer chooses to narrate. For instance, in *Sexing the Cherry* Jordan is presented as an explorer involved in the discovery of exotic fruits, whereas it is well known that the most rapidly expanding trade in seventeenth-century Britain was not in pineapples or bananas, but in slavery. In *The Passion* the most important feature of Napoleon’s character is his “passion” for chicken, a passion which becomes the symbol of his lust to turn Europe into a battlefield and send French soldiers to their deaths. In this sense, in Winterson’s novel Napoleon is the patriarchal figure associated with war and destruction. As Letissier observes, the story of a conqueror is always “a narcissistic romance” (128):

Perhaps all romance is like that; not a contract between equal parties but an explosion of dreams and desires that can find no outlet in everyday life. Only a drama will do and while the fireworks last the sky is a different colour. He becomes an Emperor. (Winterson *The Passion* 13)

The novel counterbalances Bonaparte’s masculine thirst for power and his patriarchal world with Villanelle’s feminine versatility and “the much more irrational and uncanny world of Venice”, a complementariness reflected by the two trumps in the Tarot: “The Emperor”/Napoleon vs. “The Queen of Spades”/Villanelle (Onega 68-9). The card motif and the obsessive emphasis on playing and gambling highlight the importance of chance in people’s lives, as well as in our knowledge of the past. Existence as a wager becomes the leitmotif of *The Passion*: “You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play. It’s playing that’s irresistible ... Does it matter whom you lose to, if you lose?” (Winterson 43). Villanelle, the person who repeats these words several times throughout the story, is a professional card player and croupier in a casino that figures as the social and symbolic heart of Venice. In his turn, Henri, Napoleon’s personal attendant and one of Villanelle’s lovers, was educated by a priest who “had a hollow Bible with a pack of cards inside” and who taught him “every card game and a few tricks” (Winterson, *The Passion* 12). Susana Onega points out that the gambler’s awareness that his own life is at stake underlines “an existentialist conception of life that goes back to Pascal’s conception of faith in God as a Wager on human destiny” (67).

In *Sexing the Cherry* the motif of chance translates as “the undecidable in both the past and our knowledge of the past” (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 63). “What

would history make of tonight?” (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 133) wonders Artemis, pondering over Orion’s death. History will always be rewritten and the events that Winterson depicts are “already too far to see” (*Sexing the Cherry* 133), and therefore it is difficult to establish whether they actually took place or whether they have been altered or embroidered or are straight fiction. In other words, it is by chance that certain events become historical facts. Jordan articulates the problematic veracity of past events in the claim that:

Everyone remembers things which never happened. And it is common knowledge that people often forget things which did. Either we are all fantasists and liars or the past has nothing definite in it. I have heard people say we are shaped by our childhood. But which one? (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 92)

The uncertain dividing line between history and literature also emerges in another feature of historiographic metafiction: the blending of historical personages with purely fictional characters. In *The Passion*, Napoleon, Joséphine and the Czar coexist with Henri and Villanelle, while *Sexing the Cherry* mingles the stories of Cromwell and Charles the Second with those of the Dog-Woman and Jordan. Linda Hutcheon explains that “in all fiction historical characters can coexist with fictional ones within the context of the novel because *there* they are subject only to the rules of fiction” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 153). The significance of the referent is thus brought into question, since it can be both real and fictive. This bi-referentiality allows Winterson to lend historical verisimilitude to her fictional characters and at the same time to interrogate the “reality” of well-known, historical personages. The idea is emphasised at the end of *The Passion*, when Henri declares:

I am in love with her; not a fantasy or a myth or a creature of my own making. Her. A person who is not me. I invented Bonaparte as much as he invented himself. My passion for her, even though she could never return it, showed me the difference between inventing a lover and falling in love. The one is about you, the other about someone else. (Winterson 157-58)

In Henri’s account, therefore, a real, historical figure like Napoleon can be more of an invention than a fictive character like Villanelle, yet at this moment, as Catherine Belsey underlines, “Henri is mad, alone, imprisoned on a rock, exactly like Napoleon” (80): in other words, can he be trusted? It is in fact impossible to draw a line between reality and invention in Winterson’s fiction.

Similar effects are produced by the interplay between real events and imaginary stories. In *The Passion*, Bonaparte's battles at Ulm and Austerlitz, his divorce from Joséphine, the Russian campaign in the "zero" winter, and the Emperor's death on the island of Saint Helena alternate with Henri's accounts of his dialogues with Bonaparte and Josephine, of his camaraderie with two other fictional "soldiers", Patrick and Domino, and with Villanelle's descriptions of Venice as a simultaneously real and unreal place. Using a similar strategy of juxtaposition, *Sexing the Cherry* mingles the English Civil War and Cromwell's death with references to the imaginary and the fantastic, as in the case of the pineapple's "historical" arrival in England in 1661, or the enchanted city whose inhabitants abandon gravity and prefer to float rather than walk.

Past vs. Present: Winterson's Poetics of Temporality

Another feature of historiographic metafiction as described by Hutcheon refers to the "dialogue with the past in the light of the present" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 19). This strategy is best illustrated in *Sexing the Cherry* by the interrelation that the novel creates between events set in an earlier period and issues relevant to present-day society. Winterson's goal in presenting scenarios located in the past is to create an adequate framework for the analysis of contemporary topics, or to raise "a screen on which to project for readers' scrutiny the sensibilities and identities of modernity itself" (Doan and Waters 24). In seventeenth-century England, London is "a foul place, full of pestilence and rot" (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 13), thus resembling contemporary Britain, where the mercury levels in rivers and lakes are growing dangerously high, while men in suits "build dams, clear the rain forests, finance huge Coca-Cola plants and exploit the rubber potential" (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 122).

If past events announce modern topics, characters share similarities over centuries. Thus the Dog-Woman's zeal in literally applying the Law of Moses—"an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 84)—her exaggerated behaviour and her abuse of men are to be found in the alter ego of her double, who has hallucinatory dreams of herself being a savage woman. Doan and Waters consider that this fantasy, coupled with the split banana as the visual icon of the twentieth-century female narrator, may lead to the conclusion that the Dog-Woman has been all along "nothing more than an invention of the contemporary woman's fragmented postmodern imagination" (23).

I am a woman going mad. I am a woman hallucinating. I imagine I am huge, raw, a giant. When I am a giant I go out with my sleeves rolled up and my skirts swirling round me like a whirlpool ... Men shoot at me, but I take the bullets out of my cleavage and I chew them up. Then I laugh and laugh and break their guns between my fingers the way you would a fish-bone. (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 121-22)

In a similar way, Nicholas Jordan shares with the other Jordan a fascination with sea voyages and heroism, and decides to join the Navy.

If in *Sexing the Cherry* characters merge their identities over time, in *The Passion* Henri and Villanelle appear as two sides of the same coin, their lives and perspectives forming an “intricate pattern” which suggests a shared identity, Henri representing the conscious or ego and Villanelle the spirit or anima (Onega 58-60). Thus Henri, a sensitive man with romantic dreams, raised by a pious mother and a Roman Catholic priest, joins Napoleon’s army in order to become a drummer, but ends up slaughtering chickens as the Emperor’s personal cook, although he abhors the thought of killing any living being. By contrast, Villanelle, the cunning, bisexual woman who can literally live without a heart or walk on water, is a professional gambler in Onega’s understanding of the concept, that is, a player who enjoys the thrill of dangerous bets: “Pleasure on the edge of danger is sweet” (Winterson, *The Passion* 137).

The way in which both novels engage in a permanent dialogue between complementary characters and events creates a sense of continuity and fluidity, or rather abolishes the neat distinctions between the remote past and the urgent present. Jordan concludes *Sexing the Cherry* by pondering that “the future and the present and the past exist only in our minds, and from a distance the borders of each shrink and fade like the borders of hostile countries seen from a floating city in the sky ... Empty space and points of light” (Winterson 144). Winterson’s obsessive preoccupation with time and space is announced and explained from the very beginning by the two epigraphs which open *Sexing the Cherry*. The first epigraph recounts the language of the Hopi Indian tribe, a language otherwise as complex as our own, which lacks verb tenses. “What does this say about time?” (*Sexing the Cherry* 8), Winterson asks. Just as her fiction illustrates her view that history and fiction are false dualities, so she uses the structure of the novel to suggest that time, too, is only a construct of the human mind, used to shape human experience. Human notions of space and borders are equally hallucinatory, the second epigraph suggests. We experience the world as solid matter,

although we know from physics that it is mostly empty space. In other words, our perception of reality is a fiction that we willingly adopt.

Winterson transforms chronological time into “a poetics of temporality” (Letissier 126) which states that the passing of time is arbitrary: “Dicing from one year to the next with the things you love, what you risk reveals what you value” (*The Passion* 43). In *The Passion*, the tempo of events defies any notion of a progressive unfolding of time, in spite of the historical dates frequently mentioned. Progression is further destabilised by the relation between the story’s time and the time when it is written. In the beginning Henri keeps a diary lest he should forget something, but he writes the final version only later, in his San Servello cell. Therefore, there is a gap in time which leaves room for possible memory tricks. On the other hand, as Domino remarks, events may be interpreted differently in time: “The way you see it now is no more real than the way you’ll see it then” (Winterson, *The Passion* 28). Time cannot provide any sense of firm grounding, a fact which renders the present the only palpable experience.

The Passion anticipates Winterson’s concern with tenses in *Sexing the Cherry*. Thus Henri prefers the past tense of history, which is ultimately masculine, whereas Villanelle sticks to a more feminine present tense: “It was New Year’s Day, 1805” vs. “It is New Year’s Day, 1805” (Winterson, *The Passion* 45, 76). It is Villanelle who offers perhaps the best definition of Winterson’s understanding of time, which will reverberate in all her later novels:

Our ancestors. Our belonging. The future is foretold from the past and the future is only possible because of the past. Without past and future, the present is partial. All time is eternally present and so all time is ours. There is no sense in forgetting and every sense in dreaming. Thus the present is made rich. Thus the present is made whole. (*The Passion* 62)

Commenting on this sophisticated concept of time, Doan and Waters point out that, since “all paths lead ineluctably to the present, ... and retrospection seems to be simultaneously indulged and refused”, history as such “hardly matters” (23). History thus becomes an unbounded, metafictional space, much like the one envisaged by Jordan at the end of *Sexing the Cherry*, a space where “There is only the present and nothing to remember” (Winterson 43). If we consider the historical past a masculine discourse, then Villanelle’s assertion that the present is the only certainty which matters comes to undermine the supremacy of male history, and consequently to create a space for female agency.

The Narrator's (Un)Reliability

A parallel is then drawn between the fictional character of reality and the whole act of narration. The narrator's reliability is overtly doubted, to the extent that it becomes difficult for both the reader and the writer to assert whether one story or another is true or entirely made up. In fact this is one of Winterson's literary ambitions, as she herself states in *Lighthousekeeping*:

I believe that storytelling is a way of navigating our lives, and that to read ourselves as fiction is much more liberating than to read ourselves as fact. Facts are partial. Fiction is a more complete truth. If we read ourselves as narrative, we can change the story that we are. If we read ourselves as literal and fixed, we find we can change nothing. Someone will always tell the story of our lives—it had better be ourselves. (20)

There is a certain degree of uncertainty in all the characters' stories. In *Sexing the Cherry*, for instance, after describing his first encounter with Fortunata, Jordan immediately remarks that the scene may belong to the future or to the past, that he may already have found Fortunata or not, and that he may even have imagined her all along. In the same manner, the princesses admit that their story "is true, although it is not" (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 95), while Fortunata ironically insists on the veracity of her account of the dancing city:

Now I have told you the history of the city, which is a logical one, each piece fitting into the other without strain. Sure that you must believe something so credible I will continue with the story of our nightly arrival in that city. (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* 97)

Similarly, *The Passion* questions the credibility of events and of their narrator, and a leitmotif of the text becomes "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (Winterson, *The Passion* 12), which is Henri's confident assertion at the beginning of the novel, as well as Villanelle's reassuring sentence throughout the story. This is also Henri's last remark, which concludes *The Passion*. Read in the context of Henri's situation as a prisoner in the madhouse of San Servelo, telling stories becomes a "therapeutic activity" which makes the character not a madman but a "mythmaker", that is, someone who can translate his life experiences into "archetypal stories that give sense to human existence at large" (Onega 75). The ending serves to reinforce the connotation of the title, which, according to Onega, refers to the "original" passion, which is repeated in the multiple trajectories of passion envisaged by Winterson's

text: “The definite article in the title, then, gives the life stories of the protagonists a representative, archetypal character” (55).

This distrust of both stories and narrators underlines Winterson’s commitment to “an ironic re-thinking of history” (Grice and Woods 1), which can be associated with Hutcheon’s idea that historiographic metafiction creates worlds that are “both resolutely fictive and yet undeniable historical”, worlds that have as a common point “their constitution in and as discourse” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 142). Since the representation of history appears as an ideological discourse, it comes as no surprise that Winterson rejects notions of narratorial identity or objective reality, and prefers to tell stories that do not aim at revealing any singular truth but are rather different accounts, based on various kinds of narrative. Intertextuality thus becomes a necessary tool in shaping the writer’s conception of history as “a sandwich laced with mustard of my own” (Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* 93). And Winterson encourages her readers to make their own sandwiches, that is, to create their own stories which, unlike history, provide “a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained ... of keeping it alive, not boxing it into time” (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* 93). Discussing the writer’s preference for stories and romance over history, Lynn Pykett stresses that:

In Winterson’s avowedly anti-realistic fictions, stories are less a way of trying to explain or understand the universe than of (re)experiencing it, or alternatively, of shoring oneself against its confusions and complexities; less a way of understanding material history or “the historical process” than of transcending it or escaping from its confines. (56)

Conclusion

The conclusion we reach after reading Winterson’s fiction is that the heterogeneous mixture of real and fictional characters and events renders history not as an objective record of events but as a baroque labyrinth of historical facts filtered through private, individualised consciousnesses. From this perspective, the focus shifts from the master narratives about Bonaparte, the Civil War or the Plague to narratives produced by marginalised sections of the community, such as women or “unmanly” heroes. In effect we get what Hutcheon calls “the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, ...of women as well as men” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 63). In so doing, both *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* give voice to the unwritten histories of minor cultures and ordinary people.

The exposure of the illusion-making tendency of history writing results in a critique of mainstream, male-made historiography which boasts about its search for final and absolute truths. In order to fracture the masculine discourse of history and enable women to claim their stories, Winterson relies on myth, fairy tale, fantasy and especially love, the very ingredients of much of women's writing. It can be argued that love as a form of knowing and discovery is the locus where all of Winterson's novels converge. Her fiction celebrates romantic love in an attempt to place *the* passion beyond the borders of a neglected discourse. At the same time, Winterson's stories envisage an escape from the confines of time. If time is a masculine convention and space a feminine experience (Irigaray 9), Winterson attempts to counterbalance the teleological representation of time by an emphasis on space perceived not so much as real geography, but as a fictional reconfiguration in which the ultimate reality is *the* passion repeated *ad infinitum*.

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