Integrating Fantasy and Reality in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

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"People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe" (93), observes the narrator Jeanette in Jeanette Winterson's boundary-crossing novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. By making the distinction between history and storytelling, Jeanette clearly defines fact and fiction, and by extension, the belief systems she has been brought up with -- religious fundamentalism and her mother's absolutist worldview -- as rigid binaries. Jeanette's declaration also exposes how authority is granted and maintained in this construction of the world in which there exist only opposing choices. Privileging one binary over the other becomes easy shorthand for determining right from wrong, thereby naturalizing moral judgments and perpetuating social, political, religious, and sexual norms. As Isabella C. Anievas Gamallo points out, "establishing one particular narrative as 'official History' becomes a strategy to impress and reinforce dominant ideological discourses" (128). What Winterson shows in *Oranges* are the ways in which these dominant discourses can be overturned. "Walls protect and walls limit," the narrator Jeanette notes, but "It is in the nature of walls that they should fall" (112). As this description suggests, the effort it takes to institutionalize and naturalize certain behaviors and beliefs -- to maintain the walls -- also points to places where the structures are weak because ideologies are in flux. In *Oranges*, stories are the places where ideologies are most unstable and visible.

By narratively juxtaposing reality (Jeanette's history) with fairy tales and "fantastic" spaces, Winterson complicates the "truths" of each setting, disrupts the binary imperative, and reveals the spaces where change can occur. The biblical, fantasy, and personal narratives are the sites in *Oranges* where the nature of wall-like belief systems are scrutinized and where meaning and identity are affirmed, contested, and then either reaffirmed or deconstructed. If, as Peggy Dunn Bailey argues, "Winterson deconstructs Jeanette's received ideology and demonstrates the ways in which self and reality are narrative constructions" (61), then these stories are the spaces in which the power to define oneself and one's reality is up for negotiation and interpretation. Whether the narrative's power is ultimately reaffirmed or disrupted, these remain sites of instability. By describing battles for interpretive power like the one that occurs over Jeanette's Fuzzy Felt depiction of Daniel in the lions' den, Winterson shows the fluidity of meaning and exposes what is ideologically at stake in these established narratives.

In *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Nancy Armstrong argues that fiction, domestic fiction in particular, both reflects and shapes culture: it is "the document and ... the agency of cultural history.... [I]t helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, made that space totally functional, and used it as the context for representing normal behavior. In so doing, fiction contested and finally suppressed alternative bases for human relationships" (23). This dual function of fiction is represented within *Oranges*. Winterson's text allows for a reciprocal construction of influence as Jeanette negotiates and rewrites stories in an attempt to ascertain her place both in the household and in the church. Both spaces seek to define "normal" social and sexual behaviors and desires, and one way this ideological indoctrination takes place is through culturally appropriate stories. By offering behavioral models for Jeanette in terms of family, social, and sexual relations, the Bible acts like the 18th- and 19th-century conduct books and domestic
fiction that Armstrong describes, which shape gender roles and desires: the "novel, together with all manner of printed material, helped to redefine what men were supposed to desire in women and what women, in turn, were supposed to desire to be" (251). Furthermore, Armstrong argues that these texts obscure their political agenda; they "appeared to have no political bias" so the "rules took on the power of natural law, and as a result, they presented ... readers with ideology in its most powerful form" (60). Similarly, the Bible stories and fairy tales presented in Oranges are so entrenched in Jeanette's consciousness that even though these narratives powerfully regulate conduct, their power and political bias are masked. In Oranges, Winterson both shows the ways in which the biblical stories that Jeanette is exposed to early on reinforce the fundamentalist religious beliefs and works to expose the political, sexual, and religious bias in these texts as a way of subverting their naturalizing function. By giving as much credence to Jeanette's personal feelings as the morals taught in these other texts, Winterson uses the personal narrative to disrupt the power of these socially entrenched stories. Through the process of integrating stories and reality, which collapses the distinction between history and story, fact and fiction, personal and political, Winterson models a new, more fluid belief system that "subvert[s] the possibility of a single authoritative reading of her fiction" and allows for multiple and shifting truths (Gamallo 126).

Elsie, one of Jeanette's mentors, expresses this more fluid and harmonious relationship in her advice to Jeanette: "'There's this world,' she banged the wall graphically, 'and there's this world,' she thumped her chest. 'If you want to make sense of either, you have to take notice of both'" (32). Jeanette's inner realities, the interior knowledge that Elsie represents by thumping on her chest, are worked out in fantasy and dreams. The fantasy stories do not simply describe new worlds but also contain religious and fairy tale details -- elements of traditional narratives -- that are the basis of Jeanette's early belief system. By "illustrat[ing] personal and psychological conflicts and ... point[ing] out possible solutions and alternative explanations for them" (Gamallo 126), these narrative spaces help Jeanette understand her place in the world and the different social relationships that shape it.

Through storytelling, Jeanette also learns that she has the power of self-determination and self-definition in this new world. As Bailey argues, "When Jeanette chooses herself (her thoughts and feelings, not those dictated to her) over the wall, she must construct another life, another narrative in order to survive" (75). By replacing the dominant narratives with stories of her own invention -- a skill that develops throughout the text -- Jeanette does precisely this; she constructs her own story and survives. Moreover, it is at the moment when Jeanette can write her own stories and voice her own opinions that the walls fall. "That walls should fall," Jeanette observes, "is the consequence of blowing your own trumpet" (112). Before the walls come down, however, Jeanette must recognize their restrictive nature.