"The Indigestible Elements": Witches and Female Identity in Jeanette Winterson's *The Daylight Gate*

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Introduction

In Winterson's 2012 novel, *The Daylight Gate*, which depicts the turbulent and controversial witch hunts of early 17th century England, a monstrous, but fascinating facet of female identity is outlined: the witch figure is constructed as an emblem and product of a backward and tyrannical patriarchal system, where woman is only appreciated because of her reproductive capacities, willingness to abide by men's rules and religious affiliation. The witch is an instance of transgressive femininity; she is an illustration of what Gilbert and Gubar pinned as the paradox of femininity: if a woman speaks out, she is a monster; if she remains silent, she is an angel condemned to isolation and hysteria (Leitch2022). The conundrum of female identity is rooted in this ambiguity of roles: assuming femininity has to do with isolation in both cases, whether femininity is understood as active or passive. By taking on "masculine" attributes such as power, agency, violence, a woman is rejected as ill-fitted; there is an inappropriate gap between her sex and her gender. By embracing the culturally-imposed characteristics of submission, silence, discretion, a woman fits her gender, but is excluded from power structures. Set in 17th century Britain, during the time of the 1612 Trial of the Lancashire witches, the novel centers on the figures of four witches awaiting trial, and a noble woman, Alice Nutter, who uses all her influence to defend them. Initially constructed as a mysterious, Gothic heroine who possesses an unnatural youth, and who stands up for the rights of poor women, she comes across as a feminist of her times, but pieces of her story gradually come together to reveal a tale of Faustian and lesbian sacrifice. Once in love with a beautiful Elizabeth Device, now turned into the old hag Demdike, Alice is the beneficiary of a pact with the "Dark Gentleman": she seems to mysteriously preserve her youth, while Elizabeth is turning into a frightening witch. Alice holds onto that "lesbian continuum" that stands so feeble against the patriarchy which brands poor women as monsters or prostitutes and leads them to assume that the supernatural can be their only weapon: "Such women are poor. They are ignorant. They have no power in your world, so they must get what power they can in theirs. I have sympathy for them"(Winterson 55).However, she is also tributary to the heterosexual model: her present lover is a man, Christopher Southworth, who is wanted for having participated in the plot against King James. Ultimately, in a medley of magic, superstition and conspiracy, she loses her youth as the spell breaks down, and she prepares for death as a form of rebirth: "the daylight gate" opens to welcome her in a new dimension, where she can be re-united with her lover.

The hag and the sorceress: the aesthetics of the "enchanted" body

Throughout the novel, aesthetics seems to regulate women's worth and categorize them into "ugly-therefore-guilty" and "beautiful-yet-suspicious". Poor witches are muted and denied any freedom of expression, while Alice Nutter's unusual youth and beauty may place her close enough to the brink of sorcery, yet at the same time allow her to stand above the squalor of the rabble and exercise the power that wealth offers her. As Ecosuggests in his analysis, ugly women had a much higher incidence of being condemned as witches simply because of their physical appearance (212). Although Nutter loses her beauty towards the end of the novel, her ending is Romantic and majestic, in contrast to the grotesque and wretched fleshly reality of the other convicts.

It's a death by choice, a proud, monumental ending with hints of hope and regeneration as "the daylight gate" opens and promises a new beginning. Still, the novel sways confusingly between notions of positive and negative witchcraft, between the image of the young, mysterious sorceress and the old, repulsive hag. Elizabeth Device illustrates this stereotypical portrait of the witch: "Elizabeth Device was dirty and ugly. The strangeness of her eye deformity made people fear her. One eye looked up and the other looked down, and both eyes were set crooked in her face"(Winterson39). At the other end of the spectrum, Alice Nutter is a beautiful sorceress who enjoys a very different social status. A question arises: are they both witches?

> Objective definitions of 'witchcraft' are unsatisfactory because its real meaning derives from relationships, shared experiences, and individual feelings [..]Back to the dictionary for an illustration. Under 'witch', we find 'an ugly, repulsive, or malevolent (usually old) woman; a hag' [...] But an alternative definition follows: 'a fascinating bewitching girl or young woman'. Which is it to be: repulsive or fascinating, young or old? Perhaps all these things. (Gaskill 4-5)

Gaskill's historical approach to witchcraft looks into the premises and foundation of the witch hunts in Europe, starting from the ancient era and going up to the emergence of the fundamental text *Malleus Maleficarum*, which contributed to the grounding of the witch cliché. Heinrich Kramer, the author, established witchcraft as a gendered phenomenon, related primarily to lewd women engaging in intercourse with the devil. "The projected world of the witches was therefore part object-lesson about sin, part millennial jeremiad, part febrile sexual fantasy, part early modern horror film. It repelled and it attracted; it fermented a heady brew of concern, fear, entertainment, and titillation" (Gaskill24).

The oppression of women by men takes many faces in this novel. They are sexually harassed, called names, rejected as outcasts and condemned to ignorance. The beginning of the novel sees the young Sarah Device raped and physically abused by Tom Peeper as she is suspected of having contributed to the death of John Law, the pedlar of the village. Because of the marginal status Sarah and her family have, they are poor and have to survive using any possible means. In this physically and morally squalid environment, Demdike's little girl, Jennet accepts to be Tom Peeper's sexual slave in exchange for food. Once the witches are condemned and taken to prison, they are kept in ghastly, filthy conditions. The vicious circle of abuse seems to be never-ending. The witch trials of seventeenth century England illustrate an important point in the history of male oppression. As Hester keenly demonstrates, periods that were generally considered "progressive", such as the Renaissance or the development of the modern European states were times when women were considered inferior or suffered a loss of status. She goes on by arguing that witch hunts were sex specific (Hester111). Rosen upholds the same view, alluding to the fact that women's bodies were mysterious and more likely to be dealing with the occult, precisely because their supposed intellectual shortcomings kept them away from science and medicine. Left to their own devices, women resorted to magic:

> More women than men were called witches because witchcraft deals predominantly with the concerns of women and their world was a much more closed and mysterious society to men in the fifteenth century than it is now. Woman was regarded as deficient in the rational faculties – and since she was usually pregnant or nursing (the least intellectual of states) this is an understandable view. Her physical changes and functions were mysterious, particularly that of childbirth, which was assisted by women only, and about

> which doctors were astonishingly ignorant [...] Neglected by both religion and science, there is no doubt that women did use charms and spells and imitative magic.(8)

The figure of the witch is sculpted into an intricate cultural archaeology and has survived as one of the most compelling and iconic avatars of "evil" womanhood. Through the resurfacing of the "mad, bad and dangerous to know" woman that had been forgotten since *Sexing the Cherry's* Dog-Woman, Winterson makes a bold statement of female identity and underscores the loathsome denigration to which women were subjected in 17th century Britain. Thirteen years after the publication of *Sexing the Cherry* and the creation of a powerful matron, Winterson revises her feminist agenda through what is probably the most vilified aspect of femaleness; by focusing on witches and their misery, she foregrounds a society of cruel men that will very quickly attribute evil to women and condemn them to death when they fall out of the norm. There is a plethora of treatises and works of fiction that take the witch as their focus, starting from antiquity, not surprisingly, because, just like any monster or fantastic figure, she possesses a strong aura of attraction. Ecoastutely draws attention to the chronic misogyny inherent in witch folklore:

> Right from the start, although it was recognized that black magic was practiced both by men (warlocks) and women (witches), a deep-rooted misogyny tended to identify the malefic creature with women. In the Christian world, a union with the Devil could only be perpetrated by a woman. In the Middle Ages there was already talk of the Sabbat as a diabolical assembly in which witches not only cast spells but also indulge in full-blown orgies, having sexual relations with the Devil in the form of a goat, a symbol of lust. Finally the image of the witch astride a broomstick [...] is clearly a phallic reference. (203)

Winterson stays true to this paradigmatic misogynism surrounding witches and is quick to point it out whenever the time is right. The famous John Dee and Edward Kelley, who appear in a highly-charged erotic episode of ritualistic love-making, are well-known for their dealings in the occult, yet they are revered and respected as learned men. Never is there any suggestion of Satanism hovering over them, even if they also invoke preternatural forces and engage in sexual orgies. Under the guise of arcane sexual ceremonials, these illuminated men request the obliteration of bodily autonomy in order to merge with the Universe: "The Great Work was to dissolve all boundaries. The Great Work was to transform one substance into another – one self into another. We would merge. We would be transformed"(Winterson66). They invite Alice to an orgy, but she participates as an onlooker while her soon-to-be lover, Elizabeth Southern, takes center stage, her body and sexuality sparkling with eerie and fascinating erotic power. However, despite a smouldering sexuality, at this stage, her body is not invested with the negative attributes of corruption or experience that normally accompany sexual knowledge in the philosophy of the times, but she does convey an uncanny feeling of unearthly power. To be noted, she is a far cry from her future "witch" self, appropriating angelic qualities: "In her clothes, she was like any other well-formed woman, but naked, she seemed like something other than, or more than, human. I do not say like a goddess, but like an animal and a spirit combined into human form. An angel, Edward Kelley said" (Winterson 67).

Witches and bisexuality

The lush sexuality of the witch, or "sorceress", is represented, here, as in traditional Gothic texts, as deviant and laden with the attributes of lesbianism and

bisexuality. Catherine Clement associates the witch with a repressed Imaginary and by extension, with the figure of the hysteric in their similarity regarding confinement and death; the sorceress pertains to the domain of Nature, as she "executes her transit imaginarily, perched on the black goat that carries her off, impaled by the broom that flies her away; she goes in the direction of animality, plants, the inhuman" (Clement 8). The hysteric, Clement charges, embodies bisexuality and is also defined by immobility, which betokens a split in what Levi-Strauss calls "the symbolic system". Both of them

> mark the end of a type – how far a split can go. It is the demoniac figure that comes to its end with the sorceress – the end sanctioned by the group in death by fire. The "matrix alienation", that which fixes the guilt of reproduction on the ill female organs, comes to term with the hysteric. What comes undone in both cases is woman's causality; she/it shifts, changes names at the same time the history of mentalities makes cultural norms evolve. (Clement 6)

Women are among the social categories that do not fit into the symbolic order and hence, they are affected by a dangerous symbolic mobility from which, as stated above, witches and hysterics are excluded. However, this is not their only coordinate: in fact, they are excluded, just as much as they are included in the symbolic order because of their capacity for reproduction; "they are allied with what is regular, according to the rules, since they are wives and mothers, and allied as well with those natural disturbances, their regular periods, which are the epitome of paradox, order and disorder" (Clement 8). And in the crevice thus created by their simultaneous exclusion and inclusion springs women's proclivity for magic, their body instated as a natural catalyst for the supernatural.

From the very moment of its birth, the body that is sexed female is fraught with superstitious lore. The girl-baby is considered twice as dangerous or sinful and needs to be absterged of her inborn evil. In the grim, Gothic topos of Pendle Hill, females are destined as sacrifices, as if the Hill draws its power from them and builds its magic on the acknowledgement of their presence: "A girl-child born in Pendle Forest should be twice baptized: once in a church and once in a black pool at the foot of the hill. The hill will know her then. She will be its trophy and its sacrifice. She must make peace with her birthright […]" (Winterson2).

An edifying anthropological study on magic by Mauss lists women among social classes that are more susceptible to magic because of their special qualities. Those fit for magic have to be either disabled, endowed with special qualities, such as ventriloquists, acrobats or jugglers or simply neurotic, with an accrued emotional sensitivity. Mauss describes women's changing bodies as a physical predisposition that isn't necessarily the cause of their proclivity for magic, but the effect of the social attitudes that they provoke:

> The critical periods of their life cycle lead to bemusement and apprehension, which place them in a special position. And it is precisely at periods such as puberty, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth that a woman's attributes reach their greatest intensity. It is usually at such times that women are supposed to provide subjects or act as agents for magical action. Old women are witches; virgins are valuable auxiliaries; menstrual blood and other like products are common specifics. (35)

He continues by highlighting the passive role that women occupy in religion and the gender biased exaggeration of women's contribution to witchcraft, resulting in many innocent women being accused of sorcery while in fact, greater numbers of men practised it than women.

The problem of witchcraft and of the gendered conflict it implies has been analyzed in many studies regarding the witch hunts of early modern Britain. The fascination for this subject has attracted an abundance of documented approaches, most of which look for underlying causes and factors. Mary Daly believes witch hunts were a means of purifying society of women who did not harmonize with men's interests and monopoly.

> [...] the witchcraze focused predominantly upon women who had rejected marriage (Spinsters) and women who had survived it (widows). The witch-hunters sought to purify their society (The Mystical Body) of these "indigestible" elements – women whose physical, intellectual, economic, moral, and spiritual independence and activity profoundly threatened the male monopoly in every sphere. (118)

The main characters of the Daylight Gate are clearly "the indigestible elements" Daly talks about; the strong and independent Alice Nutter thwarts male supremacy through her self-attained wealth and influence, whereas the witches threaten the stable patriarchal construct of marriage. As single and ugly women, they are self-sufficient, deviant aspects of femininity, living as outcasts on the outskirts of Pendle Hill and being absorbed into a dark local folklore.

"The Mother Church" and the Male Doctor: women's place in religion and medicine

As the trials progress, we discover that the women turn against each other and that the mother-daughter and mother-son bonds are contaminated with betrayal. Elizabeth Device allows her son, James Device, to sell his sister Jennet to Tom Peeper, and thus accepts that her own daughter will get raped by this man. Coincidentally, Tom Peeper happens to be Jennet's father, therefore Elizabeth's wickedness is all the more iniquitous. She condones incest, taking it very lightly and reducing it to a question of material welfare: "'You let me sell your own daughter to her own father. "You would have sold her to someone', said Elizabeth. At least he bought her a dress now and then.'"(Winterson160).

The mother-son bond is also desecrated when James Device testifies against his mother in return for money, clothes and a wife, with Elizabeth also turning against him by confessing he has turned into a hare. As Dalysuggests, "The Mother Church" becomes an instrument of sowing contention, it turns sons and daughters against their mothers, thus warping the feelings of women into a love-hate relationship. By invoking the metaphorical and institutional "Mystical Body" of the "Mother Church", males covered their own sadism and control and destroyed the sacred connection with the mother. The Mother Church, a replica of the Goddess, served as a reminder of their need to torture, rape and kill female divinity (126).

In *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, Ehrenreich and English argue that "women have always been healers" (25). They were seen either as wise women or as witches, yet their supremacy in this field has gradually been taken over by men, as the more knowledgeable sex: "we are told that our subservience is biologically ordained: women are inherently nurse-like and not doctor-like" (27). They suggest that witch hunts were a question of a political struggle to assert male supremacy and monopolization over the very profitable domain of medicine. In the *Daylight Gate*, those who deal with herbs or healing pertain to the domain of superstition, especially if they are women, as Alice Nutter points out. When a boy gets his tongue bitten by Sarah Device, after being goaded to sexually assault her by Tom Peeper, Alice Nutter orders that the boy be taken to a herbalist. "'The herbalist is a witch!' said Tom. 'Yes and every

midwife with her according to the likes of you'"(Winterson15-16). Women's contribution to medicine is thus dismissed as irrelevant on every level; no woman, not even the wealthy and high class Alice Nutter can escape this label, which brings into focus the importance of gender in the Puritans' conception of sin and the body.

Reisdraws attention to a few crucial points that shed light on women's social propensity for sin in the Puritan's ideology. Puritans believed that the body was Satan's means to attack the soul, and, because women's bodies were weaker, the devil could get to them more easily. However, witches were a special kind of sinful women: they were not only women prone to sin, they consciously chose to make a pact with the devil, and it is this active involvement that truly makes them "evil":

> Witches, unlike commonplace sinners, took a further damning step. Their feminine souls made an explicit and aggressive choice to conjoin with the devil. By defining a witch as a person whose (feminine) soul covenanted with Satan signing a devil's pact rather than quiescently waiting for Christ, Puritans effectively demonized the notion of active female choice. A woman risked being damned either way: If her soul waited longingly for salvation in Christ, such female yearning could conjure up images of unsatisfied women vulnerable to Satan; if, on the contrary, that soul acted assertively rather than in passive obedience, by definition it chose the devil overtly. (Reis16)

However, the soul, through its inwardness, suggested femininity, just like the female sexual organs are placed within the body (Reis 19). There is even a hint of a sexual union between the soul and Christ or the devil; whether the soul embraces the protective and beneficent power of Christ or it succumbs to the wicked influence of Satan, the bond between them is heterosexual, with the soul being conceived as feminine (Reis20).

The "marriage" with the devil does not only exist at a metaphorical level in Winterson's novel. The devil is a sophisticated and lewd "Dark Gentleman", who throws a lush orgy and has intercourse with Alice Nutter, not before making Elizabeth Southern his wife. Alice's sexual union with Satan is preceded by an episode of lesbian sexual love where the division of body and soul ultimately decides who is the winning and who is the defeated aspect of femininity. Elizabeth's body is the Puritanic embodiment of the weak female body that caves in to the Devil's siege and becomes his bride. Alice, on the other hand, uses her body as a shield. It becomes clear that Elizabeth Southern has made a pact with the devil, and her lesbian relationship with Alice is one that remains at the level of shallow bodily pleasure: "'You belong to me', I said. She shook her head. 'I did once upon a time, but you never belonged to me, did you, Alice? You gave me your body, but you never gave me your Soul" (Winterson79).

The Gothic Double

The Daylight Gate could be read as a Gothic tale, in which the two sorceresses, Alice Nutter and Elizabeth Southern are engaged in a narcissistic relationship with the former feminized, and the latter de-feminized, downgraded, turned into a feared monster. Although there is, from the beginning, a suspicion of sexless lesbian bonding between Alice Nutter and the other witches, Alice and Demdike are revealed as inverted mirror images of each other only later, when Demdike proves to be the degraded version of Elizabeth Southern. A ruse typical of Gothic texts, doubling adds to the interplays of identity as well as to the aesthetics of darkness and the sublime. As the women make a pact with the devil, they are ensnared in a dualistic identity game dominated by the "unheimlich". When the old witch Demdike dies, Alice Nutter's guarantee against death

also becomes dysfunctional, and her vision of young Elizabeth Southern turns into a harbinger of her impending death. The idea of doubling as a protection against death derives, as Freud has argues, from a deep narcissistic self-love, a need for the preservation of one's self. By claiming that the double has changed its meaning from a guarantee against death to a herald of death, Freud shows that the fear of doubles is basically has irrational roots:

> For the double was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego, an "energetic denial of the power of death", as Rank says; and probably, the "Immortal Soul" was the first double of the body. This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of the genital symbol; the same desire spurred on the ancient Egyptians to the art of making images of the dead in some lasting material. Such ideas, however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which holds sway in the mind of the child as in that of primitive man. And when this stage has been left behind, the double takes on a different aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death. (630)

But the reason why the doppelgänger appears uncanny and has now acquired negative connotations is precisely the evolution of human mental structure and society beyond the primitive beliefs of such cultures like the Egyptians. "The 'double' has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons" (Freud 631).

In Winterson's novel, spectres appear while bodies are still alive, in a chronotope that is not meant to be unidimensional. It appears that Winterson stays true to her credo, asserted and re-asserted throughout her fiction: space and time exist in a multiplicity of planes and occasionally ooze into each other. The vision of the two women in love, Alice and Elizabeth, appears hauntingly in a chapter entitled "Shadows", where hints of a pre-Oedipal conflict loom large. Hiding in the allegedly haunted room of a brothel, Christopher Southworth glimpses images of Alice and Elizabeth taking dinner and dancing. The feeling of jealousy he experiences at the sight and his desire to interfere and disrupt the blissful connection between them is reminiscent of the Freudian intrusion of a jealous father who intends to break the passive mother-daughter pre-Oedipal attachment and restore the active heterosexual relationship with the mother.

> He looked back; Alice and Elizabeth were dancing together. This time he did not rush in, he watched them. The room was exactly as he knew it, but there were flowers and everything seemed pretty and vital, not dusty and abandoned. Alice kissed Elizabeth. He felt himself dizzy with jealousy. They moved toward the bed. Alice touched Elizabeth's neck. He could not contain himself. He jumped into the room. It was empty. (Winterson198)

The male voyeurism in this scene does not entail pleasure on the part of the man. Lesbian love is a threatening concept in male ideology because men become utterly isolated from this exclusivist "club" and frustration sets in. The lesbian holds a special lure that adds to her transgressive, chameleonic sway; "the portrayal of her in the uncanny roles of spectral visitor, witch and vampire in popular gothic fiction and horror film also illustrate her reputation as ambiguously fascinating/dangerous" (Palmer50).

Lesbianism, Creed maintains, "was seen as inextricably linked to self-absorption and narcissism. Men were shut out from this world – hence they understood the threat

offered by the lesbian couple"(Creed99). The consequence of the lesbian couple mirroring each other is tied to the problem of immobility; ultimately, the danger resides in the fact that such narcissism does not allow for progress, only regression and circularity.

In the same article, Creed describes the lesbian body as represented in a triptych of stereotypes: the lesbian body as masculinized, the animalistic lesbian body and the narcissistic lesbian body(87-88). The close association of women with nature because of their reproductive capacities and supposedly inferior status predispose them to anomaly. The lesbian's transformative sexuality is so much more abject as she parallels the sex changes and deviant births associated with such animals as the hare, the weasel or the hyena. (pp. 96-98) In *The Daylight Gate*, the haunting appearance of Alice and Elizabeth is suggestive of another popular representation of the lesbian: the ghost. According to Castle, lesbian sexual experience is effaced and dematerialized through the representation of the lesbian in spectral terms, thus "denying the carnal bravada of lesbian existence" (30). The ghost in itself is an ambiguous being, disrupting borders, lying on the borderline of the living and the dead, just like the lesbian illustrates sexual liminality. In parallel with the beginning, the ending of the novel suggests the same duality of life and death. Christopher Southworth, Alice's lover, awaits his death as a new beginning: ultimately, the suggestion is that a body, be it male or female, beautiful or ugly, transgressive or normative, is a frivolous piece of matter waiting to be redeemed outside the boundaries that enclose it.

Conclusions

The Daylight Gate focuses on the figure of the witch as an aberrant and transgressive aspect of female identity. The discourses of religion and medicine shut the Demdikes and Alice Nutter out: the former are too ugly, therefore evil, the latter is suspiciously youthful – so both parties must be dealing with the Devil; both tamper with magic, hence they also acquire a negative connotation in medicine as healers. Winterson's novel highlights the misogynism inherent in the witch craze: women are more likely to be sentenced to death when they are aging, deprived of the reproductive capacities which make them useful to society. They are more easily integrated to the folklore of magic, because they are closer to nature and their changing bodies betoken mystery. As unmarried, independent women, they pose a threat to patriarchy and must be eliminated under the guise of heresy. The heterosexual norm is imposed through a paranoid and stern Church, but the two main characters escape it by uniting in a narcissistic, lesbian relationship, as they become each other's doppelgänger. While one of them ages, the other preserves her youth. Their homosexual experience is represented through spectrality as a strategy of effacing carnal lesbian experience, but also as a reminder of the novel's main point: the body is a temporary abode, and fulfilment lies in an atemporal, amoral and non-physical realm.

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