



# *In a Queer Gothic Space and Time: Love Triangles in Jeanette Winterson's The Daylight Gate*

by Silvia Antosa

## 1. CHALLENGING HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION: THE PENDLE WITCHES TRIAL

In her work, Jeanette Winterson consistently shows an interest in history and the way in which it has been transmitted through generations. In particular, she attempts to fill in the gaps of historical representation by shedding light on those identities that were marginalised and made invisible because they ostensibly violated society's norms, or because they were perceived as deviant and threatening for the social order. From her first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) to her more recent works, Winterson reclaims a verbal and symbolic space for those subjects whom society has failed to recognise. Winterson narratively revisits history by adopting and combining several technical postmodern strategies, such as historiographic metafiction, parody, intertextuality, self-reflectivity and pastiche. In so doing, she aims to explore the cultural construction of sexual and gender identities as well as to challenge patriarchal and heterosexual hegemonic discourses.

One of the motifs that Winterson adopts to dismantle hegemonic representational identity models is the queer love triangle. Love triangles were discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her groundbreaking work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. In her analysis of several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English and American novels, Sedgwick argued that social relations were often built around a triangle between two men and a woman. In her opinion, this is a model of homosocial bonding in which male desire overpowers and ultimately displaces the female subject, who is consequently isolated (Sedgwick 1985).



A variation of this relational archetype was studied by Terry Castle, who developed Sedgwick's reflections on the triangulation of desire in order to theorise the existence of a female countertriangulation in lesbian novels. According to Castle, female bonding causes a disruptive effect on the male homosocial order and leads to the formation of a new triangle in which the male subject is isolated from the female-dominated relationship (Castle 1983: 72-74). The shift from male homosocial bonds to dynamic female/lesbian triangulated relationships is at the core of Winterson's novels, in which they also become symbols of creativity and artistic inspiration.

In her latest novel, *The Daylight Gate*, Winterson combines her interest in the historical rediscovery of stories of marginalised female subjectivities with her exploration of the motif of the queer love triangle between two women and a man. This is accomplished through her adoption of the Gothic, which has historically provided a space for challenging and subverting representations of mainstream society and its dominant hegemonic values. In particular, Gothic fiction has often staged uncanny, queer dilemmas and desires that were turned into phantasmatic, albeit vivid, supernatural figures. In this way, in the words of Rosemary Jackson, the Gothic "pushes us [...] towards an area of non-signification [...] by attempting to articulate the unnameable and to visualise the unseen" (Jackson 1981: 41).

*The Daylight Gate* was published in 2012, for the four-hundredth anniversary of the notorious 1612 Trial of the Lancashire Witches, also known as the Pendle Witches Trial.<sup>1</sup> The story is set in the early seventeenth century under the reign of James I, whose *Daemonologie* (1597) had paved the way for the practice of witch-hunting and the persecution of all forms of heresy. Catholics and witches, wizards and political dissidents such as the gunpowder-plotters, who had tried to burn the Parliament and kill the King in 1605, were all persecuted. Rural Lancashire, in particular, was seen by many as a hotbed of Catholics, outlaws and sorceresses. The Pendle Witches Trial was, as Winterson remarks in the Introduction, "the most famous of the English witch trials". It was also "the first witch trial to be documented" (Winterson 2012: vii). The most famous account of the Lancashire court case, entitled *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster*, was written by Thomas Potts, a lawyer faithful to the King. His motto, "Witchery popery popery witchery", is also a refrain in the novel and reveals the complex nexus of socio-cultural anxieties pervading the first half of the seventeenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pendle Witches Trial has inspired several accounts in the course of time: Victorian novelist William Harrison Ainsworth wrote *The Lancashire Witches* (1849), while Robert Neill dramatised the events in *Mist over Pendle* (1951). More recently, the writer and poet Blake Morrison has published the collection of poems *Pendle Witches* (1996). Several works have been written for the four-hundredth anniversary; among them, *The Lancashire Witches* by Carol Ann Duffy, a long poem inscribed on posts along Witches Walk from Pendle to Lancaster, and a documentary narrated by Simon Armitage, *The Pendle Witch Child*, which has been released on August 2012 on BBC 4.



The novel follows the events taking place just before the August Assizes, at which ten convicts are accused and hanged for practising witchcraft. It all starts when a local pedlar, John Law, accuses a young beggar, Alizon Device, of casting a spell on him that left him paralysed. Reciprocal accusations of witchcraft quickly follow between the Device family and the members of a rival family, the Chattoxes. Eventually, they are all incarcerated. They are held in a tiny dungeon in Lancaster Castle in horrific conditions for months, before being executed thanks to the testimony of the youngest member of the family, Jennet Device. Among those executed was a gentlewoman, Alice Nutter, who also owned the land on which Malkin Tower stood, the Device's home. Nutter's involvement in the case, as well as her conviction and execution, are still a mystery for historians and scholars (Poole 2002; Clayton 2007). Winterson's novel focuses on Alice Nutter and imaginatively rereads events from her perspective.

Winterson takes the historical record and weaves a complex plot in which real characters and places are turned into a fictional story where the lines between reality and magic, history and fiction are constantly blurred. In this article, I argue that Winterson re-writes the well-known historical event of the Pendle Witches Trial by assuming a perspective which is 'other' to the official textual source provided by Thomas Potts and other contemporary witnesses, in order to investigate the hidden paths that still lie undiscovered in the historiographical records. In so doing, she rejects the official version of the trials and adopts the Gothic mode to re-assert the denied voice of those who Linda Hutcheon has called "the ex-centrics, the marginalised, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (1988: 114). In focusing on the historical persecution against witches that took place in England between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *The Daylight Gate* also shows, in Paulina Palmer's words, that the figure of "the witch continues to provide a source of inspiration for writers today, carrying radical feminist connotations of female empowerment, marriage resistance and women's community" (2004: 122).

In addition, I analyse the ways in which Winterson connects the persecution of women as witches with other oppressed social and religious minority groups, such as the poor and Catholics. As I shall demonstrate, one of her aims is to create a feminist genealogy that also gives representation to the lives of queer individuals, whose 'haunting' presences have not been taken into account either by novelists or by historiographical records. Moreover, I investigate how Winterson exploits a number of standard Gothic tropes in order to enhance their subversive qualities, as well as to explore and articulate women's abuse and exploitation, female same-sex relationships as well as non-hegemonic forms of masculinity. In my view, *The Daylight Gate* is a novel that makes explicit the queerness inherent in the Gothic by tying it to a queer love triangle between two women and a man.



## 2. QUEER GOTHIC DESIRE

Historically, Gothic fiction has focused on non-normative forms of sexuality traditionally perceived as transgressive and taboo. In its excessive, ambiguous and immoral representations, the Gothic articulates individual and collective anxieties and fears – especially sexual fears. It also opens up a symbolic space of production and representation of subversive sexual meanings that are conventionally repressed (Rigby 2009: 51; Palmer 2012: 1-22). In *Queer Gothic*, George Haggerty has claimed that:

the cult of gothic fiction reached its apex at the very moment when gender and sexuality were beginning to be codified for modern culture. In fact, gothic fiction offered a testing ground for many unauthorised genders and sexualities [...]. In this sense it offers a historical model of queer theory and politics: transgressive, sexually coded, and resistant to dominant ideology. (Haggerty 2006: 2)

Such a view similarly informs William Hughes and Andrew Smith's argument. In their introduction to *Queering the Gothic*, they claim that "Gothic has, in a sense, always been queer [...] The genre has characteristically been perceived in criticism as being poised astride the uneasy cultural boundary that separates the acceptable and familiar from the troubling and different" (Hughes and Smith 2009: 1). Like the queer, the Gothic troubles the boundaries between "acceptable" and "different" by questioning the very notions of 'normality' and 'respectability' and by expressing transgressive desire. In providing a space for the articulation of gender and sexual differences, the Gothic also stages desire; as Haggerty points out, "Gothic fiction is not about homo- or heterodesire as much as it is about the fact of desire itself" (Haggerty 2006: 2). It is a sexually-charged desire which is strictly connected to the exercise of or, alternatively, the resistance to dominant forms of sociocultural power.

In the Gothic setting of *The Daylight Gate*, queer desire is a space of resistance to heteronormative, patriarchal power. Winterson's queer Gothic novel is set in a world where political and cultural control is exercised, in Foucauldian terms, through "the deployment of sexuality". Michel Foucault claims that sexuality itself becomes a mode of social knowledge and surveillance (Foucault 1998). The fictional world of the novel is dominated by repressive socio-cultural relations founded on sexual taboos, such as incest and same-sex desire – taboos that, ironically, are evoked so often that they become familiar concepts.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, they reveal the almost hidden tensions between the acceptable and the familiar (*Heimlich*) and unfamiliar repressed fears and anxieties (*Unheimlich*). On this point, Sigmund Freud has famously pointed out that: "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the

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<sup>2</sup> On the political and sexual function of taboos such as incest and the exchange of women as a form of distribution of power among families, see Lévi-Strauss (1969: 44-45) and Rubin (1975).



process of repression [...] the uncanny [...] [is] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (Freud 1990-1993: 363-364). In discussing Freud's essay and its Derridean interpretations, Hélène Cixous has emphasised its disturbing function, by arguing that it is "a relational signifier [...] a composite that infiltrates the interstices of the narrative and points to gaps we need to explain" (1976: 536). Palmer has further emphasised the relevance that the unstable tensions between the homely and the unhomely can have for the recognition of queer lives and for the rediscovery of their histories. On this point she has argued that "[t]he 'unhomely home' [...] evokes a domestic space that, though ostensibly warm and secure, is disturbed by secrets and the return of repressed fears and desires. The implications that it evokes of a tension or clash between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the strange, make it particularly relevant to queer existence" (2012: 15).

Winterson depicts a world where power is entirely held by men, who exercise their gender and class privileges through physical and mental abuse, sexual violence and religious and political persecution. All these forms of power are legitimised by both the royal and the Divine Laws, which are deemed to be preternatural and incontrovertible. The patriarchal Lancashire community narrated by Winterson presides over an immutable order. It is maintained through rigorous surveillance as well as harsh punishments, which are based on mere speculation about presumed 'criminal' deeds.<sup>3</sup> In this way, individual freedom is denied and order is maintained in the name of truth. As reviewer Richard Strachan has emphasised, "the true horror in the book is not the threat of witchcraft, not the severed heads and demonic apparitions, but the exercise of power by the powerful over the weak" (2013).

By exploring transgressive sexualities, prohibited desires, loss and incest, this queer Gothic novel disrupts notions of stable and social order. In so doing, it exposes the constructed nature of sexual and gender identities and dismantles the foundations of the socio-cultural order on which they are founded. Following Monique Wittig, who stated that "Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order" (1992: 2), I claim that Winterson deconstructs the category of sex to show that it is the product of a long-established masculine system. Her ideological stance is also close to Judith Butler's theories, according to which gender is a performative act and there is not a gender which is proper to one sex rather than another. The supposed naturalness of the relation between sex and gender is then discursively produced, and has no original pre-existing model (Butler 1991).

In light of these reflections, in the next section I discuss the ways in which queer desire works as a form of resistance to male patriarchal power structures as well as a

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault has argued that: "Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance; [...] it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies" (1977: 217).





way of enhancing female bonding, empowerment and self-assertion. In so doing, Winterson gives her own narrative version of historical events and critically rethinks notions like masculinity, femininity and subalternity through queer triangulated desire.

### 3. ALICE NUTTER AND THE POLITICS OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

The protagonist of the novel, Alice Nutter, is a self-made woman. As a young widow, she moves from Lancashire to Manchester to become a member of John Dee's steering group of alchemical studies. Dee was an influential astrologer and mathematician to the Queen. Alice becomes an active member of his research group and makes her fortune through her discovery of a special technique for dying cloth. She summarises the scopes of their activities as follows: "The Great Work was to dissolve all boundaries. The Great Work was to transform one substance into another – one self into the other. We would merge. We would be transformed" (Winterson 2012: 59). This passage is reminiscent of another of Winterson's novels, *Gut Symmetries* (1997), in which she focuses on Paracelsus' own search for unity. Paracelsus' new alchemy combined Cabbala and magic together; his main aim was to transform matter by studying the influences between the different parts of the universe. Paracelsus' theories and experiments had an influence on the work of John Dee, as both scientists investigated the possibility of establishing a harmonious relationship between man and the universe in order to create a holistic vision in which all opposites are merged (Clucas 2006). Moreover, the dissolution of boundaries and the transformation of oneself into the other anticipates the destabilising effects of the queer triangulation of desire on which the novel pivots.

After spending a few years in Manchester, the group moves to London, where Alice lives an intellectually and sexually fulfilling life with her lover Elizabeth Southern, who is also a member of the alchemical research group as a mathematician. Alice and Elizabeth's relationship is doomed and fated to end, as Elizabeth is drawn to the darker side of her magical explorations. She chooses "the Left-hand Path" and – in a Faustian move – sells her soul to "The Dark Gentleman", also known as Lord of Hell. She moves to Vauxhall by the Pleasure Gardens, and leads a luxurious life for a while. Alice later decides to go away from London and return to Lancashire. As the narrative progresses, it is gradually unveiled that the reason has to do with Elizabeth herself.

Alice's wealth, intelligence and independent nature make her an object of suspicion for the local Lancashire men. Her past connection with John Dee, together with her knowledge and culture, are similarly perceived as dangerous. She embodies female agency and empowerment, thus exceeding her role as a woman within the local male-dominated environment. Her characterisation is marked by disruptive and transgressive signs of excess, ranging from her upper-class background to her gender



identity and unconventional sexual role. A telling episode which testifies to her perceived 'excess' among the local patriarchal community occurs when she brings and wins a lawsuit against her neighbour, the influential local Magistrate Roger Nowell, on a case of land owning. The controversy is introduced and conveyed to readers as follows:

Roger Nowell was a widower. Alice Nutter was a widow. They were both rich. They could have been a match. Alice's land abutted Read Hall. But they had not courted; they had gone to law. Roger Nowell claimed a parcel of land as his. Alice Nutter claimed it as hers. She had won the lawsuit. Roger Nowell had never lost anything before – except his wife. (Winterson 2012: 42-43)

The two characters seem to share similar features, as it is conveyed by the symmetrical structure of this short extract. Both Alice Nutter and Roger Nowell are rich landowners. As confirmed by their ensuing conversation, both also seem to share a critical distance from the prejudices and the beliefs held by local people and authorities. Nonetheless, the adversative conjunction "but" introduces the terms of a long-standing controversy between them, which ostensibly precluded any form of relationship. Alice's victory over the issue of land ownership seems to be the starting point of a conflict that ends up with Nowell's arrest of Alice on the grounds of witchcraft. In so doing, he condemns her to be judged by the local court together with the other suspects. Therefore, this brief extract hints at the possibility that Nowell's personal resentment might have played a significant part in Alice's later arrest. It is her challenge of patriarchal authorities that ultimately turns her into the target of social persecution and leads to her trial and death.

In addition, Alice lives alone and performs activities and sports that usually pertain to the masculine realm, such as riding horses astride. In this way, she inhabits the outside space and moves out of the suffocating domestic sphere to which patriarchy had relegated women. As postmodern human geographers have recently pointed out (Bell and Valentine 1995; Browne, Brown and Lim 2007; Duncan 1996), social spaces are not only geographical contexts where events take place, but are rather constituted by networks of actions and interpersonal relations. They can thus be defined through embodied social practices and power relations of integration and exclusion. It is through these practices that the norms regulating spaces are acted out. In this way, spaces are ideologically and culturally codified and spatially (re)produce a social order founded on gender differences, which are structured on a hierarchical level (McDowell 1999). As a consequence, public and visible spaces privilege dominant, patriarchal and heterosexual identities.

In inhabiting public spaces and performing social practices, Alice challenges the (re)production of the gender differences on which social order is founded. She is an exception and becomes a challenging symptom to the established order. Her defying role has unsettling effects over those surrounding her. Several male characters make



negative comments on the fact that she goes out on her own. Even her gaze conveys her non-conventional, active personality who cannot be easily relegated to the sociocultural margins of society. For example, she has the power to make the politically influential Thomas Potts uncomfortable just by looking at him. She encounters him for the first time on her way to Houghton Tower, where she is going to see Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with Nowell and the local authorities. As the narrator ironically emphasises, Potts "had been curious to meet Alice Nutter but *she made him nervous*. Something about the way she looked at him *made him feel less important than he knew himself to be*" (Winterson 2012: 84-85, my emphasis). Furthermore, Alice speaks out for herself. Therefore, she moves beyond the realm of the private and 'the unspeakable' in order to find her own discursive space within society. She also speaks out on behalf of those women in the grip of poverty and desperation; they are women accused of witchcraft, who cannot defend themselves from legal, mental and physical abuse. Answering Nowell's pressing questions about the Demdike family, Alice points this out quite clearly: "Such women are poor. They are ignorant. They have no power in *your world*, so they must get what power can be in theirs. I have sympathy for them'. 'Sympathy? Elizabeth Device prostitutes her own children'. 'And what of the men who buy?'" (Winterson 2012: 49, my emphasis).

Another notable example of Alice's role as a spokesperson for other, defenceless women is her defence of Sarah Device, who is raped by Tom Peeper with the complicity of the local Constable. The men exploit the fact that she has been accused of witchcraft as a justification of their attack. In addition, the two men encourage a passing young boy to participate in the sexual assault. When he kisses Sarah, she bites out his tongue, provoking further accusations of witchcraft. The passage where Alice defends her clearly exemplifies her matter-of-fact, forthright style as well as her ability to deconstruct the mechanisms of verbal and physical power adopted by the two men: "[...] 'You see? [said Tom Peeper] What woman that is no witch-woman would do this to a man?' 'What man that is a man would do this to a woman?' [said Alice]. The men did not reply" (Winterson 2012: 13). The rhetorical strategies used by Alice dismantle the very system of power that Peeper and the Constable evoke to justify their physical abuse. By inverting the subject-object order of their sentence (woman-man; man-woman), she unveils the emptiness of their language and uses it against them. In so doing, she reduces them to a powerless silence. As these examples demonstrate, Winterson adopts a bare, straightforward style throughout the novel, which effectively conveys the traumatic regularity of sexual violence in a world dominated by poverty and superstition. Running throughout the novel is a seam of abuse and exploitation: of prisoners by their guards, of children by their parents, and of marginalised women by the men of the law.

#### 4. GOTHIC ENCOUNTERS: LOVE, LOSS AND DESIRE





The episodes of abuse of power and sexual violence against women accused of witchcraft occur in a narrative world which is set in an enchanted land where life and death, time and timelessness, real and magic arts, rationality and superstition coexist. The bleak Lancashire landscape described at the beginning of the novel lends an ambiguous tone to the narrative:

The North is the dark place. It is not safe to be buried on the north side of the church and the North Door is the way of the Dead. The north of England is *untamed*. [...] Lancashire is the *wild* part of *the untamed*. [...] Stand on the flat top of Pendle Hill and you can see everything of the county of Lancashire, and some say you can see other things too. *This is a haunted place*. The living and the dead come together on the hill. (Winterson 2012: 1-2, my emphasis)

From the outset, Winterson weaves a narrative which is ambivalently encoded as real and fantastic, imaginative and horrific. As readers, we are asked to suspend disbelief and enter a world where magic and witchcraft are possible. Moreover, it is a fictional world located in a timeless zone where boundaries between past, present, future – and even afterlife – are transgressed. They can even coexist. The title of the novel refers to the liminal moment of the day where light and darkness melt into each other, creating a third zone where epistemic certainties are confused. In addition, *The Daylight Gate* also hints at the ‘witching hour’, which is conventionally midnight. However, here Winterson seems to be emphasising the connection between light as time of the living and dark as time of the dead. Therefore, the “gate” of the title may refer to a temporal and a metaphysical border when different worlds come together and melt into each other. The multiple meanings offered by the title are continually evoked as it is used as a powerful refrain throughout the narrative.

Winterson conjures up a world ‘untamed’ by reason and unrestrained by conventions. In so doing, she recasts a number of familiar Gothic motifs. Her Lancashire is a “haunted land” suspended between the world of the living and the underworld of the dead. The locations carry similar Gothic connotations: Lancaster castle and its dungeon recall the decaying and bleak Gothic fortresses. It is full of hidden, dirty and rat-filled passageways. It harks back to a feudal past associated with barbarity, torture and fear. It is a patriarchal establishment that entraps women by exerting control and abuse. Another ‘Gothic’ location is Malkin Tower, where the Devices live. It is a rotten and squalid building. It causes disgust and repulsion and, in a typical Gothic move, is connected to the women who inhabit it. Unlike the Castle, it is a female-dominated environment. In the ambiguous and crepuscular world of *The Daylight Gate*, however, women are not only victims: they seem indeed to be using dark magic arts as a form of self-affirmation that is harshly repressed by the dominant order because of its threatening potentiality. It is up to readers to decide whether some of them believed they had magical powers, whether their recourse to magic was



a 'natural' response to their oppression, or whether it was a sign of an old pagan belief system mixed with Catholic remnants which had not quite been replaced by the dominant Protestant religion.

The description of the Well Dungeon at Lancaster Castle clearly exemplifies Winterson's adoption of Gothic motifs in the novel. The dungeon is an enclosed, small and dark room where several women have been locked, waiting for the August Assizes. The women who live in the tower are described as ugly, filthy and dirty. Their bodies are covered in blood, pus, sweat and excrement. The 'luckiest' are the youngest, who are taken for sex by the gaoler and have fewer sores than the others:

The place stinks. Drainage is a channel cut into the earth under the straw. Their urine flows away, their faeces piles into a corner. Old Demdike squats over the mounting pile and generally loses her footing and slips into it. Her dress is smeared with excrement. She has weeping sores between her legs. [...] When the bread is thrown through the door, the rats squeal at it and have to be kicked away. There are four or five rats. There were more. The rest have been eaten. [...] Every kind of disease is in these walls. (Winterson 2012: 80-81)

The imprisoned women have been turned into abject beings. Their description reminds readers of Julia Kristeva's definition, according to which the abject "is radically excluded and draws [...] toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982: 2). The process of physical and social abjection of the imprisoned women is essential to maintain the coherent symbolic social order that seeks to control, exclude and suppress them, in order to confirm its 'civilised' superiority. As they approach death, they become increasingly bestial. The presence of their abject bodies represents, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, "an insistence on the subject's necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality" which provokes the subject's simultaneous "recognition and refusal of its corporeality" (1990: 89).

The most abject of the imprisoned women is Old Demdike, who is later revealed to be Elizabeth Southern, Alice's former lover. At this point it becomes apparent that Elizabeth is the reason why Alice returned to Lancashire after the years she spent in London. She is the lover she once lost, when she decided to make a Faustian pact with the 'Dark Gentleman'. Alice's life is a quest to regain her. Her desire is thus founded on loss. The relation between love and loss is central in the novel. It implies that love necessitates loss just as desire is defined by lack. In Jacques Lacan's words: "it is in so far as [the subject's] desire is unknown, it is in this point of lack, that the desire of the subject is constituted" (1979: 218-219). Love and loss constitute the axis of desire which defines the itinerary of the subject towards the final reunion with the object. The intrinsic relationship between love, loss and desire is also pointed out by Heather Nunn: "The capacity to love always entails the experience of loss. [...] [*D*]esire and loss are [...] the twin-faced abstractions that drag, lure and impel us [...] through our



worldly existence. Love is the [i]diom of anxiety through which we give linguistic shape to the phantasms of desire" (Nunn 1996: 19, my emphasis).

As desire and loss are twin-faced, so are Alice and Elizabeth: they are two specular figures, each the double of the other: the former is young and wealthy, whereas the latter is old and abject. In this sense, the motif of the double could also be the representation of a split sexual subjectivity. On this point, Palmer has emphasised that: "These ideas are pertinent to the lesbian who, encouraged by homophobic attitudes to keep her sexual orientation secret and lead a double life, frequently becomes a figure of psychic division" (Palmer 2004: 119). From this viewpoint, I read Alice and Elizabeth as two sides of the same coin: while the former is a seductive and empowering figure, who has fought for her liberated sexuality, the latter has rejected her intellectual and lesbian life to be enslaved by the Dark Gentleman. This fantastic figure might be, in turn, both a symbol of a patriarchal heteronormative world that dominates women, and a cross-gendered embodied introjection of self-hatred. In Judith Butler's terms, this dynamic of self-hatred and uncontrollable sexual violence is inherent to psychic structures themselves (Butler 1997). Elizabeth thus ends up being the victim of her own internalised homophobia. She self-consciously chooses to be entrapped and literally secluded in a male-dominated world and to turn herself into a highly-sexualised object of male desire.

The outcome of Alice's search for Elizabeth seems to be determined from the outset. As Ruth Parkin-Gounelas explains, in Gothic fiction the encounter with one's double as shadow or image frequently acts as a threat and an uncanny prediction of death (Parkin-Gounelas 2001: 109). It is thus no accident that when Alice encounters Elizabeth in prison, they both die within a few days: Elizabeth dies in prison and Alice is executed. On the face of it, the final meeting between the two doubles reconstitutes the symbolic divided psychic self and seems to lead to the inevitable physical and the symbolic 'death of the lesbian'. But there is more than that. There is another character who constitutes the third pole of the queer triangulated desire: Christopher Southworth, a Catholic priest and gunpowder plotter, who was Alice's lover in the past. He belongs to the same abject space of alterity and sexual otherness inhabited by the two women. He has been persecuted, tortured and castrated by his oppressors. His body still bears the scars inflicted on him: "When he had been captured after the Gunpowder Plot his torturers had cut his face with a hot iron. They had blinded him by dripping wax into his pinned-back eyeballs. [...] [N]othing could hide the scars" (Winterson 2012: 54). His scarred body represents the stigmatisation of the Catholics, considered by many as unmanly and sexually-deviant individuals. As an outcast and an outsider, Christopher stands for a different, positive model of masculinity that includes characteristics of the opposite sex.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher recalls other Wintersonian queer male characters, such as Henry in *Passion* (1987) and Jordan in *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). On this point, see Antosa (2008: 57-94).



From his place of banishment, France, Christopher returns to Lancashire because the authorities have arrested his sister Jane on the grounds of witchcraft. He finds a secure shelter at Alice's house and confesses her that Jane's arrest is only a trap to catch him. Moreover, he warns Alice to be careful; in protecting the women accused of witchcraft, she might risk her own life:

[...] Withdraw. Apologise. Equivocate. Do not risk yourself for that broke family of vagrants and thieves they call the Demdike.' Alice drew away from him. 'Are you like all other men after all? The poor should have no justice, just as they have no food, no decent shelter, no regular livelihood? Is that how your saviour Jesus treated the poor?' (Winterson 2012: 55)

In her typical straightforward style, Alice points out the classist and the misogynist arguments that Christopher adopts to warn her. She does it by questioning his masculinity ("Are you like all other men?") and his Catholic beliefs ("your saviour Jesus"), which are the factors that have turned him into an outcast within the Protestant, witch-hunting society that they both inhabit. She later explains to him that her interest in the Demdikes is based on her life-long love for Elizabeth Southern, who has returned to her native Lancashire after years of dissolute life in London. The moment in which Christopher meets Old Demdike is highly revealing of Elizabeth's 'fallen' status. He goes to the dungeon to free his sister Jane. While he tries to convince her to escape with him, he is approached by a woman who mistakes him for the Dark Gentleman:

Christopher pushed her off. 'Get away from me, you hag! Which one are you?' 'Demdike. I am Demdike! You have my Soul. Here is my body'. Her hair was matted. Her skin was thin and lined with red vein marks round her nose and cheeks. Hairs grew from her moles. Her neck had joined her shoulders. The rest was a shapeless mass. He did not know what to say or what to do. Was this the lover of his lover? (Winterson 2012: 145-146)

Christopher acknowledges that "the hag" is the woman once loved by Alice. By selling her soul, Elizabeth also gave her young and attractive body away. Now she is a "shapeless mass" emptied of her past identity, who is only waiting for the apocalyptic return of the Dark Gentleman. The encounter provokes much reflection for Christopher, who wonders what would have happened if things had gone differently, at both a historical and a personal level. In a sense, the chance meeting with Old Demdike makes him aware of the ineluctability of the passing of time and of the signs that individual and collective choices leave on each of us and on our bodies (Winterson 2012: 147).



## 5. IN THE QUEER TIME AND SPACE OF *THE DAYLIGHT GATE*

After his failed attempt to free his sister Jane, who decides to wait for the trial, Christopher returns to France in order to escape from his Protestant persecutors. On his way, Christopher stops off at Alice's London house and waits for her to join him. There, he encounters the ghosts of Alice's and Elizabeth's younger selves, which is surprising because both women are still alive in Lancashire. Christopher is the only character who can witness the spectral ghosts of the two women's joyful albeit secretive past love relationship. The haunting echoes of their happy days in the London room that they have occupied for years addresses another Gothic trope which, like the double, is related to the construction of abject lesbian identities. It is the theme of the haunting lesbian, which calls to mind Diana Fuss's concern with "the figure of the homosexual as spectre and phantasm, as spirit and revenant, as abject and undead" (1991: 3). It may also hint at the loss of historical lesbian her/stories that writers and historians can only, apart from a few exceptions, imaginatively reinvent in their accounts or fictions. In other words, the lack, or loss, of a female/lesbian history can lead to a sort of narrative Lacanian repetition of the loss, which can be used as a form of substitution or compensation for what, as readers/historians, we can no longer find. The figure of the haunting lesbian is related to the motif of the unspeakable, which in turn recalls the themes of secrecy and silence. Palmer has identified three different meanings of the unspeakable in Gothic fiction: "Something can be unspeakable because the individual lacks knowledge of it, because the knowledge is repressed, or because, though having access to it, s/he dare not admit the fact" (Palmer 2004: 120). Similarly, these meanings can be related to the sociocultural construction of lesbian identities, whose denied history and lack of recognition has turned them into phantasmatic figures whose existence has to be kept secret and silent (Fuss 1991; Castle 1993; Love 2007).

Significantly, Winterson makes Christopher see what other men cannot see. His queer masculinity as well as his love for Alice allow him to go beyond the rigid strictures of patriarchal hegemonic culture in order to acknowledge the existence of the relationship between two women, even though through a spectral, supernatural imagery. It is however through Gothic appropriation that the unnameable and secretive relationship between Alice and Elizabeth can find its verbal articulation and visual representation through Christopher's queer lens. In addition, the Gothic haunting images of the two women's younger selves are a reflection of a past which is becoming present again: in other words, it is a queer time in which past, present and future 'melt into each other'. On the face of it, Alice and Elizabeth seem to have found the key to the Great Work envisaged by John Dee: it is through their love that they manage to dissolve corporeal, spatial and temporal boundaries to transform 'one self into the other' in a queer atemporal dimension.





The love triangle between Alice, Elizabeth and Christopher both subverts the normative order and is annihilated by it. The three real characters die – Elizabeth dies in prison claimed by the Dark Gentleman, Alice dies by public execution and Christopher kills himself after witnessing Alice's death on the gallows. However, readers are led to believe that they continue to live, even if in a phantasmatic form. The presence of the two happily dancing ghosts in the London room may also indicate not only that they continue to live 'in a queer time and space' where time zones overlap, but also that Christopher too may find himself soon in this alternative space/time. This is what he wishes for as he commits suicide in the final scene of the novel: "Men approaching. They are bringing nets and clubs to hunt him down like an animal. [...] *He is already a ghost.* [...] He squats and takes out his knife [...] If there is another life he will find her there" (Winterson 2012, my emphasis). Significantly, in the concluding lines of the narrative, Christopher has almost turned into a ghost, which seems to prepare him to join the two women in a queer, albeit phantasmatic, afterlife.

As I have discussed in this article, *The Daylight Gate* is a challenging text that resists a univocal interpretation. Winterson could be accused of being complicit with narratives of transgressive homoerotic desire as leading inevitably towards abjection and death. However, she provides an alternative story in which Alice and Elizabeth – and possibly Christopher – live their love relationship happily in a queer alternative world that is no longer dominated by patriarchal heteronormative rules. Ostensibly doomed to live as haunting spectres in their normative reality, as queer subjects they can inhabit an alternative, timeless space and time where differences can coexist. It is up to the readers to decide whether Winterson denies this possibility *a priori*, or whether her imaginative rewriting of the existence of marginalised lives hints at the future existence of a queer world by opening up its multiple possibilities. Her queer Gothic rewriting of history seems to interpellate present-day readers, offering an empowering cultural history in which all subjects may find their own queer time and space.

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