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# Percevalian Mediaevalism

*In Jeanette Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

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"All characters...are seekers." <sup>1</sup>

Contemporary author Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* explores the coming-of-age and coming-out of a young girl adopted into an evangelical Pentecostal English household. To craft her autobiographical novel, Winterson interweaves memoir, fantasy, fable, fairy tale, medieval romance, and an organizing biblical chapter schema. Such an array of fictional intertextualities working with(in) the overarching autobiographical model proves to be a complex and compelling approach to telling personal narrative. In this paper, we will focus on one particular narrative strategy and intertextuality which emerges explicitly four times toward the novel's end when Winterson reworks the legend of Sir Perceval and his quest for the Holy Grail.<sup>2</sup> In *Oranges*, the Percevalian tale functions as a mythic identity or model for Jeanette's life—from her familial beginnings to her elected and exiled status to her quest toward selfhood and authorship. We will draw not only from the medieval myth as presented by Winterson, but also as originally introduced by twelfth-century romancier Chrétien de Troyes in *Perceval ou le Roman du Graal*. Consequently, this paper will differ from other studies which have examined Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* as the primarily Percevalian intertext in *Oranges*.

Percevalian mediaevalism serves as a means of exploring self, identity and personal psychology in *Oranges*, for Sir Perceval's legendary life becomes in many respects a mirror for Jeanette's experiences and journey. The parallelism is established early, as the mythic chevalier and Jeanette

nette share a strikingly similar ontological genesis. Both are molded by the influence of, on the one hand, a dominant mother figure and, on the other, an absent father. Chrétien alludes to the formative role of Perceval's widow mother: "Lors le fils de la veuve se leva dans la Gaste Forêt solitaire" ["at daybreak there arose a boy/ who was a widowed lady's child"] (Chrétien 34/5).<sup>3</sup> Raised in such social isolation, the impressionable Perceval imbibes his mother's Catholic imaginary and her cosmology of a world filled with angels and devils. Having assimilated this worldview without understanding it, the boy mistakes "cinq chevaliers armés" ["five armed knights"] in the forest for devils, "les plus laides choses du monde" ["the vilest things on earth"], and then instead for angels and even God (35-36/6-7). In a world both perilous and merveilleux, Perceval's mother seeks to protect her son in a safe and controlled physical and social space. Her exclamation upon hearing of this episode in the forest reveals her intentions and fears: "Beau fils, je croyais si bien vous tenir éloigné de la chevalerie que jamais vous n'en auriez entendu parler!" ["I had expected, / sweet son, that you could be protected / so perfectly from chivalry / that you would never hear or see / one thing about it"] (41/14).

Like Perceval, Jeanette is raised largely in cultural isolation. The girl's mother attempts to keep her safe from the reach of the "Enemies," a list which includes "The Devil (in his many forms)," "Next Door," "Sex (in its many forms)," "school" (also referred to as "a Breeding Ground"), and "Unnatural Passion" (Winterson 3, 37, 89). The dominating force of the mother's character leaves no room for a (human) father, a man who is sometimes referred to impersonally as "her husband" (5). The marginalization of paternal influence and authority is humorously suggested in the novel's incipit when Jeanette explains her arrival in the family: "We had no Wise men because [my mother] didn't believe there were any wise men..." (3). Jeanette's adoption further underscores the irrelevance of the father who, like the biblical Joseph, has no real blood familial claim to the child. "[A]n easy-going man," Jeanette's father passively fades away from the central narrative plot (5). Hence, as with Perceval, the mother plays the formative role, imparting her view of a world fraught with heathens, devils, merveilles, and enchantements as real as those of the mediaeval tale.

In an implied extension of the Holy Family analogy, Jeanette's adoptive mother is paired with Mary. The girl explains: "She had a mysterious

attitude towards the begetting of children; it wasn't that she couldn't do it, more that she didn't want to do it. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first" (Winterson 3). The mother hence settles for the adoption and molding of a model child. The description of Jeanette's personal creation, emphasized by its indented poetic form on the page of prose, is thus asexual and intellectual, echoing the Old Testament YHWH speaking creation into being or the Johannine Word-made-Flesh:

Her flesh now, sprung from her head.

Her vision.

Not the jolt beneath the hip bone, but water and the word. (10)

The biblical narrative schema used to make ontological sense of Jeanette's creation, reflected by the chapter title "Genesis," positions the child in a christic light. She is capable of, and (pre)destined for, great things. Jeanette's mother, seeking to fashion "a missionary child, a servant of God," impresses upon the girl the gravity of her vocation:

We stood on the hill and my mother said, 'This world is full of sin.'

We stood on the hill and my mother said, 'You can change the world.' (10).

This sense of destiny, internalized early on by Jeanette, highlights a second major point of convergence with the mythic Perceval, that is, the status as elect. In *Perceval ou le Roman du Graal*, even the sheltering mother admits to her son's predestination or quasi-divine mission: "Vous serez bientôt chevalier, s'il plaît à Dieu et je le crois" ["soon you will be a knight, / God willing; I am sure I'm right"] (Chrétien 43/17). The pairing of Jeanette with Perceval further suggests that election is not determined or limited by familial inheritance or by sexual and gender identity. For although she may not fully understand her status as adopted, female, and homosexual, the girl is aware of these identities early on and insists upon her uniqueness and privilege, saying, "I cannot recall a time when I did not know that I was special" (Winterson 3).

Nonetheless, election does not simply imply personal glory or destined triumph, but rather risk, loss, loneliness, and exile, a third narrative parallel linking Perceval and Jeanette. The trajectories followed by Perceval in both the mediæval romance and this contemporary novel reveal that both authors understand the implications of an elected status. The elect is drawn into an unknown world to explore not in hopes of glory, but for "his own sake, nothing more" (174). For Chrétien's Perceval, exile,

however self-induced it may be, involves first cleavage with the mother. Perceval's decision to disobey his mother's advice upon encountering the five-armed knights, fighting rather than making the Sign of the Cross, foreshadows the mother-son separation (Chrétien 35). The next development in this progressive detachment is Perceval's decision to leave home to join King Arthur's knights. As Chrétien explains, his mother's dissuasion is in vain: "La mère le retient comme elle peut...Mais plus de trois jours elle ne peut le faire demeurer" ["He stayed there only three more days,/ and afterwards, although she pleaded, her tears and coaxing went unheeded"] (43/16-17). Perhaps the chasm is definitively marked by the symbolic passage in which Sir Gorneman de Gorhaut persuades Perceval to cast of "les habits que...fit [s]a mère" ["the garments [his] Mother sewed [him]"]. Shedding the maternal influence and protective cloak that enveloped him, Perceval chooses instead to dress himself in the garments offered by his new mentor (63/47).

In Winterson's reworking of the Perceval myth, based in part on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the young knight "transfers" the maternal relationship to King Arthur (Cosslett 15, 20). His sense of loss and separation results from his decision to leave Arthur, the fellowship of knights, and the utopian Camelot community in which he enjoyed a respected position. Winterson expresses the sense of regret which accompanies Perceval's departure: "[H]e dreams of Arthur's court, where he was the darling, the favourite" (Winterson 135). Arthur, however, reciprocally experiences the sadness, for Perceval notes "the king's sorrowing face" upon leaving (166). If Arthur replaces the mother figure for Winterson's Perceval, this image of the king's suffering calls to mind a comparable distress in Chrétien's original version, in which the mother essentially dies of a broken heart caused by the loss of her son (Chrétien 99, 157).

Jeanette's narrative parallels this departure from the will of the overbearing mother and the ensuing acute loss, a development reflected by the second chapter title, "Exodus." As critic and mediævalist Carla Ann Arnell explains, Jeanette, like Perceval, "ventures out of the garden of maternal care and bibliculture"; this "latter-day Eve" moves out of "a garden of innocence, where all things are named by the maternal keeper of the garden" (Arnell 51). Refusing to be the missionary her mother desires, Jeanette breaks the mold cast for her to discover her own sense of mission and identity. Her understanding of her election as "called to be

apart" differs from that of her mother and church and leads to ultimate separation (Winterson 43). Jeanette's defiance plays on the Edenic topos, since the so-called transgression causing the rupture with mother and church is her lesbian relationship with a young woman named Melanie. One particular exchange between the two characters stresses the symbolic significance of her first lover's name:

'Melanie,' I plucked up courage to ask at last, 'why do you have such a funny name?'

She blushed. 'When I was born I looked like a melon.' (83)

The passage likens Jeanette's "sin" to the tasting of the forbidden Edenic apple which modern authors often transmogrify, for example, as the more sensual, lush, and fragrant « *pêche mûre* » ["ripe peach"] of Julien Gracq's reworking of the Perceval legend in *Au Château d'Argol* (Gracq 75). Furthermore, the passage negates the mother's insistence that oranges are "the only fruit," a leitmotiv emphasized throughout the text and by the title and epigraph (Winterson 29).

Jeanette's desire, which in her innocence she views as "pure," provokes an unexpected interrogation in which she affirms her love before her evangelical pastor and congregation:

'I love her.'

'Then you do not love the Lord.'

'Yes, I love both of them.'

'You cannot.' (105)

The church's condemnation, its attempts to heal Jeanette of her "unnatural passions and...mark of the demon," and its ultimate rejection of the young woman mirror the reactions of Jeanette's mother, for like her adoptive family, "the church was [her] family, too" (105, 37). Just as Perceval parts from his mother, Arthur, and the community of the Round Table, so Jeanette must part ways physically, emotionally, and spiritually with her mother and the church family. The narrator explains: "My mother wanted me to move out, and she had the backing of the pastor and most of the congregation, or so she said. I made her ill, made the house ill, brought evil into the church" (127). Although the correlation is not exact, the last part of this passage suggests again the image of Perceval who, in visiting the Fisher King but failing to ask the anticipated questions, prolongs the king's illness and the kingdom's decline.

In a *Village Voice* interview, Winterson emphasized her interest in such characters moving in marginalized and liminal spaces: "I always

write about outsiders. All my characters are exiles, people on the margins...who are in fact interesting and special and have their own way of looking at the world" (Anshaw 17). This outsider status, which seems paradoxically both predetermined and willingly adopted, initiates Jeanette and Perceval into a period of journey and errantry. In this respect, as stories of formative and spiritual development, *Perceval* and *Oranges* share in the tradition of the Bildungsroman.

A common thread uniting the development of the Bildungs-heros is the exploration of personal identity, although literal and figurative battles such as that against the nefarious Other, e.g., "l'Orgueilleux de la Lande" ["the Proud Knight of the Moor"], who must be fought along the way (Chrétien 106/108). Along the path of discovery, Perceval explores his new role and identity. He learns the duties and proper comportment of a chevalier with respect to maidens such as the Demoiselle de la Tente or to his fellow members of Round Table. Furthermore, he discovers a new *modus operandi* not based on reckless force but instead on a certain sensitivity (toward, for example, Blanchefleur) as well as a capacity for silent contemplation (e.g. of the three drops of blood on the snow).

Although the rather bleak and industrial landscape of *Oranges* does not depict the same evocative primæval geography as does Chrétien's *Perceval*, Jeanette no less represents a twentieth-century knight-errant whose metaphorical peregrinations can be construed as interior. Like Perceval, she must 'do battle' against the demons and doubts which plague her and which are symbolized by the "orange demon" that appears when her mother locks her in a dark room (Winterson 108). In the course of her development, the embedding of the mythic knight's journey within the overarching narrative provides Jeanette with a means of acting out her own emotional drama which closely matches that of Perceval: guilt and remorse, fear and uncertainty, and delight and discovery. The Percevalian tale also allows the narrator to explore the unnamable compelling force driving her onward. She writes: "Perceval could have turned back...[T]he woods were wild and forlorn, and he did not know where he was, or even what had driven him there" (166). Likewise, Jeanette is "always thinking of going back" but realizes such a return is impossible if she does not want to "lose herself" like "Lot's wife" (160). In this way, mythic tale provides a mirror and a vast network of images, symbols, and interpretive lenses with which Jeanette can examine her life. In addition, as Arnell points out, the narrator "creat[es] a dream self who is linked to

her spiritual psychology, but free from her autobiographical destiny and, therefore, potentially self-liberating" (Arnell 35). Percevalian legend thus provides not simply a parallel for Jeanette's life, but also the hope of another realizable life paradigm.

Moreover, a narratological reading of Jeanette and Perceval's processes of self-discovery reveals that each character learns to become a subject and to create his/her own narration. The previously discussed detachment from the mother implies that the two protagonists step outside the constructed parental narration which dominated and determined their life trajectories. This development is perhaps clearer in the case of *Oranges*, which also presents itself as a Künstlerroman, or story about an artist's formation (Benson Brown 215). In distancing herself from the voice and desires of her mother, Jeanette moves into her real vocation as prophet:

I could have been a priest instead of a prophet. The priest has a book with the words set out. Old words, known words, words of power...The prophet has no book. The prophet is a voice that cries in the wilderness, full of sounds that do not always set into meaning. The prophets cry out because they are troubled by demons. (Winterson 161)

Before she can step into her authorial role, Jeanette must discover her voice as speaking subject whose words cannot be pre-scribed because the prophet points to the future, to paths yet to be navigated.

This process of finding one's words is not so dissimilar from the maturation of Perceval, who is originally described as lacking sense and who progresses to the point where he is capable of guessing his own name (Chrétien 39). Chrétien writes: "Et lui, qui son nom ne savait, soudain le connut et lui dit que c'est PERCEVAL LE GALLOIS" ["Not knowing his real name at all, he guessed his name was Perceval/ of Wales and said so"] (99/98-99). Although it may seem a peculiar or incongruent detail, the act of naming has been since the days of Adam quite significant, for as Winterson explains, "Naming is a difficult and time-consuming process; it concerns essences, and it means power" (Winterson 170). Perceval, then, asserts power over his self. This act of inspired or prophetic divination is necessary because Perceval's mother addressed him as "beau fils" (literally, "beautiful son"), thereby allowing him only to exist and be named in relation to her rather than as an autonomous being (e.g. Chré-

tien 45). The hermit in Chrétien's romance later confirms Perceval's capacity to understand the significance of the naming act when he confers upon the knight "une certaine prière [qui] contenait beaucoup des noms du Seigneur Dieu, parmi les plus puissants, et que nulle bouche humaine ne doit prononcer" ["Such potent forms of Our Lord's name/ were in this prayer, so great and many,/ no one should utter it"] (159/175). Thus, like Jeanette, Perceval journeys toward an understanding of the power of naming, of words, and of prophetic self-authorship.

Closely related to the creation of the subject and personal narration is the fact that both characters progressively learn how to "read," to interpret signs and signification skillfully. Perceval must first learn the meaning and purpose of a chevalier to surpass his original ignorance: "Chevalier? Je ne connais personne ainsi nommé! Jamais je n'en ai vu" ["I haven't met a knight before/...nor seen one"] (36/8). He also discovers the need to interpret the advice of his mother and Gorneman and to formulate important and necessary questions. Such questions would allow him to understand Blanche fleur better, to treat her with courtoisie and to restore health and prosperity to the Fisher King (70, 43, 47, 93, 120). In learning to interpret signs and to speak up appropriately and confidently, Perceval steps progressively into his new identity.

Jeanette follows a related trajectory. In order to understand—to better name—her identity as lesbian, she must first learn the meaning of homosexuality, from which her upbringing shielded her. Jeanette's world is fraught with "signs and wonders" to interpret, such as the gypsy who reads in her palm that she will never marry or the lesbian paper shop owners who ask Jeanette "if [she'd] like to go to the seaside with them," an invitation the mother promptly forbids (Winterson 17, 13). Critic Amy Benson-Brown comments that the latter scene plays on the connection between sexuality and textuality explored by both Jeanette persona and the authorial Winterson: "Significantly, Jeanette's first encounter with a potential lesbian community is at a 'paper shop,' later referred to as 'the forbidden paper shop' (*Oranges* 77). By some symbolic slippage, paper itself carries the connotation of forbidden fruit" (Benson Brown 215). Hence, like the legendary knight, Jeanette must learn to read the world around. This linkage in *Oranges* between identity and textuality calls to mind the "oral textuality" of Perceval's pre-paper world; when the chevalier conquers an enemy, he sends the vanquished back to Arthur's court to recount the story. Furthermore, the unfinished nature of Chrétien

tien de Troyes's textual Perceval legend catalyzed (and continues to inspire) myriad continuations, reinterpretations, and textual explorations of Perceval's identity and story.

Moreover, Jeanette, much like Perceval, must learn to speak again. The protagonist learns to question her adoptive mother's ontological and cosmological stories and absolute truths which teach that there is only one way to read and to taste life, a view made manifest by the mother's insistence that "[o]ranges are the only fruit" (Winterson 29). When Jeanette's church cites Saint Paul and forbids her from the very preaching it once encouraged, the young woman is silenced and forced to find her voice again. She must realize that, as a woman, her threatening "success in the pulpit" is actually "the reason for [her] downfall" (134). In a proclamation before the congregation, her mother makes clear that sexual orientation and desire are a cover for the crux of the matter, that is, a woman overstepping gender roles and boundaries:

My mother stood up and said...that women had specific circumstances for their ministry, that the Sunday School was one of them...but the message belonged to the men...She ended by saying that having taken on a man's world in other ways I had flouted God's law and tried to do it sexually. (133-134)

Jeanette's trajectory—speaking, being silenced, and finding her voice again—calls to mind not only the development of Perceval, but also that of Chrétien's heroines in *Cligès* and *Erec et Enide*. Hence, both *Perceval* and *Oranges* emerge as stories about writing, reading, and speaking one's own personal narrative. Benson Brown explains Jeanette's personal, sexual and authorial development: "[T]hat subject, that identity, is not immediately readable, and the resulting difficulties of interpretation and representation fuel a...recurrent type of narrative in *Oranges*: the hermeneutical tale, or story about language and story making" (Benson Brown 210-211).

The themes of exile and errantry seem to suggest, however, that Perceval and Jeanette are seeking something more than affirmation as autonomous subjects. For, as described by Winterson, Sir Perceval is "begged" not to leave Camelot by King Arthur who "knew this was no ordinary quest" (Winterson 128; my italics). Is there indeed a telos to this questing, an exploit to accomplish or an object to obtain? The case of Perceval implies that both the path (personal and spiritual development) and its

end (the Grail) are of importance. Although the Grail is described as a serving platter, “un graal...fait de l’or le plus pur” [“grail/...of purest, finest gold”] and of precious stones, its precise nature and significance are never revealed (Chrétien 92/89). The Grail comes to symbolize peace, healing and wisdom, as such human ideals will result from the questions Perceval must pose regarding the Grail. Winterson’s version of the myth further suggests the balance, peace and life-giving creativity that the Graal bestows upon its seekers; she writes: “[Perceval] would speak of the Grail, but not of his reason for seeking it. He had seen the vision of perfect heroism and, for a fleeting moment, the vision of perfect peace. He sought it again, to balance him. He was a warrior who longed to grow herbs” (Winterson 166). This striking image and apparent paradox of a warrior who longs to grow herbs calls to mind the biblical image of Judah and Jerusalem beating “swords into plowshares” and thus suggests the sacredness of the Grail and the ultimate peace it grants to its seekers.<sup>4</sup>

In *Oranges*, another ideal associated with the Grail is perfect and “pure” love (64, 105). In this vein, Arnell suggests that “Jeanette’s own quest is a romance in the most literal sense, for it is the story of the love affair between Jeanette and Katy,” with whom Jeanette forms a couple at the story’s conclusion. She adds: “Yet their romance finds fulfillment in a quest end that is similar to the one Perceval envisions: creativity and healing” (Arnell 86). However, the reader is cautioned by another embedded narration—this time a fairy tale in which a prince seeks the perfect wife—not to equate perfection with “flawlessness,” but rather with “balance” and “harmony” (61, 64). A wise and fair woman warns the prince: “What you want does not exist...What does exist lies in the sphere of your own hands” (66). This tale thus overturns the concluding line of the sermon that the narrator hears and recounts just before introducing the fairy tale, that is, “Perfection...is flawlessness” (60). Thus, an unattainable or otherworldly object or state of being is not necessary, but rather a shift of consciousness, as is needed by Perceval who sees the Grail before his very eyes without recognizing its splendor and significance (Chrétien 92-93).

In a brief passage in which she returns to garden imagery, Winterson further fleshes out the significance of the Grail to include exploration of passion and sensuality as well as the realization of love. She writes: “All true quests end in this garden, where the split fruit pours forth blood and the halved fruit is a full bowl for travelers and pilgrims” (Winterson

123). In a thoughtful analysis that considers this passage's varied elements, Arnell writes:

[T]he erotic symbolism herein intersects with traditional symbolism for both biblical and grail mythology...In a skillful inversion of the Eden story, the narrator suggests that it is eating of the fruit of this tree...of love rather than knowledge, that heals...Winterson seems to be connecting the fruit "bowl"...with the grail of medieval legend, which was seen as a "dish" or "cup." (Arnell 87)

Indeed, the bowl-grail coupling is significant, since from its inception in Chrétien de Troyes's romance, the Grail has represented an object that carries or contains physical and spiritual nourishment. *Perceval, Oranges*, and the mediæval legend within the latter story present diverse interpretations of the Grail to which questing tends. Nevertheless, such readings are related in their sensitivity toward human ideals such as peace, healing, harmony, and love.

Although allusions are made to the ultimate physical and metaphorical Grail in both stories, both characters' quests remain unresolved. Chrétien's text ends unfinished, probably because of the author's death, and Winterson's denouement leaves the tension suspended between Jeanette and her mother and church community. Likewise, the Percevalian quest as described by Winterson remains incomplete. In her article on *Orange's* intertextualities, Tess Cosslett remarks: "Perceval's final vision of the Grail is...left out: we see him only in the process of questing. This...emphasizes the unclosed nature of Winterson's ending" (Cosslett 20). One could read such endings as unsatisfactory, as evidently did the many authors inspired to continue Chrétien's romance. Such a tendency reflects a human desire for the quest to be finished, the deed accomplished, and the reward attained. However, Chrétien and Winterson's compelling endings seem to communicate that the Grail is something to be discovered in the process and the journey, rather than an ultimate prize.

In this paper, we have examined the myriad ways in which the mythic Perceval serves as a mirror and model for Jeanette's identity and story in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: her genesis, personal cosmology, election, exile, errantry, and development as subject, speaker, sign-reader, and quester. But what is the effect or the result of this mélange of personal

narrative and legend? Does Winterson's use of Percevalian mediaevalism call into question the definition, methods, and limits of the autobiographical genre? For by creating a "collage" of personal narrative, legend, and other forms, Winterson "interrupt[s] the 'straight' or mainly chronological narrative" (Benson Brown 210). In deviating from the "straight," the author dismisses the trodden and expected narrative path and heterocentric discourse, as well as the fundamentalist "straight and narrow" road. She thereby rejects the idea of one single lens through which to understand and read the world, as well as the traditional privileging of history ("real," "objective") over story ("make-believe," "subjective"). Rather, she suggests that the self and the world can be best represented and understood through mythology, imagination, and subjectivity. For as Jeanette's friend "Testifying Elsie" wisely observes: "[T]here's more to this world than meets the eye" (Winterson 32). Or as Winterson herself notes in a subtle apology for her narrative style: "'There's no such thing as autobiography, there's only art and lies'" (cited in Arnell 40).

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Brewer and Beverly Taylor, *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Arthurian Literature Since 1800*, cited on page 31 of Arnell's "Medieval Illuminations."

<sup>2</sup> To avoid confusion, I will use "Winterson" to refer to the extra-diegetic author and "Jeanette" for the diegetic narrator and character.

<sup>3</sup> All second page citations of *Perceval* refer to Ruth Harwood Cline's translation.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 2:4, also Micah 4:3.

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