Conclusion

Re-scripting the Renaissance Female Grotesque

This thesis has attempted to explore the politics and poetics of the female grotesque in Renaissance drama. It has done so by examining the gendered implication of the grotesque body as an open, transgressive entity that disrespects borders / boundaries as these pertain to Renaissance discourses and cultural practices. Since Bakhtin’s thesis on grotesque realism has been cited as central to the thesis, the absence of François Rabelais, especially in the chapter on women and carnivals, may seem a curious omission. An explanation is thus due.

Though Bakhtin’s thesis derives from his attempt to situate Rabelais in the context of the carnival, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* has very little to offer by way of carnivalesque feminine corporeality. Indeed, as Wayne Booth argues, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* appears to be largely anti-feminist in its bias.¹ This might not have precluded my discussing Rabelais together with other Renaissance texts which are perhaps equally misogynistic, were it not for the fact that though Rabelais clearly contributes most to Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body, his misogyny makes it difficult for me to theorize the carnivalesque body, in his work, as decisively feminine or female. Booth cites three examples to support his argument about the sexist nature of Rabelais’ text, which in his opinion, ‘seems to ask us to laugh at women because they are women and hence inferior.’² The first of these is the passage about the gender stereotyping of the ladies who are to be admitted to the Abbey of Theleme in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Bk. 1 Ch. 57. p. 142).³ The second example is Panurge’s treatment of the lady who rebuffs his attempts to seduce her—he sprinkles the pulverized genitalia of a bitch in heat on her as a punishment (Bk. 2. Ch. 22. p. 233). Smelling the scent, the dogs of the church flock about her, ‘both small and great, big and little, all came, laying out their member, smelling to her, and pissing everywhere upon her, it was the greatest villany in the world’ (Bk. 2. Ch. 22. p. 233). Panurge withdraws into a nearby chapel to witness the ‘sport’ laughing heartily at the condition of the lady beset by lustful dogs, her attire and body besprinkled with their staling. He then goes off in search of his friend Pantagruel to share the anecdote’, not forgetting, in his way along the streets through which he went, where he found any dogs, to give them a bang with his foot, saying, Will you not with your fellows to the wedding?’ (Bk. 2.
The third is the medical practitioner Rondibilis’ diatribe against the female sex as he explicates on the inevitability of cuckoldry to Panurge.

A detailed discussion of Rabelais’s ‘antifeminism’ is outside the purview of this discussion. However, it may be interesting to note a few instances of grotesque female corporeality that are premised on contemporary anti-feminist discourses. Rondibilis’s account is clearly in the tradition of the Renaissance querelle de femme discussed in Chapter 1 of my thesis. It follows the familiar trajectory that detractors of female nature tended to take, with women being described as dissembling, hypocritical, lazy and gossiping housewives who ‘gad abroad, lay aside their counterfeit garb, and openly declare and manifest the interior of their dispositions’ (Bk. 3. Ch. 32. p. 406). The inventory of female vices: ‘frail, so variable, so changeable, so fickle, inconstant, and imperfect’ is followed by an explanation about their changeableness and inconstancy due to the influences of the moon (Bk. 3. Ch. 32. p. 406).

There is a reference to the authority of Plato, a philosopher who was uncertain whether to regard women as rational beings or as possessing irrational bestial natures. In support of the latter view, Rondibilis launches into an account of the Galenic theory of the wandering womb or the uterus that, when unfulfilled, causes great physiological and mental disturbance, turning women into lascivious, sexually incontinent beings. The women ‘in a so frantic mood run mad after lechery, and hie apace up and down with haste and lust’ because ‘their whole body is shaken and ebrangled, their senses totally ravished and transported, the operations of their judgment and understanding utterly confounded, and all disordinate passions and perturbations of the mind thoroughly and absolutely allowed, admitted, and approved of’ (Bk. 3. Ch. 32. pp. 406-7). There is no doubting the anti-feminist or misogynist thrust of Rondibilis’ harangue, grounded as it is in contemporary cultural notions about female nature.

However, like Caninus, the antifeminist detractor in Edward Gosynhyll’s tract, Rondibilis’ authority too, is suspect. As Berrong points out, the final exchange between Rondibilis and Panurge, is worth noting. Not only does Rondibilis have recourse to exaggerated and excessive rhetorical devices; but his concern for his pecuniary benefits also complicates matters. Thus while the text elaborates and draws upon antifeminist satirical stereotypes, it positions the speaker as a ridiculous and unreliable narrator who is himself an object of satire. Rondibilis’ pseudo-medical and learned treatises on the eccentricities of the ‘animal’ (the female sexual organ) that nature has placed in ‘a
privy, secret, and intestine places in their [women’s] bodies’ creates a grotesque female corporeality that is at odds with Bakhtin’s celebratory notions of the grotesque body.

Barbara Spackman observes that Folengo’s *Baldus* and pre-Folenghian macaronic texts are some of the acknowledged sources of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Spackman’s observations are significant for the representation of the female grotesque in Rabelais. The most memorable instance of this may be Panurge’s ingenious plan for building the walls of Paris with female genitalia:

I see that the *sine qua nons, callibistris, or contrapunctums* of the women of this country are cheaper than stones. Of them should the walls be built, ranging them in good symmetry by the rules of architecture, and placing the largest in the first ranks, then sloping downwards ridgeways, like the back of an ass. The middle-sized ones must be ranked next, and last of all the least and the smallest. This done, there must be a fine little interlacing of them, like the points of diamonds, as is to be seen in the great tower of Bourges (Bk. 3. Ch. 34. p. 416).

This typically male sexist joke made by Panurge loses it efficacy if it is read as an image of fecundity within Bakhtin’s overarching theory of grotesque realism and the material bodily principle with its festive and joyous connotations. The pleasure of such a passage lies specifically in its gendered nature, in its exclusion of women from its purview since it is their private anatomy that is being made the butt of ridicule. Elaborating on the method of keeping the walls made of female pudenda free from flies there is an exemplum from a beast fable in which a Lion chances upon a ‘sempiternous crone and old hag’ who is so scared by the sight of the lion that she falls into a swooning fit and her gown is lifted by the wind above her shoulders revealing her genitalia. The lion, in great consternation at what he sees, calls Reynard the fox, and launches into a wonderfully Freudian description of the female sex organ as a great wound ‘even from the tail up to the navel, in measure four, nay full five handfuls and a-half.’ (Bk.2. Ch.15.p.207)

One is struck by the close links that the representation of the female genitalia as a open and stinking hole has with the description of the vagina in Tifi Odasi’s verse *massara dello speziale* (apothecary’s wife) with its grotesque description of the *potifarum potissima pota potaza* or the gaping ‘other’ mouth—the *vagina dentata*:
Between the legs near the aperture of the ass, which you will swear is a great nasty hole, there appears an enormous cave with openings which, with red and repulsive livers hanging out and surrounded by forests of long hairs, is everywhere called the potaza . . . I can compare it to a cavern: there galleons with sails can swim, there bedbugs are always nesting, here live crayfish and lice and fleas . . . Here there is immense stench, here mephitic shadows exhale much stink to make the nose flee.

This lewd antifeminist sexual joke has the lion plead with the fox to ‘wipe it lustily well and hard’ as he himself goes to fetch ‘some moss to put into it.’ (Bk. 2. Ch. 15. p. 208)

At this point the text merrily indulges in a description of the ‘grotesque realism’ of the material lower bodily functions that is so typical of Rabelais:

The poor fox wiped as hard as he could, here and there, within and without; but the false old trot did so fizzle and foist, that she stunk like a hundred devils, which put the poor fox to a great deal of ill-ease, for he knew not to what side to turn himself, to escape the unsavoury perfume of this old woman’s postern blasts. (Bk. 2. Ch. 15. p. 208)

Rabelais’ text participates in the popular anti-woman discourses of the period, deeply embedded in contemporary lewd sexist attitudes with their contempt for female sexuality. Yet even where he uses misogynist stereotypes that form the stock of formal controversies, conduct books, sermons and medical discourses, the sly, elusive and teasing quality, the inherently dialogic nature of Rabelais’ text eludes categories. In its ability to draw upon popular and learned discourses and as well as to playfully demystify and debunk its stereotypes Rabelais’ text poses a challenge to ethical and polemical criticism in general and to feminist critique in particular.

Though, generally speaking, Rabelais’ text does not seem to celebrate carnivalesque female corporeality the representation of Gargamelle is quite a tour de force. A woman of monstrous appetite, the huge, pregnant Gargamelle participates in the carnival’s tripe feast gorging on ‘sixteen quarters, two bushels, three pecks, and a pipkin’. This excessive consumption brings on an early labour leading to Gargantua’s birth. The vivid description of Gargamelle’s labour pains and her son’s fantastic birth epitomize what Bakhtin terms the carnival’s celebration of the material lower bodily stratum:
A little while after she began to groan, lament and cry. Then suddenly came the midwives from all the quarters, who groping her below, found some peloderies, which was a certain filthy stuff, and of a taste truly bad enough. This they thought had been the child, but it was her fundament that was slipt out with the mollification of her straight entrail, which you call the bum-gut, and that merely by eating of too many tripes. (Bk. 1. Ch. 6. p. 21)

A Bakhtinian reading of this passage would identify in it traits typical of the grotesque body which is in the process of transgressing bodily boundaries through a carnivalesque conflation of ‘acts of defecation and copulation, pregnancy and birth.’ The body of Gargamelle, in the process of birthing, assumes a positive regenerative valence and position of centrality within the cultural context of carnival. The contribution of Gargamelle—despite her minimal presence in the text—is that she has created the notion of the Rabelaisian woman in the popular imaginary.

It is fitting that this thesis concludes with a discussion of Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Cherry (1989), a twentieth century feminist fiction about a seventeenth century Rabelaisian female figure. Sexing the Cherry merges the boundaries of fantasy and fact, magic and realism, space and time in its narrative, exploring the past as energized space. Winterson has said that she wanted to create a ‘word-dependent world not restricted either by realism or contemporaneity.’ Examples of the novel’s remarkable use of intertextuality, parody and pastiche are the ‘Stories of the Twelve Dancing Princesses’ which are placed in the centre of this cross-time novel. These stories comprise feminist retellings of Anderson’s fairy tale; they both critique the norm of compulsory heterosexuality and celebrate lesbian desire. However, this thesis focuses on a single aspect of the novel—Winterson’s representation of the ‘Dog Woman’ as a feminist recasting of the relation between the female, the grotesque and the monstrous.

Celebrating the Rabelaisian woman in Sexing the Cherry

The Dog Woman (one of the narrators of the fiction) is a humongous being of formidable strength with a flair for billingsgate rhetoric, and an irrepressible joie de vivre. Her unusual name, (reminding readers of Jonson’s ‘pig-woman’), derives from her profession; she breeds hounds and enters them ‘in the races and fighting’ (p. 13.)
returning home every Saturday ‘covered in saliva and bitten to death but with money in my pocket and need nothing but a body for company.’ (p. 13.) Like Jonson’s ‘pig-woman’, she too is a sweating ‘leaky vessel’. The Bakhtinian associations of the carnivalesque grotesque body as an open porous entity are evoked in her description of her self:

I could scarcely step outside without sweating off me enough liquid to fill a bucket. These waterfalls took with them countless lice and other timid creatures, and being forced to put myself often under the pump I can truly say I was clean. (pp. 21-2.)

Early modern misogynist satire usually denigrated women as grotesque by representing the female body as mass of repulsive putrid flesh. Winterson’s fiction takes a sly dig at early modern anti-woman discourse by making the Dog Woman masquerade as an ailing pox-infected prostitute in order to gain entry to the trial of Charles I. She tells the horrified guards that her body is a mass of rotting flesh and if she were to stand up they should ‘see a river of pus run across these flags.’ (p. 69.)

Winterson celebrates the Rabelaisian corporeality of her protagonist and the novel has several comic incidents of the Dog Woman making unabashed use of her filthy gross body to her advantage. When the herbalist Thomas Johnson attempts to charge money for a glimpse of the banana—‘an edible fruit of the like never seen in England’ (p. 11.) she tries to bully him saying she would cram his face into her breasts and smother him (p.12). He finally capitulates when she grabs him and pushes him into her dress: ‘He was soon coughing and crying because I haven’t had that dress off in five years’ (p. 12).

In the circus when the man, ‘a little bit of vermin’ (p. 24) tries to make fun of her size suggesting that he search her she casually lifts her dress over her head: ‘I was wearing no underclothes in respect of heat. There was a great swooning amongst the crowd and I heard a voice compare me to a mountain range’ (p. 25). It takes very little for this mountainous woman to catapult Samson, the circus elephant into the air (p. 25). Possessor of prodigious strength, the Dog Woman has no qualms about using it to destroy her enemies, the Puritans who are described as ‘those po-faced, flat-buttocked zealots’ (p. 67). A staunch Royalist, who believes that Charles I is ‘our King by Divine Right’ (p. 27), she is irked by her neighbour Firebrace’s sermonizing about the king’s
evil doings. When she fails to silence him through her lung-power the Dog Woman resorts to violence: ‘I had no choice but to strangle him, and though I used only one hand and held him from the ground at arm’s length, he was purple in no time’ (p. 28). There is a grotesque comic description of how the Dog Woman takes on an army of Roundheads single-handed, an incident that turns her into the indomitable female hero of a mock epic battle:

The other five came at me, and when I had dispatched two for an early judgement another took his musket and fired me straight in the chest. I fell over, killing the man who was poised behind me, and plucked the musket ball out of my cleavage. I was in a rage then. (p. 66.)

After the execution of the King the Dog Woman is aroused by fellow Loyalists to avenge the murder and goes about it with her characteristic zest. She is struck by the preacher’s reference to the Law of Moses ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’ and chooses to interpret the Scriptures quite literally. Thus she gouges out the eyes and breaks the teeth of her enemies collecting them as trophies of ‘right-doings’ and proudly displays them in the next meeting: ‘I tipped my sack of takings over the floor. I had 119 eyeballs, one missing on account of a man who had lost one already, and over 2000 teeth’ (p. 85).

Undeterred by the shocked response of her fellow Loyalists the Dog Woman decides to continue the carnage alone and picks Preacher Scroggs and her neighbour Firebrace for execution while they visit the Spitalfields brothel. She interrupts the sodomite duo in their private histrionics of playing ‘Brutus and Caesar before the quarrel’ (p. 87), and announces her presence with the dramatic ‘I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him’ adding that it is a quote ‘from a playwright whose name I can’t remember’ (p. 88). The ‘execution’ of the two Puritans, described in vivid detail, is a pastiche of Elizabethan grotesque prose.

The representation of female empowerment through the figure of a gigantic woman on the rampage has been seen as a questionable feminist agenda. Sara Martin, for example, strongly censures Winterson for turning the Dog Woman into a moral monster. She comments: ‘it is doubtful whether the reader is supposed to sympathize with her androphobia or to condemn it as the dark side of contemporary feminism.’ However, not all feminists are offended by Winterson’s flamboyant flouting of political
correctness. According to Roessner Jeffrey, in her retelling of the Puritan Revolution, ‘Winterson presents passion as an instinctual and uncontrollable force that cannot be repressed without harsh consequences.’

Critics have also expressed a degree of discomfort with the novel’s representation of males as ‘cruel, hypocritical, and / or insensitive, as little more than obstacles in the way of the self-realization of women.’ One could perhaps argue that the feminist polemics of *Sexing the Cherry* is premised on a strategic reverse sexism. Indeed the novel spells this out in the narrative voice of the crusading eco-feminist, the unnamed woman who serves as a twentieth century alter ego of the Dog Woman. This is what she says:

I don’t hate men, I just wish they’d try harder. They all want to be heroes and all we want is for them to stay at home and help with the housework and the kids. That’s not the kind of heroism they enjoy (p. 127).

Thus, it is possible that some readers will take umbrage at the Dog Woman’s sexual misadventures, the incident where she bites off the penis of a man who persuades her to do fellatio on him (p. 41) or when during intercourse she sucks in her partner’s member ‘balls and everything’ (p. 106). The feminist humour works through a literalization of the misogynist image of woman as a monstrous swallowing womb. The implicit message of the text seems that if men have invented the image of the vagina as the castrating ‘other’ mouth, then they might as well enjoy the feminist re-telling of their fantasy in fiction.

More importantly, what redeems such accounts from becoming ‘sexist dirty jokes at the expense of women’ is the narrative strategy of highlighting the Dog Woman’s endearing naiveté regarding sexual practices. The Dog Woman is astonished by the rapture of the man who seems to swoon when she takes his penis into her mouth and swallows it (p. 41). Likewise she can’t quite fathom why the ‘gallant gentleman’ who wants to pleasure her does so by burrowing ‘down the way ferrets do and tried to take me in his mouth’ (p. 107). However, he soon acknowledges his failure saying that she is too big for him. If psychoanalytic theory has constructed woman as a lack then Winterson’s feminist rebuttal is to create a Rabelaisian woman who possesses a clitoris that is like a monstrous ‘orange’ (p. 107). The Dog Woman is not only monstrous in size but also ‘hideous’ This is how she describes herself:
My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas (p. 24).

Though she can ‘sing inside the mountain of [her] flesh’ with a voice that is ‘slender as a reed’ without a trace of ‘lard in it’ (p. 14) she is told that a gargoyle must remain as grotesque adornment outside the church and not occupy choir stalls (p. 14). In a culture where a woman’s sexual desirability and attractiveness is premised entirely on her physical appearance the monstrously huge, ugly Dog Woman is a figure of ‘devalued difference’. As she says ‘I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared to approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains’ (p. 34).

Her only experience of romantic longing makes her acutely aware of her status as marginal and outcast; ‘I fell in love once, if love be that cruelty which takes us straight to the gates of Paradise only to remind us they are closed for ever’ (p. 35). She recounts the incident with her usual flair for comic absurdity: ‘I decided that true love must be clean love and I boiled myself a cake of soap’ (p. 35). She douses herself and waits for her lover all caked with flour and when he finally appears she scoops him up in her arms waiting to be kissed. It is only her lover faints that she realizes that the only emotion she can arouse in men is that of terror (p. 36).

However, Sexing the Cherry creates a powerful counter discourse on love through the unorthodox relationship between the Dog Woman and Jordan, the foundling she rescues from the Thames. The Dog Woman knows that Jordan loves her because she is as ‘wide and muddy as the river that is his namesake’, because it makes her ‘his kin’ (p. 34). Jordan himself says that though he knows his mother is ‘a fantasist, a liar and a murderer’ none of that ‘would stop me loving her’ (p. 92). Theirs’ is a poignant companionate bond without the claustrophobia of bondage. Though the Dog Woman is lonely and ‘heart-broken’ when Jordan goes away on his voyages, she accepts him the way he is—‘he came from the water and I knew the water would claim him again.’ (p. 83.) When he returns from his adventures, she wants to tell him ‘how much I’d missed him, but thirteen years of words were fighting in my throat and I couldn’t get any of them out’ (p. 101). Indeed in a world where words accumulate to create a pollution and ‘men and women in balloons’ armed with mops and scrubs fly up periodically to cleanse the sky (p. 17) neither Jordan nor his foster mother speak about their love for each other.
The fiction challenges patriarchy’s negative associations between maternity and monstrosity at several levels. The Dog Woman recounts how her mother who was ‘so light that she dared not go out in the wind’ could effortlessly swing her on her back and carry her for miles (p. 25). She comments, ‘There was talk of witchcraft but what is stronger than love?’ (p. 25). This incident seems to underscore that only maternal love does not feel encumbered by the burden of a monstrous child. Nurtured and fortified by this strong maternal love, the Dog Woman herself is an unusual mother figure; her monstrous sexuality forecloses the possibility of biological maternity—since no man can have sex with her—but it simultaneously underscores that maternity is not predicated on reproduction alone. The fiercely protective and strong maternal love that she feels for Jordan is an integral aspect of her monstrous being; indeed the Dog Woman’s invincible strength is most pronounced when she perceives any threat to Jordan. (p. 66.) Similarly she will use her prodigious strength to coerce people in order to save her adopted son; thus when Jordan is delirious with fever she tells her neighbour the witch to cure him threatening her in no uncertain terms: ‘I snatched her by the waist and held her up over my head. ‘make him well,’ I said as politely as I could ‘otherwise I may not say what maternal rage might do’ (p. 140).

_Sexing the Cherry_ deconstructs the metaphysic of maternal tenderness as necessary but also largely ineffectual and weak. Re-inscribed in the body of a monstrous woman, maternal love becomes a formidable power to reckon with. Delinked from reproductive sexuality, the Dog Woman’s maternal love both challenges the patriarchal scripting of passive female nurturance and tenderness and provides an alternative feminist model.

It is in Jordan’s narrative that the readers get an entirely different perspective on the Dog Woman. She is a strong ‘rip-roaring’ woman who is ‘self-sufficient and without self-doubt’ (p. 101) and wants to be alone. Jordan is the only male who is not intimidated by her monstrous size or repulsed by her ugliness; he remembers her holding him like a puppy in the palm of his hands and he picks something from her face (p. 79). In his imagination she is a monster in a fairy tale born from a ‘cobalt blue bottle with a wax stopper’ who has now ‘forgotten all that and sits with her dogs watching the tide’ (p. 79), Jordan’s narrative seems to suggest that the earthy, boisterous Dog Woman and the ethereal dancing princess Fortunata—two women who appear to be diametrical opposites—belong to the same continuum of the magic-real.
Winterson’s novel is part of a late twentieth century tradition of feminist appropriations of the female grotesque and the monstrous. It can be read alongside Fay Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) and Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984). All these fictions have the monstrous or grotesque women as their central characters. Winterson’s Dog Woman shares her lineage with Carter’s bird woman Fevvers and Weldon’s Ruth. For feminist novelists of the 80s, like Fey Weldon, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson, the ideas of excess and power embodied in the female grotesque and the female monster are extremely attractive because they contain the potential for challenging and subverting patriarchal misogynist fictions. That the female monster is a product of feminist fantasy—a creation of the woman writer’s power of fiction—is hinted at in Jordan’s imagination of the Dog Woman being born from the bottle:

A woman coming by hears noises from the bottle, and taking a knife she cuts open the seal and my mother comes thickening out like a genie from a jar, growing bigger and bigger and finally solidifying into her own proportions (p.79).

Monstrous and grotesque females allow novelists to create feminist counter-narratives that challenge patriarchal narratives of controlled femininity. Unlike actual carnivals that turned unruly women into figures of displaced abjection, *Sexing the Cherry* creates a carnivalesque topsy-turvy in which the victorious Dog Woman epitomizes the feminist fantasy of the ‘woman-on-top’. Towards the end of the novel, the eco-feminist narrator spells out the feminist politics of monstrosity when she talks about her need to grow bigger than ‘all things that had power over me’:

It seems obvious, doesn’t it, that someone who is ignored and overlooked will expand to a point where they have to be noticed, even if that noticing is fear and disgust (p. 124.)

Thus in her hallucinations she is ‘huge, raw, a giant’ (p. 121). She frightens men who shoot at her by taking bullets out of her cleavage and with loud laughter breaks their guns between her fingers, ‘the way you would a wish-bone.’ (p. 122). The very nature of her imagination makes this unnamed woman scientist a twentieth century avatar of the Rabelaisian Dog Woman celebrated in the narrative itself. She fantasizes about visiting the World Bank and the Pentagon—the bastions of patriarchal
power—and listening to men in Gucci suits discuss schemes of environmental pollution in the name of development and talk of nuclear weapons to promote peace. In her fantasy of retribution she piles them up in the huge sack that she carries and later gives them ‘compulsory training in feminism and ecology’ (p. 123).

In reality, although she is a chemist with a good degree, she goes into pollution research (p. 125) and alarmed by the level of mercury in the rivers, starts a one woman campaign gradually developing ‘a passion for evangelism’ (p. 123). Naturally the world does not care for a crusading eco-feminist who is trying to create awareness about the dangers of mercury poisoning. Indeed people are irked by her persistence and the way she manages to grab media attention. For young men like Jack, who work for multinational companies, this crusader is a nuisance who holds up ‘progress, industry and the free market’ (p. 137). Yet perspectives differ. To Jack’s friend Nicholas (a 20th century Jordan) she appears as a hero:

Surely this woman was a hero? Heroes give up what’s comfortable in order to protect what they believe in or live dangerously for the common good. She was doing that, so why was she being persecuted? (p. 138)

The Dog Woman and her unnamed twentieth century counterpart embody the potentials inherent in the Bakhtinian grotesque body as a ‘virile category associated with the active civic world of the public.’ But the power of the female grotesque does not lie in her immense bulk and physical strength alone. Indeed the text’s feminist politics of monstrosity is to transform the monstrous into a condition that the eco-feminist narrator feels within herself:

When the weight had gone I found out something strange: that the weight persisted in my mind. I had an alter ego who was huge and powerful, a woman whose only morality was her own and whose loyalties were fierce and few (p. 125).

Women like this scientist, women who fail to fit into patriarchal conventions of the feminine, perceive monstrosity as a source of strength; thus the monstrous alter ego is a ‘patron saint’ and ‘whenever I called on her I felt my muscles swell and laughter fill up my throat’ (p. 125). Winterson’s novel recasts contemporary female empowerment as women’s fantasy of the monstrous within themselves. Sexing the Cherry celebrates the return of the Rabelaisian female grotesque—the marginalized and the outcast. The
enduring appeal of the monstrous women in Sexing the Cherry is in its feminist poetics; as Winterson puts it, ‘By writing the familiar into the strange, by wording the unlovely into words-as-jewels, what is outcast can be brought home.’

Notes

2 Ibid. p. 60.
6 Ibid. p. 21.
7 Bakhtin, Rabelais, p. 21.
15 Russo, The Female Grotesque, p. 8.
16 See Winterson interview, in www.jeanette.winterson.com, cited earlier.