

Jeanette Winterson's Weight combines ancient myth, autobiography, and the latest scientific accounts of the universe in a unique amalgam. Hers is an absorbing story that is also a meditation on the use of stories. The world in Winterson's myth evolves in tandem with human understanding of it, ultimately enabling Atlas to let go of the globe, stand back, and admire it as we have come to know it, "the diamond-blue earth gardened in a wilderness of space" (150). At the same time, Winterson uses the world as a metaphor for each person's experience of it; this is the world we still carry on our backs, the world that has not yet fully evolved and whose weight can paralyze us.

Like most modern retellings of classical myth, this one is self-conscious; it includes two explicitly autobiographical sections in which Winterson explains how the myth gripped her as a child, when the "world Atlas" of her bedside globe lamp inspired dreams of escape to a better place. Paradoxically, she found as an adult that the weight of her experience—epitomized by Atlas' burden—was not something she could shake off by traveling or by cutting ties with other people. Her admiration for Atlas' patience and "gentleness" is profound, and she has imagined him vividly, both in his isolation and in contrast to Heracles, the unreflecting man of action who serves as his perfect foil.

In a brief introduction, Winterson describes the convergence of her lifelong fascination with the myth and the "phone call" that precipitated this writing of it. From a classicist's perspective, she had the good fortune to choose a myth that has no dominant canonical version: Atlas appears in Greek and Roman visual art, but literary references from antiquity are confined to brief allusions or summaries (in, e.g., the Theogony, Prometheus Bound, Pindar's Pythian 4, Ovid's Metamorphoses, and Apollodorus' Library). Winterson follows quite closely the Apollodoran version of Atlas' encounter with Heracles, but she also identifies the Titan with the figure of Atlas in Plato's Critias, a son of Poseidon who ruled Atlantis. Re-writing the Atlantis myth to fit the rebellious figure of Hesiod's Atlas, she preserves his anti-Establishment credentials but does not stress his political side. Instead, playing on the lowercase use of atlas to name books of maps, she links him with the globe itself and its geological history.

More surprisingly, Winterson's Weight can also be seen as a logical extension of her own earlier fiction. There has always been an autobiographical strain in her works, which she simultaneously admits and denies: "Autobiography is not important. Authenticity is important" (xv). As a postmodernist she is not bound by the canons of realism, and there are fantastic elements in several of her novels. Although she is best known for her portrayal of lesbian characters, she adopts masculine personae with ease, and she has reanimated legendary figures like Lancelot and Dante's Francesca da Rimini (The PowerBook, 2000). Even the importance of the dog Laika in the denouement of Weight is anticipated in a short story called "The 24-Hour Dog" (The World and Other Places, 1998). Like James Joyce, Winterson seems to see myth as an antidote to the vacuousness of contemporary media; in her introduction she blasts the "gruesome appetite" for reality TV and the plodding quality of many documentaries and biographies, "'true life' accounts that occupy the space where imagination used to sit" (Weight, xv). Her retelling of the Atlas myth includes the latest scientific account of the solar system but infuses it with wonder: "Your first parent was a star" (4).

Above all, the success of Winterson's retelling is attributable to her talent for "telling stories": for plotting, pacing, and fully inhabiting her characters. The autobiographical excursions, which have been criticized as unnecessary intrusions on the story, serve the important function of reminding the reader that it is a woman who has produced this version: the story of these ancient male figures lives again for, and through, her.