

Lesbian mermaids? *The Vagina Monologues* runs aground

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Abstract

This research is within the disciplines of English and Comparative Literature. My methodology involves combining textual analysis and stylistics, the study of how linguistic devices work in literature, with constructivist gender theory, in an analysis of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. So. Lesbian mermaids? Adrienne Rich wrote in 1980 that feminism *needs* to include lesbians, for feminism's sake and for lesbians'. But has it happened? Or do they remain the sirens tempting feminist vessels into waters they cannot traverse? And how can we test the progress feminism has made? The most sexually explicit, lesbian vagina-monologue is not performed. It has no name. It is one of only two monologues with a speaker entirely in quotes: a voice in which the narrator cannot speak. Its narrator is riddled with anxiety. What is it about representing lesbian sexuality that creates this incredible tension? And how might this tension be resolved?

Keywords

Eve Ensler, *Vagina Monologues*, lesbian representation, literature, feminism

Essay

Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues* is one of the most famous and influential pieces of third-wave feminist art. It has had great political and cultural impact. In 2001, a celebrity performance of the play sold-out Madison Square Garden ([Ensler, 2008](#), p. 199). In 1998, the V-Day organisation was founded, to fund charities preventing violence against women, through productions of the play. In 2006, V-Day was named the second-best charity in the world by *Marie Claire* magazine (Ensler, 2008, p. 210). In 2007, over 3,000 benefit performances of the play took place in 58 countries, and on 700 college campuses (Ensler, 2008, p. 213). Ensler won the Guggenheim Fellowship Award for Playwriting in 1999.

The text aims to empower women, and to critique dominant cultural discourses about women's sexuality and the female body. But not all women are empowered by this text. It can, in fact, be seen to reaffirm discourses that participate in the oppression and exclusion of some women ([Hall, 2005](#), p. 100). Because of its enormous influence and audience, because of its feminist mission and impact, it is important that this text is critiqued.

The Vagina Monologues (henceforth referred to as the VM) is a play by New York playwright Eve Ensler, written in 1994 and first performed as a one-woman show in 1996. The play is a series of between 12 and 18 monologues (depending on the version) of female characters speaking about women's sexuality, the female body, and sexual violence. There exist different versions of this text. In 1998, Villard Books published the monologues with introductions. V-Day releases updated performance scripts every year, from which producers of benefit performances worldwide are not permitted to deviate ([V-Day, 2012](#)). I will be working from the 2008 tenth anniversary edition of the Villard book.

The following is a description of my methodology and the contribution I believe my analysis can make. I will combine queer theory and constructivist gender theory with stylistics in a formalist analysis of one monologue from the VM, within the disciplines of English and Comparative Literature. The strengths of an analysis of this text within these disciplines lie in the particular kind of attention we pay as critics to linguistic devices, and the consequences of textual differences (such as between different versions) and structural relationships (between author, audience, critic and text) for the construction of meaning. Stylistics permits an examination of how linguistic devices contribute to the production of meaning in texts. Queer theory and constructivist gender theory applied to the study of literature argue that if gender and sexuality are seen as social constructs instead of biological phenomena ([Butler, 1993/2011](#)), then a culture's texts and their readers' negotiations rewrite the lived possibilities of gender and sexuality in the world.

This paper is an analysis of the unnamed, sexually explicit lesbian monologue I refer to by its opening line, "As a lesbian." This monologue is unique in a number of ways, and forms a particularly rich object of critique. Its analysis reveals the play's foundational tensions and assumptions. I will begin with an analysis of the unique formal features of the monologue, followed by the application of some key theoretical concepts from queer theory that can illuminate the larger meaning of this monologue's formal structure. I then address a counter-argument formed by the narrator's comments. Finally, I state how an analysis within queer theory and formalism allows us to address this counter-argument and the wider production of meaning in the text.

"As a lesbian" is the most sexually explicit monologue in the play. It has no name. It is not included in V-Day's official VM performance script, from which performers worldwide are not permitted to deviate ([Cooper, 2007](#), p. 749; [Scott, 2003](#), p. 417). It is one of only

three monologues in the play in which the sexuality is marked as lesbian. As I will discuss, its form deviates from the traditional monologue. A description of the prominent features of “As a lesbian” must begin with the preceding monologue, as it forms an important intertext. “The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy” is a monologue spoken by a lesbian dominatrix and sex-worker who describes her work with great passion, ending with a humorous taxonomy of her clients’ orgasmic moans. It is often the climactic closing monologue of stage productions (Cooper, 2007, p. 750). The printed text of the VM contains introductions to some of the monologues. In the introduction to “As a lesbian,” the first-person narrator recounts a criticism made by the sex-worker interviewee, that her experience of lesbian sexuality had been misrepresented by “The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy,” which is the preceding monologue. This frames what follows as a corrective.

“As a lesbian” begins, without a title, on the next page. As shown below, for two pages it alternates between passages of very explicit descriptions of lesbian sex presented as reported speech, and a narrator’s anxious, interjected commentary in the first person. The final page features a long, eloquent passage by the narrator, which can be seen to describe the benefits to women that can come from speaking about female sexuality and the female body. In the closing lines of the monologue, the narrator quotes the speaker one more time, then herself in reply.

The introduction to “As a lesbian” is quoted below, followed by the opening passage, and the narrator’s first interjection. Of note is the framing of the monologue as a corrective, and the differences between the voices of the introduction, quoted speaker and narrator, as indicated by the use of italics, quotation marks, and register. The formatting of the passages

below is identical to the book, except where I have used a single line to represent a page break. The text reads:

After I finished this piece I read it to the woman on whose interview I'd based it. She didn't feel it really had anything to do with her. She loved the piece, mind you, but she didn't see herself in it. She felt that I had somehow avoided talking about vaginas, that I was still somehow objectifying them. Even the moans were a way of objectifying the vagina, cutting it off from the rest of the vagina, the rest of the woman. There was a real difference in the way lesbians saw vaginas. I hadn't yet captured it. So I interviewed her again...

"As a lesbian," she said, "I need you to start from a lesbian-centered place, not framed within a heterosexual context. I did not desire women, for example, because I disliked men. Men weren't even part of the equation." She said, "You need to talk about entering into vaginas. You can't talk about lesbian sex without doing this.

"For example," she said. "I'm having sex with a woman. She's inside me. I'm inside me. Fucking myself together with her. There are four fingers inside me; two are hers, two are mine."

I don't know that I wanted to talk about sex. But then again, how can I talk about vaginas without talking about them in action? I am worried about the titillation factor, worried about the piece becoming exploitative. Am I talking about vaginas to arouse people? Is that a bad thing?

(Ensler, 2008, pp. 113-116)

The monologue's formal distinction is stark. It has no name. It is, in fact, no longer a traditional monologue, consisting instead of quoted speech interjected with commentary. It is one of only two monologues whose speaker is situated entirely in reported speech; the other is "I Asked a Six-year-old Girl" (Ensler, 2008, p. 103). This suggests that only certain voices can be appropriated, accommodated, and that the narrator cannot comfortably enter

the subjectivities of lesbian or child. An anxiety is implied in speaking *for* or *as* the lesbian or child, following an introduction that describes a criticism of the VM as a misrepresentation of lesbian identity.

The VM is presented as growing organically out of exchanges between author and audience, and the introductions to the monologues argue for their collective nature, for the *authorising* of these fictionalised accounts in their origins in interview material and audience stories. The arguments one finds in the introductions to these monologues invite the audience to read this text as a set of authentic accounts, that performance of the text is the sharing of real women's stories with other people. These literary devices situate the text so that its origins, its performances, and its revisions over the years are emphasised as a dialogue with the audience.

Formally – through the device of reported speech – “As a lesbian” performs its status as a dialogic text. This is also narrated throughout the book with reference to the monologues' origins in interviews Ensler conducted with more than two hundred women (Ensler, 2008, p. 4, p. 75). The critical literature surrounding the VM has argued that the use of quotation marks in “As a lesbian” suggests the extent to which the other monologues were fictionalised, that “As a lesbian” is therefore closer to verbatim interview material ([Striff, 2005](#), p. 74). These existing analyses of the VM reveal a problematic tendency to situate the textual strategies through references to the playwright, or with the monologues' origins in interview material. Cooper (2007), for example, has argued that in “As a lesbian” the narratorial voice is closer to that of the playwright than a narrator (p. 752). This is a reading the text invites, but this interpretation should not be assumed. This methodological vulnerability within the existing criticism can be addressed through a formal analysis.

In formalist literary studies, we examine how selecting and combining elements within a text contributes to an implicit argument about how that work should be read. I am critical of the argument being forwarded in the VM that the text is a dialogue with women, and I am critical of the argument in the existing literature on the VM that the use of quotation marks in “As a lesbian” indicates a more faithful reproduction of interview material. It is exactly because this is *no longer* verbatim interview material that the quotation marks in “As a lesbian” are of interest, as they should be read as realist devices designed to create the illusion of transparency, directness, and immediacy, which is fundamental to the political and representational project of the VM. Regardless of its relation to any interview material, that “As a lesbian” has a speaker contained in quotation marks, speaking from the past, indicates a voice in which the narrator cannot speak. This quoted voice is not permitted to speak for herself. She is situated entirely within the narrator’s interjected commentary.

My formalist analysis is the foundation for the larger argument of this paper. I argue that the unique formal devices of this monologue – the split into speaker/narrator, italics, quotation marks around reported speech – reveal a representational breakdown stemming from two fundamental and problematic assumptions that inform the play, by which all the monologues are structured: heteronormativity, and the sex-negative association of sex with exploitation and violence. I will begin by defining three terms central to the following analysis: heterosexual symbolic, heteronormativity, and sex-negativity.

I will be using “heterosexual symbolic” to describe the set of discourses in contemporary Western cultures that have as their central assumptions: that there are two gender roles (masculine and feminine) which map necessarily onto two biological sexes (male and female) whose primary sex act is genital penetrative sexual intercourse

(heterosexuality). The heterosexual symbolic is a set of narratives about which genders, sexes, sexualities, and sex acts exist in the world, what these mean, and how we should feel about them. The heterosexual symbolic contains a powerful, compulsive force that demands all members of a culture hold themselves and be held to these narratives, as well as be judged by their adherence to or deviation from them (heteronormativity). Judith Butler (1993/2011) has stated: “The regulatory norms of “sex” work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative”. (p. xii)

Here Butler has drawn attention to the normative and performative nature of gendered discourse. Critical theory (of which queer theory is a part) includes the examination of subjectivity, the study of how individuals come to be constituted – seen as individuals with full personhood – through their interactions with culture. Butler argues that anatomical and biological sex are not “natural,” concrete, and prelinguistic. Rather, the normative power of gendered narratives forces subjects to acquire subjectivity – including their recognisable sex, gender, and sexuality – through this discourse. To “materialize sexual difference” in this manner means that those whose bodies and identities do not adhere to the narratives of the heterosexual symbolic come to be seen as *abnormal*, as the exceptions that prove the rule.

The narratives that comprise the heterosexual symbolic are culturally and historically contingent: they change across time and place and in every context. They may be considered an intertextual pool of narratives from which other discourses draw, and to which other discourses contribute. Prominent queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have discussed the pervasive and contradictory nature

of heteronormativity in their 1998 paper “Sex in public.” Berlant and Warner have stated that heteronormativity is institutional and epistemological – which is to say, it is built into the production of knowledge, and into social structures and systems of meaning. It is also both unmarked and idealised ([Berlant & Warner, 1998](#), p. 548). The narratives of the heterosexual symbolic are the default, their contents form the unmarked category to which other practices and subjectivities are compared. For example, mainstream culture, popular culture and advertising are populated with representations and celebrations of romance and sexuality. It is, of course, *heterosexual* romance, but as the default this modifier remains invisible. Berlant and Warner foreground the *ideal* nature of heteronormativity in contradiction with its position as default. The narratives of the heterosexual symbolic are posited as both the natural condition from which one errs and the ideal condition to which one strives. These narratives cannot be definitively nor exhaustively listed. Nor do they function in every context in the same way. However, certain narratives comprising the heterosexual symbolic appear more frequently, become more popular, wield greater influence, and demand greater adherence. I argue that the representational crisis apparent in “As a lesbian” derives from a struggle to adhere to these normative narratives.

In addition to the structural assumption of heteronormativity, Ensler’s text is characterised by a strong association between sexuality, violence and exploitation. The play’s fundamental logic associates female sexuality with sexual violence, and this logic draws from certain second-wave feminist traditions. The feminist “Sex Wars” of the 1980s and 1990s entailed a long series of debates over issues such as sadomasochism, prostitution, and pornography. “Sex-negative” (also called “anti-sex” or “radical”) feminists

argued that these practices collude in women's oppression and exploitation ([Ferguson, 1984](#), p. 107; [Swedberg, 1989](#), p. 602). "Sex-positive" (also called "libertarian") feminists argued that the liberatory or oppressive potential of these practices cannot be determined in advance, and that in the absence of specific conditions of exploitation (such as poverty or coercion) these practices can be empowering and pleasurable for women, as well as expressions of their agency (Ferguson, 1984, p. 109; Swedberg, 1989, p. 603; [Tong, 1989](#), p. 122). The stylistic rupture of "As a lesbian" into quoted speaker and anxious narrator reveals a sex-negative association of sexuality with sexual violence and exploitation. Cooper (2007) has stated:

The kind of sex appears at issue. It is remarkable that the play's most explicit description of sex would be that of two women, thus the other to its predominant heteronormativity. That Ensler raises the possibility of titillation here but not elsewhere, and that it appears inextricably bound to exploitation, gives pause. Voicing her discomfort to the reader, not the interviewee, she doubles the voyeurism even as she hints at its pornographic potential.

(p. 752)

Cooper's insight is the foundation for my analysis of this monologue: that here is the *only* occasion in the VM that the narrator fears titillation, and this is inextricable from fears of exploitation. Within the frameworks of formalism and queer theory, my questions are: what causes this unique stylistic split? What is the device of the anxious narratorial commentary in the service of? What is it about the representation of explicit lesbian eroticism that requires these unique formal qualities?

I suggest that the fear of titillation occurs at the convergence of two kinds of attitudes towards lesbian sex. From heteronormativity, the view that lesbian sex lies outside

the sanctioned narratives and is therefore exotic; from sex-negative feminism, that lesbian sexual narratives are titillating and arousing so therefore exploitative. The VM expounds against sexual violence towards women, and in doing so it reveals a set of assumptions that draw from sex-negative feminist traditions. Rosemarie Tong (1989) outlines the “feminist antipornography” (what I have called “sex-negative”) stance: “(1) Although in and of itself pornography is not harmful in the way that sexual harassment, rape, and woman battering are, it encourages people (men) to behave in these harmful ways; and (2) pornography is in and of itself harmful because it defames and/or discriminates against women” (p. 114). In “As a lesbian” we find emergent the assumption that the titillating and arousing effects of explicit representations of lesbian sexuality entail exploitation, which I argue may be read as an expression of the “feminist antipornography” stance.

Given that the VM works within the heterosexual symbolic, it is not surprising that we see a formal disjuncture in this monologue. The heterosexual symbolic has no place for lesbian sexuality. It has no normative narrative for what lesbian sex is, or should be. What it *does* have is a narrative for how we should feel about lesbian sexuality – that it is exotic, tantalising, threatening, or obscene. [Adrienne Rich \(1993\)](#) has commented on the exoticisation of lesbian sexuality as a form “by which male power manifests itself... enforcing heterosexuality on women,” and that “erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature, film” is a “[form] of compulsion... [exemplifying] control of consciousness” (p. 209). Rich has highlighted the unique position of lesbian sexuality within heteronormative representation as absent except when presented as perverse.

Heteronormativity’s installation of particular narratives of heterosexuality as dominant and hegemonic means that heterosexual sex acts then go unmarked, they are the

default. This hegemony facilitates the creation of a set of *safe* narratives about what heterosexual sex should be, how we can write it, and how we should feel about it. [Berlant \(1997\)](#) has identified the process I am examining in the VM. It is the process whereby certain narratives of heterosexuality and romance come to be conventionalised, what Berlant has termed the “narrative containment of sex into one of the conventional romantic forms of modern consumer heterosexuality” (p. 62). Narratives contained in this manner can then be cited and circulated safely, without risk, without anxiety. Berlant has argued that it is not something *inherent* to particular sex-acts or their representation that causes them to be received with anxiety, instead it is their distance or deviation from an arbitrary, culturally-specific set of safe, conventionalised narratives (1997, p. 62). The compulsive force of heteronormativity, combined with a sex-negative fear of the representation of sexuality as exploitative, creates in this text the situation whereby lesbian sexuality has no safe conventions to cite in order to be written. I argue that the narrator’s anxiety in this monologue may be read as an anxiety in writing outside the safe narratives of the heterosexual symbolic.

So far I have suggested two structures of meaning that an analysis of form can reveal in this monologue: heteronormativity and sex-negativity. However, I must at this point address the content of the narrator’s interjections, which might seem to provide a counter-argument to my assertions. The narrator could appear, in contradiction to what I’ve said thus far, to be questioning this relegation of explicit lesbian sexuality to the titillating and exploitative and exotic. This monologue is included, after all, and the narrator asks a set of questions about this material’s status as taboo. Consider some of the narrator’s interjections:

I realize I don't know what is appropriate. I don't even know what that word means. Who decides. I learn so much from what she's telling me. About her, about me...Saying these words feels naughty, dangerous, too direct, too specific, wrong, intense, in charge, alive.
(Enslar, 2008, p. 117)

I emphasise the narratorial voice as a positioning to be distinguished from the playwright, because everything in the realm of representation functions as a literary device. This is *not* the voice of the playwright. This narrator's anxiety is a literary device that forms a narrative arc from anxiety, to doubt, to empowerment. The narrative arc is encapsulated in the progressive shift of connotations in the series "naughty, dangerous, too direct, too specific, wrong, intense, in charge, alive." The narrator here is a linguistic device mapping the journey from fear to celebration, a journey the reader is invited to follow. The narratorial commentary is an attempt to forward a sex-positive argument that explicit lesbian sexuality ought to be celebrated.

An analysis within formalism and queer theory, however, allows us to see that this attempt at a sex-positive argument in the *content* of the monologue is betrayed by its *form*. Through a reading of the stylistic rupture, the structural assumptions of this text are revealed. The framing of this monologue, its deep structures of heteronormativity and sex-negative fears of exploitation, the anxious commentary, the distancing quotation marks, the lack of monologic unity *or* a speaker's dialogic response – these perform an anxiety that reaffirms the representation of explicit lesbian sexuality as something outside the intelligible in the heterosexual symbolic.

In this paper, I have argued that the unique narratorial anxiety in this monologue is the consequence of a text structured by heteronormativity and sex-negativity. An analysis

within formalism and queer theory allows us to see this monologue's distancing formal devices as undermining the narrator's questioning of the status of lesbian eroticism as tantalising and exotic in mainstream discourse. Instead of critiquing these structures of meaning, the stylistic rupture emergent in "As a lesbian" reaffirms explicit lesbian sexuality as taboo, in need of containment within the terms of the heterosexual symbolic. Through the framing devices of the introductions one finds in the VM the argument that the text is the product of a dialogue with women. I have critiqued this assertion, because *The Vagina Monologues* continues to exclude and misrepresent the experiences of some women, while claiming to speak for and empower all. When we critique how gender and sexuality are represented, we change what can be imagined, and what can be lived.

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