



Looking at Paula Vogel's Breasts

by Dr. Susan C. W. Abbotson

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To some degree this title works as an objective correlative for one of the issues the paper raises, for the way in which it operates illustrates much about Paula Vogel's technique and ultimate message, even while it may run contrary to her typical play titles. With the exception of *Hot 'n' Throbbing*--which interestingly enough was not one her more successful productions--the titles of Vogel's plays, in contrast to my title here, tend to be less provocative--indeed they seem deliberately innocuous given the subject matter of much of her work. Titles like *How I Learned to Drive*, *Baltimore Waltz*, and *Baby Makes Seven* conjure up a comforting sense of nostalgia, even while the subject matter of such plays--incest, pedophilia, and sexual abuse, AIDS, and the strangest infanticidal menage a trois you have yet to meet--might appall: the titles conceal only to shock.

Many of Vogel's plays, as several critics have pointed out, seem parodies of former classics--*Desdemona's Handkerchief*, with its trio of female characters retelling the tale of *Othello* from their point of view; *Meg* and its retelling of the Thomas More story in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* from the daughter's perspective; *The Oldest Profession*, with its five elderly prostitutes on a park bench trying to make sense of their world, riffing off David Mamet's two old men in *Duck Variations*; and *Baby Makes Seven*, a subtle twist on Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, only with a lesbian couple, their gay sperm provider, and three fantasy children to kill off as they make room for a new, living child; *How I Learned to Drive*'s Uncle Peck and his lust for young Li'l Bit reminiscent of Humbert Humbert's illicit fascination with Lolita; *The*

Baltimore Waltz, a variation on Ambrose Bierce's short story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," as the play offers a fantasy journey through Europe at which end we discover one of the central protagonists has just died in the hospital room from which we have never really left; and the recent *Long Christmas Ride Home*, inventively amalgamizing *Our Town* and Thornton Wilder's earlier one-acts "The Happy Journey," and "The Long Christmas Dinner," as a family, with what turns out to be a ghostly narrator, recalls a devastating car ride over the Christmas holiday. Just like Charlene in *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, who turns the movie *Moonstruck* into *Moonfuck*, Vogel loves to write outrageous parodies that bawdlerize the so-called classics. David Savran refers to these as Vogel's "acts of retaliation" ("Loose" x), for as Ann Pellegrini points out, they are clearly intended to expose and unsettle "the guiding assumptions of her (usually) male predecessors" by "rewriting" their works (476). But Vogel is doing more than simply rewriting: she is re-visioning.

My title also draws attention to two other pointed aspects of Vogel's work (pun intended)—the historical and sadly still current way in which women are frequently judged and deemed inferior by their physique (by both sexes), and Vogel's fierce declaration that women (and some men, too) need to take ownership of their own lives and bodies, thus wresting control from a manipulative and restrictive society. One could say that Vogel does for breasts what Eve Ensler does for the cunt—she asks for a revisioning and reassessment of every woman's sexuality and esteem, partly through her presentation of breasts in several plays, but most specifically in the two she names, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive* and *The Mineola Twins*. Sarah Stevenson suggests that Ensler uses "representation not as objectification but as a means to

articulate female phenomenal subjectivity” (*Presence* 27), and it seems that Vogel is doing something very similar. In the eyes of men like the grandfather in *How I Learned to Drive*—“What does she need a college degree for? She’s got all the credentials she’ll need on her chest” (*Mammary* 17)—the breasts become an emblem of submissive female sexuality. But rather than allow society to dictate what a woman’s breasts should mean, Vogel could be suggesting that we allow each woman to decide for herself.

Myrna and Myra, our twins from Mineola, we are told are “Identical . . . except in the chestal area” (*Mammary* 96), and of course the single letter “n.” Despite this, Myrna, the one with the boobs, lives a restricted life and obsesses about making others do the same. Myra, on the other hand lives free and easy. When Myrna threatens to “RIP OFF WHAT LITTLE THERE IS OF YOUR KNOCKERS, MYRA! I’M GONNA USE YOUR ITSIES FOR MY KEY CHAIN” (127), it suggests that a woman can be controlled by gaining possession of her breasts, but as Myra points out while escaping through a bathroom window after having slept with her sister’s fiancé, “Lucky for me I don’t have tits” (127). This lack seems to allow her greater freedom. But this doesn’t mean boobs are bad, just potentially restricting if one views them in a limited way, especially in a play that Pellegrini rightly describes as a “commentary on the straightjacket of gender roles and the limitations of binary thinking” in order to expose the “consequences of not listening to perspectives other than one’s own” (480-81). The point here is all about perspective.

I asked my twelve year old daughter, who is currently obsessed with her budding breasts, why she is so keen to acquire these appendages. “Because boys like them,” was her first response, followed by “and they make you feel like a woman.” On further

interrogation she tells me, “Without boobs you’d just be a guy . . . only without a penis.” It seems that in her eyes at least, breasts are what make her the woman she wants to be. As Iris Marion Young has written, “the chest is the center of a person’s being in the world and the way she presents herself to the world, so breasts cannot fail to be an aspect of her bodily habitus” (94). As Emilia intones in *Desdemona’s Handkerchief*, “No matter how you dress up a cow, she’s still got udders” (*Baltimore* 194). All women have breasts, but do women have to be defined by their breasts? As Pelligrini suggests, “Vogel is always interested in disrupting routinized habits of response” (477), and she does this as a means of refreshing people’s perception and challenging them to create a better world rather than accept what should be an unacceptable status quo.

Looking at *How I Learned to Drive*, Savran points to the potential phallus Li’l Bit’s name implies (having been thus named when they saw in the hospital that she had “a little bit” between her legs), and her identification with fast cars—the archetypal male phallus extension—which suggest that Li’l Bit subversively “takes up a masculine subject position” (*Queer* 199). As Diane Hamer suggests, this is not in order to become male, but to adopt a “fluid and flexible relationship to the positions around which desire is organized” (qtd. in de Lauretis 31). Savran explains what he sees as Vogel’s “belief that gender is a kind of floating signifier that can attach itself to bodies and texts in unpredictable ways . . . because,” he continues, “all conventions are historically produced and thus changeable, both people and conventions can be transformed” (*Queer* 187).

Vogel’s unpredictable ways do not just play games with penises in *How I Learned to Drive*, she also plays around with Li’l Bit’s breasts. As Stevenson suggests, Li’l Bit is seeking “to find a way to represent herself” (*Presence* 25), and she feels that Vogel is

insisting on “the crucial importance of the body, and in particular the breasts, to Li'l Bit's telling of her story” (“Yielding” 230). Stevenson asserts that because Li'l Bit's breasts are “the site of her violation by her uncle” they “are rejected by her” (232). Taking Li'l Bit's line, “That was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck” (90) at face value, Stevenson describes Li'l Bit as disconnecting from her breasts, viewing them as alien, “parasitic rather than benign” (231).

Admittedly, her argument seems persuasive, and Li'l Bit seems to support it when she describes her breasts as “alien life forces, these two mounds of flesh have grafted themselves onto my chest, and they're using me until they can ‘propagate’ and take over the world and they'll just keep growing with a mind of their own until I collapse under their weight and they suck all the nourishment out of my body and I finally just waste away while they get bigger and bigger” (*Mammary* 57). But the hyperbole seems to undercut any serious assessment, and offers a comical vision of breasts taking over the world, an image of power at odds to any deep-seated feelings of victimization, reinforced by her later image of her breasts “like sirens calling [the boys] to dash themselves on these ‘rocks’” (58). The hardness of “these rocks” at odds to the expectation of a soft and welcoming chest.

Stevenson's reading, perhaps, falls into the trap of objectifying and devaluing the breasts in the same way that the boys at the Sock Hop attempt to do. While the other girls express mild jealousy, telling her she should be happy to be a sex object—“You know, you should take it as a compliment that the guys want to watch you jiggle. They're guys. That's what they're supposed to do” (*Mammary* 57)--Li'l Bit refuses to dance, and so resists the boys' attempts to ogle her bouncing breasts. Yet Li'l Bit is still capable of

enjoying her breasts on her own terms. When she rewards Peck for not drinking by allowing him to fondle and kiss her “*celestial orbs*,” the “*sacred music*” that swells indicates her joy as much as his as she “*rears back her head*” in ecstasy before reining him in (12). While her breasts may have been used against her, in a sense, they are still her breasts, and by reclaiming them, even if only momentarily, they can still be a site of pleasure. Perhaps this is the real lesson Li'l Bit needs to learn, one that will allow her to define her breasts for herself, rather than allow Peck to define them for her?

Stevenson sees the covers of Vogel's play collections, *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays* and *The Mammary Plays* as possible lenses through which to read the plays. She points to the framing devices used on *Baltimore Waltz* that seem to fix the woman in the center and present her, exposed (quite literally given the naked breast), to the gaze of others. The silhouetted body on the front of *Mammary Plays* she describes as “a negative space in a sea of light” (“Yielding” 229), and points to the irony of having tape measures around a body that is not clearly in sight, and views the tapes as evidence of this woman's entrapment. Beneath this we see a “kaleidoscopic proliferation of chests” (230), which is the image Stevenson finds most offensive. Due to the absence of faces and lower bodies she views these women as being erased. But is she, again, pardon the pun, missing the point? As I suggested earlier, the issue here is perspective. So let us read these covers from a different perspective rather than the “habitualized” response that Stevenson takes. These are pictures of breasts, not women, and should possibly be taken at “face” value, despite the lack of faces.

Gustavo de Leon's cover art for *Baltimore Waltz* offers a Picasso style figure in strange costume who could be potentially any gender, which suggests freedom rather

than entrapment—a man in drag or a woman in uniform, while the face appears feminine, the screws and balls to the left hand side may be indicating a different story, even while these are balanced against the girlie pink stickers and white bunny to the right. What we have is an image that refuses classification—the overlapping frames suggesting not a fixing or entrapment, but a multiplicity of possibilities. Chip Kidd’s design for *Mammary Plays* can be read in a similar fashion. The silhouette is a blank slate on which we can write whatever woman we wish to be. Indeed, there are a few drag queens in P-town who could fit smoothly into that silhouette, too. The row of chests could simply be there to show us alternatives. Another opening up rather than a closing down.

For many, the essential difference between men and women is that one has a penis and the other breasts, or one does not have a penis and the other does not, generally, have breasts. But I suspect that Vogel is suggesting that people should not be defined by their body parts, no more than by their lack. As Savran point out, “Inversion does not in itself fundamentally alter oppressive formations” (*Queer* 192), thus Vogel is not trying to replace the power of the penis with the power of the breasts, but eradicate our preconceived perceptions of both; what Savran describes as “a lesbian modernism that destabilizes and unsettles identities and desires” (201).

Vogel’s real target in all her plays seems to be the human weakness toward categorization, which inevitably leads to exclusion, because categories, by their nature, do not include everyone. Just like Toni Morrison leads us toward a vision of a society that is utterly inclusive, in her novel *Paradise*, Vogel, too, is asking for a totally inclusive, non-judgemental society which no longer even entertains the idea of Otherness. To this end, she consistently subverts our expectations by challenging our usual

categorizations. Under her subtle handling, the predatory pervert becomes a sympathetic victim, an abortion clinic bomber is just an angry sister, a writer of pornography becomes a beaten wife, and prostitutes become ordinary people. The whole point being to warn us against our surface judgements and view people as individuals, each on their own terms. Theater—in which an audience views actors playing roles—is the ideal space in which to teach us these lessons about the potential fluidity of identity.

Vogel's love of cross-dressing, which Savran details in *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, is yet another aspect of this as it blurs gender lines. The ideal society would be a genderless one, in which gender, color, and sexual preference are no longer recognized as differentiating factors, and all are truly equal. When the homosexual character Peter, in *And Baby Makes Seven* wants to feel Anna's breast we see him undergo sexual confusion. As Robert Post suggests, "Vogel seems to be suggesting that sex roles are not necessarily fixed and that we, perhaps, make too much of them" (53). As further evidence Post reminds us that in *Mineola Twins* Vogel suggests that Sarah may be played by the same actress who plays Jim (53). Her two twins, also, are played by the same actress, because despite all the surface differences we are offered—an essential one being that one has big breasts and the other does not—breasts aside, they are less different than they suppose. It is this understanding that forms the heart of what Pellegrini describes as "the democratic promise of Vogel's theatrical vision" (481).

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