Author(iz)ing the Body

Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* and the Anatomy Texts of Andreas Vesalius

Kym Martindale

BATH SPA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

ABSTRACT Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* subverts the authority of the anatomy teaching text, and challenges its claim to objectivity, by writing to the texts of Andreas Vesalius. Vesalius, working in the late 15th century, is recognized as having set the precedent for how the anatomy of the human body is taught even today. By writing a 'lesbian body' in disarray, Wittig metaphorically topples the authority and order of the standard Vesalian (male) anatomy. By writing that body as a desiring subject, she also invites us to question the desire for knowledge and ownership of that knowledge, and the illusion of scientific objectivity. Indeed, she offers us a celebration of the subjectivity of the production of texts and identities. But in her rewriting, she must also adopt a particular subject position and guard that position from the 'wrong' interpretations. *The Lesbian Body* is then, despite its literary and political force, a text which fears the interpretive role of its reader.

KEY WORDS anatomy texts ◆ lesbian subjectivity ◆ queer theory

Monique Wittig's novel *The Lesbian Body* (Wittig, 1973) has received varying degrees of critical attention over its use and appropriations of myth (see Anderson, 1994; Chisholm, 1993; Crowder, 1983; Nelson-McDermott, 1994; Rosenfeld, 1984; Shaktini, 1981; Wenzel, 1981). The novel recognizes the importance of myth to notions of self and identity, and it focuses on rewriting those myths which have contributed substantially to the shaping of western ideas of self and the subject. These ideas have largely imagined the subject as male, and women as 'other', a presumption which is then repeatedly offered as proof of its own claim in various discourses. However, Wittig also rewrites the anatomy textbook through the poetics of lesbian desire. In doing so, she challenges two further myths upheld in the study and presentation of human anatomy: that the male body is the standard against which the female

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body is to be judged 'other'; that science arrives at such conclusions objectively.

In particular, the novel poses a serious challenge to the authority of the anatomy textbook and of the empirical body as it is proposed by western medical science. I suggest that it does so by looking back to the work of one of the first dissectionists, Andreas Vesalius, metaphorically tearing up the authorative Vesalian text to throw the empirical (male) body into disarray, and replacing his order, his anatomy and his 'body of knowledge' with disorder, a 'lesbian' anatomy and another 'body of knowledge'.

At the same time, *The Lesbian Body* also seems to look to a particular moment in literary history. It is an experiment in the poetics of desire and it celebrates, as it inscribes, the language and history of sensuality and desire as wholly lesbian. It also plays with form and narrative, fragmenting text as it fragments the body, yet constructing both a text and a body which are complete. Significantly, in all these respects, it also invokes the *blason anatomique*, a poetic genre which, at first glance, seems to eulogize its object, usually female, through, in David Norbrook's words, 'the detailed enumeration of the parts of [her] body' (Norbrook and Woudhuysen, 1992: 43). Moreover, the *blason anatomique* is a genre which, as Jonathan Sawday notes, found its fullest expression in 1543, the year in which Vesalius published his *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica* (Sawday, 1995: 195). Even supposing that *blasons* actually addressed the women they described, they would still seem to write woman as she is desired by men, and, simultaneously, silence her. Sawday argues, however, that far from addressing women, *blasons* described women but were circulated among men: the *blason* appropriated the female body both as an object of male desire, and as a vehicle for the exhibition of the male poet's wit (Sawday, 1995: 193). Similarly, the Vesalian anatomy texts, while undoubtedly furthering medical knowledge, claimed the human body as the field of Vesalius's, and other anatomists', endeavour and professional prowess.

Wittig 'blazons' the lesbian body, but her 'blazons' move democratically between her protagonist lesbian lovers; moreover, these 'blazons' are not poetic listings of attributes, but are enacted upon and by living bodies. As these lovers literally and figuratively partition each other, the lesbian is both author(iz)ed and author-ity, both the subject and object of desire. Thus, the apparent invocation of the *blason* in Wittig's text seems to place *The Lesbian Body*, and by extension, the lesbian, in literary history and in a poetic tradition which explores the erotics, not only of sexual desire, but of ownership and authority. As such, it invites us to review the desire that might lie behind the production of anatomy texts, and thus, anatomies. Sawday, as we see, accounts for the urgency which can be found in Vesalius's work, in terms of desire, but desire for knowledge of, and authority over, the body.[1] Wittig does not claim the 'lesbian' as the site of her

endeavour and poetic prowess, but Sawday's observations prompt me to question how, and if, Wittig as author, must retain ownership of her text and her 'lesbian'; for if she is to insist on this text and this body as lesbian, she might, like Vesalius, feel constrained to guard her body-text as carefully as he marks his anatomy texts.

Wittig makes important, and still radical, gestures, but the novel's overall project, the lesbianization of the subject, raises wider questions about how and why interpretations of both text and self are made and authorized. Just as both author and reader might seek to defend 'their' text against other interpretations, so the subject might defend his or her narrative of self against other tellings or readings of that self. My argument is that Wittig, as the 'Author' of this 'lesbian body', betrays an understandable anxiety to defend it against those readings which, both historically and currently, 'tell' the 'lesbian body' 'wrongly'.

Can *The Lesbian Body* then be said to uphold or challenge notions of authorial control and textual authority? In addition, given the novel's concern with a specific sexual identity, what questions might it raise about ourselves as authors of our own identity narratives, sexual and otherwise, which we can, perhaps, only offer, not dictate? *The Lesbian Body* is at pains to define the lesbian on, and in (its own) terms, and so cannot afford to relinquish its authority. In poststructuralist and queer discourses, this might be seen as a failure to question the constitution of identity, and the basis for such authority. Rather than criticize the novel's position, however, I see that it highlights a tension which troubles debates about the authenticity of the subject, and the adoption of a non-hegemonic subject position such as lesbian. As Moira Gatens observes, 'If the human subject is an effect of its structural position, on what basis does political action rest?' (Gatens, 1991: 110). It is necessary to accord political agency the reality of the experience which prompts that action, but, possibly, this experience, too, can be overprivileged, and other versions of that experience then overlooked.

The novel also questions the interpretive role of the reader, who, in this case, possibly threatens the author's version of lesbian? *The Lesbian Body* recognizes the subject's vulnerability to interpretation, and hence definition by others, since it seeks to rescue the lesbian from that very fate. In doing so, however, it runs the risk of speaking to, more than with, the reader. The strategy which heightens this effect, while it is a powerful and justifiable one, is the, albeit poetic, reshaping of those specifically pedagogic texts, the anatomy textbooks of Vesalius. It is this strategy that I now address in detail.

The study of human anatomy is carried out and presented as objective, but Wittig's rewriting of the anatomy textbook reveals that ideologies operate here too (Chisholm, 1993: 197). It has been, and perhaps remains, difficult for medical science to acknowledge the sociocultural factors

which cannot help but shape its understandings of the body. Thomas Laqueur has argued, for example, that the early-modern anatomists continued to see and represent women's anatomy as Galen of Pergamon advised 1300 years earlier: 'Turn outward the woman's, turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man's [genital] organs, and you will find the same in both in every respect' (Laqueur, 1990: 25).

In broad terms, the medical profession had looked to Galen, or more specifically his texts, for knowledge and understanding of the body, until, in the mid-1500s, the practice of human dissection offered an empirical approach (Sarton, 1954: 90–1).[2] At this point, the site of authority became, in some sense, the body itself (Laqueur, 1990: 70; Sawday, 1995: 64–6). By this I mean that leading anatomists, such as Andreas Vesalius, cited their dissected corpses rather than Galen's texts; in reality, authority over the 'medical body' remained firmly with the one who gazed into it, and then displayed it by teaching or writing it, that is, the anatomist. Moreover, the empirical study of the body served initially to confirm the 'truth' of Galen's model: as Laqueur puts it, the more bodies that the anatomists dissected, 'the more powerfully and convincingly they saw [the woman's body] to be a version of the male's' (Laqueur, 1990: 70). A famous example of such 'seeing' is Vesalius's uncannily penis-like diagram of the womb (Saunders and O'Malley, 1950: 170–1).[3]

The last two centuries have seen an extensive challenge to the perception of masculinity as the naturally superior state of being; but the idea of the male as standard and female as 'other' still prevails in some anatomy textbooks which, overall, purport to present 'established "facts" in dispassionate form' (Petersen, 1998: 3). As Petersen notes, 'one cannot help but be struck by the consistency with which the male body has been fabricated and posited as the standard or norm' (Petersen, 1998: 3). His survey cites various instances of such privileging of the male body, and they are not confined to the genitals or reproductive organs. For example, the adult female skull 'has been consistently described . . . as being 'light*er* and small*er*' and retaining more "infantile" . . . or "childlike characteristics" than that of the male' (Petersen, 1998: 11; emphasis added).[4] The problem here is not that there are differences, but the qualitative manner in which they are announced. Throughout the history of medical discourse, as Margrit Shildrick (whose own survey produces similar results to Petersen's) observes, women's anatomy 'has served to ground the devaluation of women by men' (Shildrick, 1997: 14).

However, the pervasiveness of this 'othering' of the female body, as Shildrick notes, is not the result of bad science or poor observation; it is rather that each instance 'express[es] the truth of [its] age' as each age fails to see that its truth is also culturally situated (Shildrick, 1997: 14). The body as a stable and fixed given, untouched by cultural and / or historical significations is, as Shildrick, Petersen, Sawday and Laqueur argue, a

myth (although this may only be the 'truth' of our own age).[5] Their arguments, which do not dismiss the biology of body, query a particular mode of perception. They sever fact from explanation, and alert us, if I might paraphrase Roland Barthes here, to the ideologies which have naturalized this particular myth (1993: 129). Up to a point, *The Lesbian Body* is a literary attempt to do the same.

The number of features which *The Lesbian Body* shares with a real anatomy text is striking, but my analysis of these features is not a reductive endeavour. As I noted earlier, Wittig rewrites not only the anatomy textbook but the poetics of desire, and this combined rewriting offers a powerful critique of the myth of scientific objectivity. Alan Petersen describes anatomy texts as intending to be 'authoritative sources . . . on the make-up and workings of the "the body" ' which objectively 'construct *simplified and universalized* models of sexed bodies, abstracted from cultural and historical contexts' (Petersen, 1998: 3; emphasis added). Similarly, *The Lesbian Body* simplifies and universalizes the material body, emphasizing its constituent parts at the expense of individuality, and creating a body-self which is transhistorical and public. It also contests the authority of the conventional anatomy text which resides with its (male) author first, and in the text and the body second; *The Lesbian Body* endeavours to resite that authority by proposing the lesbian as the 'author' of her own anatomy, as the subject who anatomizes, maps and names her body-self.[6] At this juncture, the novel radically departs from the anatomy textbook, since, far from being objective, it celebrates its subjectivity through its poetry; in doing so, it offers an ironic comment on the anatomy textbook's failure to recognize its own subjectivity.

Dianne Chisholm agrees that *The Lesbian Body* parodies the anatomy text, its radical strategy being, for her, that it 'emblazons the names of all the parts of the female body . . . with little respect for the classical androcentrism . . . of anatomical taxonomy' (Chisholm, 1993: 197). Citing Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and carnival, she argues that *The Lesbian Body* draws on 'the image of the carnivalesque or grotesque body of medieval and Renaissance world literature' in order to subvert 'canonical formations of the body (politic)' (Chisholm, 1993: 204), and, one might add, the body poetic. Chisholm, then, also observes an energy and use of imagery in the novel which refer to the Renaissance, but for her, the 'lesbian body' revels in its grotesqueness and remains parodic of the anatomy text in its refusal to cease becoming (Chisholm, 1993: 209).[7] *The Lesbian Body* goes beyond parody: it wants to establish the 'lesbian' as a serious historical and cultural force. Consequently, it might appropriate the Renaissance as a certain point in the history of the body and of the self for its purpose, but it must also appropriate the authority of that history. Broadly speaking, the Renaissance was a period of geographical and anatomical discovery, and we see in the practice of anatomization, the

intensification of the gaze into the body. This is the gaze which will map and name that interior, but these discoveries were related to a concern with cosmic and political order and harmony, which the body's interior would reflect or confirm (Norbrook and Woudhuysen, 1992: 9–11; Sawday, 1995: 143). *The Lesbian Body*, as it maps the lesbian anatomy, also maps the lesbian body-politic and the lesbian body-poetic, and creates a universe with the lesbian as its cultural and historical force.

In this respect, the anatomy texts of Vesalius are particularly relevant to Wittig's purpose. Vesalius is commonly recognized as the pioneer of dissection, and most importantly, as the first anatomist to draw and describe the body so precisely. His textbooks were intended as pedagogic devices to enable his readers (medical students and professionals) to dissect and 'recreate' the human body; as such, their layout, method and precision have largely set the precedent of the study and presentation of human anatomy ever since. Moreover, Vesalius's texts mapped the body as it had never been seen, his texts are texts of discovery. L.R. Lind calls them atlases, and emphasizes the innovative use of language necessary to their purpose (Lind, 1949: xxiv). It seems apposite then, for Wittig's text to return to this moment in order to claim both language and body as lesbian, but these claims have to be protected, and I see Wittig's lesbian body as one which does aspire to be 'finished' as lesbian. There are several signs of closure, as I show, which contain and complete this body. Even the continuous disintegration becomes, in its persistence, a mark of stasis rather than fluidity, and Wittig's disorder, becomes, in its repetition, ritualistic.

The capitalized 'anatomy' of the novel exemplifies the arguments outlined earlier. Announced and concluded as 'THE LESBIAN BODY', it details the female body in 11 chunks of upper-case text. These appear separate from, but alongside, the prose narratives:

> THE LESBIAN BODY THE JUICE THE SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE SNOT THE SWEAT THE TEARS THE WAX THE URINE THE FAECES THE EXCREMENTS. (Wittig, 1975: 28)

This is a living anatomy, secreting and excreting, a scatological, almost Rabelaisian, mockery of the Vesalian anatomy, especially if we see these blocks of print as the equivalent to the illustrations in an anatomy textbook. For like the diagrams in Vesalius's (or any other instructive) work, Wittig's 'anatomy' punctures an already fragmented, and fragmenting, text with an impact that is both visual and vocal. The relentlessness of upper-case typeface, the repetition of 'THE . . . THE . . . THE . . .' seem to bellow at the reader and hit the senses like visual blows. Her anatomy is both impossible to ignore yet difficult to hear or read, didactic and imposing, aggressive in its authority and disorder. (And Wittig must

raise her voice to be heard in those discourses that refuse the lesbian subject.) As Chisholm observes (after Bakhtin), the novel offers a 'revel of categories' which throws into disarray the careful, methodical illustrations of the anatomy text, especially as they appear in the Vesalian text (Chisholm, 1993: 199). Here, order is paramount, beautiful and calm in its precision and authority. In the *Epitome*, for example, descriptions of the body are unbroken by paragraphs, headed by illuminated capitals, lending a scriptural appearance to the text. This linguistic detailing of the body is followed separately by illustrative plates of the body in various stages of dissection; each plate carries a numbered list of body parts corresponding to numbers inscribed all over the anatomized figures. Each muscle, ligament, organ and bone is mapped; but this is not simply a display of the 'body'. It is also an exhibition of knowledge, of Vesalius's expertise, and its authority means to extend beyond its pages.

The plates of the *Epitome* include further diagrams of isolated anatomical features, also numbered, which the reader/student is encouraged to cut out and superimpose on to the main illustrations. There is, in this device, an expectation about how the reader will receive the text, and it is an expectation which is echoed, albeit for different reasons, in Wittig's novel. Both Vesalius and Wittig define a 'body' which they will 'teach', and both seek to topple a previous 'teaching' authority: Vesalius, as Lind points out, dismisses Galen by scarcely mentioning him in the *Epitome* (Lind, 1949: xxv), while Wittig's project is to dismantle the authority of Vesalius and the myth of the empirical body of medical discourse. Thus, her chaotic and desiring lesbian body displaces the order of the standard asexual (male) body. Significantly, too, Wittig's anatomy mentions the womb once, and then only towards the end of the eighth section (Wittig, 1975: 115). The vulva and the vagina, meanwhile, are referred to three times, while the clitoris features at various points in the prose narratives. This is a female body absorbed by its own sexiness. The word vagina is particularly resonant since at the time of Vesalius, the word did not properly exist (Laqueur, 1990: 96–7, and notes 59–62 for Chapter III; Saunders and O'Malley, 1950: 170–1). The point of difference between the sexes at that time, and the focus of female anatomy specifically, was the uterus, the site of reproduction. Wittig's lesbian, lewd and noble by turns, defies the Vesalian anatomy by glorying in sensuality for its own sake. But like the Vesalian text, the novel offers a body that is universal: its protagonists are nameless or mythical types, and defined only by, and within, their physical desire for each other. Both texts, then, challenge a historical version of the universal body to offer their own.

Wittig's lovers further mock the anatomized Vesalian figures in how they inhabit their world. The latter maintain attitudes which seem, initially, to be those of the living. They stride about the countryside, lean

against trees, they (almost comically) ape soldiers, standing boldly with parts of their cranium held lightly, like a helmet, against a thigh, they gesticulate towards the sky, themselves or the onlooker. They seem far from corpse-like, but neither do they 'live'. Their bodies are flayed, muscles are draped and suspended from limbs, organs displayed as their host rolls back his skin. They are both violated, and yet violators of the boundaries between life and death, of the body itself (Sawday, 1995: 114–16). The protagonists of *The Lesbian Body* wander through pastoral and urban landscapes in a similarly fantastic manner: '*I* see you abreast of the rounded bulk in the middle of the cornfield the wild rosebush assuredly laden with red flowers visible in broad daylight. Contrariwise *I* see you suddenly above the sea where you stay motionless' (Wittig, 1975: 49); 'm/y eyeballs start from their orbits. *I* bend down repeatedly to pick them up groping in the sand' (Wittig, 1975: 52); 'Your body is spread still warm bleeding over the entire surface of the ploughed field' (Wittig, 1975: 113); '*I* see the sun shining between your ribs. The sky of an intense blue is also visible in certain intervals of their arrangement. . . . Had *I* to come here thousands of times *I* should still run to the bend in the path from which *I* can see your skeleton all white lying on the hilltop' (Wittig, 1975: 155).

Both the Vesalian and the Wittigian figures can be seen as grotesque and yet classical. Each text offers bodies which should be dead but which 'live' in a perpetual state of fragmentation, existing in a state of change that is, somehow, arrested. But there are important differences. The Vesalian figures thwart bodily corruption, but they are, in their strangeness, figures of liminality, and as such, inhabit wilderness surroundings. They seem exiled from civilization. Yet, their poses are also highly stylized, and their settings mannered in such a way as to invoke a 'high' culture which is both overtly religious in its concerns, and which looks to classical antiquity for its cultural authority. This, Sawday argues, has a twofold intention: the anatomized bodies' display of themselves signals a collusion in their own disintegration, thereby absolving the anatomist from accusations of physical violation; that they do so in these deliberately iconographic settings, signals an attempt to raise a disreputable and profane practice to professional medical status and religious acceptability. In other words, the Vesalian figures claim a place for dissection in the civilized world (Sawday, 1995).

The protagonists of *The Lesbian Body* are also part of an attempt to gain entry into the cultural establishment, but, as Chisholm demonstrates, through a grotesque parody and *dis*ordering of that culture. Thus, Wittig's figures scrabble about in the sand for lost body parts, or spread each other's intestines about; they fight and have frenzied sex, they gobble and expectorate each other. The lovers persistently violate, not only each other, a democratizing gesture, but also notions of where desire should

begin and end, and who should desire whom. The grotesqueness of their actions then mocks the hegemonic view of the lesbian herself as grotesque. As Chisholm argues, Wittig 'deploys her lesbian grotesque against canonical idealizations' (such as those which the Vesalian figures invoke), and furthermore, against '*all representations of the female body* such as are drawn in opposition . . . to the universally standard male body' (Chisholm, 1993: 211). The problem is that *The Lesbian Body*'s principle of repeated chaos, disintegration and dismemberment also normalizes the grotesque body. Of course, this is, at one level, the novel's radical project, to bring the lesbian to the centre by erasing the lesbian as 'other'. But there is also a danger that Wittig's universal lesbian body becomes a 'canonical idealization' of that oppositional body. Thus, lesbian subjectivity and / or identity is still defined and prescribed in opposition to heterosexuality, and by an authority, in this case Wittig, other than lesbian subjects themselves.

Canonization seals and protects a 'body' against claims upon it concerning ownership, and, by extension, desire. The desire to know and own one's body-self is expressed in terms of sexual desire in Wittig's novel, and the persona of the Wittigian lesbian is, first and foremost, that of lover. But equally urgent is the desire to claim a place and / or a voice in history, in civilization. Vesalius too, as a pioneer of dissection, was compelled to establish his voice in medical discourses. The desire that moved him was professional, but this, in its urgency, echoes the eroticism of sexual desire. The anatomy texts themselves suppress, rather than express, his excitement which is found in private accounts, but it is intriguing to compare the objectivity of the official Vesalian voice with the openly desiring voices of both *The Lesbian Body* and Vesalius offguard. In the novel, the prose equivocates to those parts of the Vesalian textbook which describe the 'universal' human anatomy, but Wittig blazons the lesbian anatomy via the lesbian lovers. Her poetics can therefore admit the desire which the professional Vesalius erases, but which the private Vesalius cannot hide: the desire to own, to author, to define this 'body'.

In the following passage, Wittig's protagonist is being vivisected. That she, the protagonist, narrates the procedure recalls again the conceit of the Vesalian figures' collusion in their dissection. The response of 'I' to the touch of 'you' is, however, expressed in sensual terms:

> Outside the weather is damnable, your hands promptly operate on m / e. The scalpel deftly manipulated by your adorable hands has detached retracted the muscles. *I* am a spider's web of nerves exactly resembling the drawings of the anatomy texts . . . you fiddle insanely with m / e with the very tips of your fingers, *I* am touched in m / y brachial nerves m / y circumflexes m / y ulnars m / y radials m / y terminal branches, *I* insist on telling you all that that's where it's most exquisite. (Wittig, 1975: 60–1)

Compare this with Vesalius's description of a similar anatomical feature:

> The first nerve which seeks the arm sends from its own offshoots to the muscle which raise the arm a very slender shoot to the skin covering the external region of the arm . . . it runs under the skin and, divided into various offshoots, it intermingles with the skin of the superior and internal region of the forearm as far as the hand. (Lind, 1949: 71–2)

Both texts use the present tense and their detail is exhaustive; Wittig's 'I' relates her dissection, yet even the Vesalian corpse seems alive as nerves 'send . . . hasten . . . impart'. We are invited to gaze into a body at work, a further echo of the body's participation in its partitioning. In the novel, this collusion becomes reciprocated desire, and in 'you' and 'I', the anatomist is always openly present. Wittig foregrounds the desire that Vesalius only expresses privately. In his quest for the 'body', Vesalius needed real cadavers and was prepared to risk his life to acquire them. In one account, he describes smuggling home part of an executed felon from the gibbet, and his return for the remaining parts later at night. He is 'burning with so great a desire . . . that I was not afraid in the middle of the night to snatch what I so longed for' (cited in Sawday, 1995: 196). He succeeds in his enterprise over several days, and from those body parts 'construct[s] that skeleton which is preserved at Louvain' (Sawday, 1995: 196).

Sawday's analysis of this account detects a passion and urgency which verges on the erotic, emphasizing the intensity of the desire to know, and to be the one who possesses both the knowledge and the object known. For the body which Vesalius craves is not the cadaver, but the scientifically mapped human anatomy, and his production of that body is narrated here. He reconstructs the skeleton in a public domain, but it is *his*, authored by him. His textbooks, the *Fabrica* and the *Epitome* are the textual equivalents of such reconstructions, and authorities towards further reconstructions by his readers, always 'overseen' by Vesalius. In this sense, the energy and power of Vesalius's desire finally divorces the body from (its)self to become an inert exhibition of the anatomist's skill, authority and expertise. But that desire remains a covert impulse in the anatomy textbook, its chief expression being found on the title pages, as I show later.

The protagonists of *The Lesbian Body* exist solely in a state of sexual longing for each other, but this desire is politically complex. First, by granting her lovers joint authorship of their bodies, Wittig seems to return agency to the lesbian body specifically, and by implication, to the body and self in general. Her text revives the inert, dissected cadaver from object, to become the body as subject. Second, the protagonists' shared authority over their bodies throws awry the conventional relationship

between anatomist and corpse. However, I argue that Wittig also upholds the anatomist's authority, albeit unintentionally: like the early-modern anatomists, 'you' and 'I' map the body, reinscribing it as female and lesbian. There remains a hierarchy, though it is reversed, of gender and sexual identity. Both the desire for and the importance of the anatomist's authority are recognized and claimed by Wittig, but they are now employed to privilege the lesbian subject.

Finally, although a notional self is re-embodied in Wittig's text, *The Lesbian Body* must refuse this body-self any individuality since it proposes a universal lesbian subject. Like the Vesalian skeleton, this is then a body and self-constructed in the public domain, and like Vesalius, Wittig the Author presides over this body, this self and this text. Consequently, the democratizing gestures which leave the lovers unnamed and co-authors of their narrative, are troubled by Wittig's 'presence' as their 'Authority'. For, again like Vesalius, Wittig 'heads' her text with an 'Author's Note' (Wittig, 1975: 9–11), in which she summarizes the novel's intent and meaning.[8] Her tone is instructional, and she states the project of *The Lesbian Body* rather than trusting the reader to infer the project.

The presence of the anatomist in the early-modern texts was problematic, for if it was too stated, it invited accusations of religious and physical violation. Yet, the anatomist cannot be entirely absent from a text in which he pioneers and displays his knowledge. In both the *Fabrica* and the *Epitome*, Vesalius is depicted carrying out a dissection on the title page, and he prefaces the latter text with a direct address to the reader (Lind, 1949: xxxi–xxxxiii; Saunders and O'Malley, 1950: plates 93–96). His voice then presides over this text and the body it produces. In some sense, Wittig must also be present to ensure that 'her' lesbian is produced, that her text is read and understood as she intends.

In *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man argues that such prefaces can be seen as the 'site of contest for textual mastery and authority' (de Man, 1979: 296). The universality of the lesbian subject is compromised, however, if this author, in 'heading' the text, also 'heads' the lesbian body. This is, perhaps, inevitable: both Wittig and Vesalius, in their urgency to undo old orders, cannot afford query without an assured answer, and must replace the certainties they sweep away with new certainties. They are almost forced to stamp these new certainties with their author-ity, but it means that the lesbian which Wittig proposes, is finally, Wittigian rather than universal.

CONCLUSION

The Lesbian Body remains a paradox in terms of how, precisely, it breaks with western orthodoxies concerning notions of the self and the subject. It

continues to challenge masculinist and heterosexist assumptions at work in most discourses, and by installing the lesbian at the heart of those discourses, gives us the symbolic lesbian as a clearly sexual and autonomous subject. However, the normative as a principle is not, in itself, challenged, rather it is reversed. This does not mitigate the novel's radical project, nor its poetic effect, but it offers a closed world of lesbian-only. It is in its non-plurality that the novel lets us down, because there lies in its closures, fear: fear of beings other than lesbian, and the fear of being narrated, and therefore, of narrative over which the narrator has no control. The towering force of the novel is that it recognizes with absolute clarity how we create and construct ourselves, and most importantly, others as self. But its intent to write the lesbian large in cultural history also means that it must protect that lesbian subject. The Wittigian lesbian self speaks to be heard and understood as it intends; likewise, the Wittigian text seeks to be read and understood as it intends. In other words, the text and the 'author' remain the point at which meaning is to be found, rather than the beginning of the reader's own narrative.

NOTES

1. This is not to say that Vesalius, and medicine and science in general, are not motivated by the will to benefit humankind.
2. George Sarton claims that Galen's authority extended, in the West, even into the 1700s, his name being synonymous with medicine. His authority, which was textual, was defended against that of the empiricists by practising physicians for at least two centuries after the study of anatomy focused on the human body itself.
3. Interestingly, while other later commentators such as Laqueur, Sawday and Margrit Shildrick cite this diagram as an example of cultural blindness, Saunders and O'Malley ascribe the penile appearance to the hurried manner in which Vesalius had to dissect and draw the organ. They also refer to the comment which its resemblance to the male organ has excited: 'some have called it "monstrous" and others have implied that a Freudian quirk in the author [Vesalius] had resulted in its assuming a resemblance to the male organ'. I cite this as an instance of how our analyses of this diagram reflect our varying concerns.
4. Petersen is citing a range of editions of *Gray's Anatomy* here, from 1918 to 1995. See also p. 6 in the same article where he cites the 1995 edition, in which the 'female pathway' (of gene activity) is described as the 'default pathway' while the 'master switch' is to be found in males.
5. Sawday et al.'s arguments echo Judith Butler's premise in *Bodies that Matter* (Butler, 1992).
6. The ownership of self as expressed through autonomy over one's body features heavily in the practice and politics of dissection. Jonathan Sawday details how dissection was, for centuries in Britain, an extension of capital punishment. The horror of posthumous partitioning sits strangely, however, when considered alongside such medieval practices as the veneration of

alleged saints' remains, and voluntary dispersed burial which was popular amongst the nobility in the 1200s to 1400s. It would seem that the issue is not only what happens to the body after death, but also a concern with status and control of the post-mortem self whose fate resides in the material body.

7. Chisholm seems then to oppose Namascar Shaktini's suggestion that Wittig's 'lesbian body' is in flight from its status as grotesque.
8. I refer specifically to the English translation here, since there is no 'Author's Note' in the original French version.

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Kym Martindale *recently gained her doctorate at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, and is currently a lecturer in English and Creative Studies at Bath Spa University College, as well as an associate lecturer in Literature for the Open University. Recent research interests cover the construction of identity through narrative with particular reference to the sexual self. She plans to research representations of Australian identity in the work of Peter Carey, but also has an interest in New Age rhetoric, its historical and literary antecedents, and its role in constructions of spiritual identity. Address: 19 Claverton Village, Bath BA2 7BQ, UK.*
[email: k.martindale@bathspa.ac.uk or *kym.martindale@waterstonesonline.co.uk]*

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