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"In Control … Under Control"

Not I, *Sexual Trauma, and Rape Play*

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Abstract

Allusions to gendered violence and sexual assault in Samuel Beckett's works raise difficult questions in today's classroom and theatre auditoria. So too does the physical subjugation that Beckett's female actors often endure on stage. How far might our post-#MeToo sensibilities usefully inform our reading of instances of gendered subjugation and sexualised violence in Beckett's theatre? This article focuses on *Not I* as a playtext that combines intimations of sexual assault with a history of female actors suffering physically in performance. It uses the lens of rape play—enacted for therapeutic value within the BDSM community for sexual assault survivors—to read *Not I* as an embodied trauma narrative, and to open up discussion of forms of coercion and consent in Beckett's work.

Résumé

Les allusions à la violence sexualisée et l'agression sexuelle dans les textes de Samuel Beckett soulèvent des questions difficiles en classe et dans les théâtres aujourd'hui, tout comme le sujet de la sujétion physique que subissent ses actrices. Jusqu'à quel point nos sensibilités post #MeToo façonnent-elles notre interprétation des cas de sujétion sexualisée and de violence sexuelle dans le théâtre de Beckett ? Cet article étudie les suggestions d'agression sexuelle dlans e texte de *Pas moi* en lien avec la souffrance physique des actrices qui jouent le rôle de Bouche. J'utilise le cadre théorique du 'rape play' ou 'viol théâtralisé', utilisé dans la communauté BDSM auprès de certaines victimes de violences sexuelles pour sa valeur thérapeutique, afin de lire *Pas moi* comme le récit d'un traumatisme inscrit dans le corps et pour ouvrir le débat sur des formes de contrainte et de consentement présentes dans l'œuvre de Beckett.

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Keywords

Not I – trauma – rape – sexual violence – women – consent

Content Warning

This paper deals with allusions to sexual trauma in the play *Not I*, to rape play practice in a psychosexual therapy context, and to therapy testimony from rape survivors. There is no graphic description of sexual assault itself.

The intimations of gendered violence and sexual assault in Samuel Beckett's works raise difficult questions in the contemporary classroom. Sensitivity to sexual violence and coercion has intensified following the viral explosion of the #MeToo movement in 2017 and revelations of sexual assault by major figures in the performing arts world, including Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, actor Kevin Spacey, and former Abbey and Gate Theatre director Michael Colgan. In regard to staging Beckett's work, Trish McTighe has written eloquently about the need to consider how "art is complicit in the maintenance of gendered systems of power," calling attention to how often "our participation in the process of making, critiquing and consuming art is marked by a tacit acceptance of moral compromise" (32, 20). This is a compromise that many are inclined to resist. Increasingly, I find students preoccupied by textual moments such as Winnie's narration of the 'mouse' that runs up the child Mildred's thigh in *Happy Days*, the Animator's leering over the female stenographer and his insistence that she kiss the prisoner in *Rough for Radio II*, and the description of Joe's relationship with the green-eyed young woman before her suicide in *Eh Joe*: "You've had her, haven't you? … You've laid her? … Of course he has … She went young … No more old lip from her …" (Beckett 2006, 365). Students find their own experiences of sexual harassment and violence reflected here, and discussions about the relative significance of these textual moments often arise as a result.[1] Are these texts 'about' sexual violence and issues of consent in some

1 This is, of course, not a response confined to the undergraduate population. Given the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in everyday life, many of us will inevitably find our own experiences echoed here. Recent estimates of sexual violence figures suggest that up to one in two women will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lives (one in four while at college or university), and 13–19% of women and 2–3% of men will be raped. These figures do not include the inestimable numbers of sexual assault cases that go unreported each

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meaningful way? Or are these instances no more than disconcertingly casual punchlines? I recognise much of what Megan Quigley describes of her experience of teaching high-modernist literature to what she calls "the #MeToo generation", and its plethora of texts in which "brutality against women seems a side note, a plot device": "My students who live in the age of Donald Trump and Brett Kavanaugh, however, are often enraged, and, insistently, they are taking me to task for my blind spots" (n.p.). Why, my own students ask me, is there not more critical discussion of consent, coercion, and these troubling moments of sexualised violence in Beckett scholarship? And how far, I ask myself in turn, might our post-#MeToo sensibilities usefully inform a reading of these scenes?

Closely aligned to the issue of sexual violence evoked in Beckett's scripts is the associated question of the physical pain and apparent subjugation that Beckett's actors, and particularly his female actors, often endure on stage. "Every damn play of Beckett's that I do involves some sort of physically or mentally excruciating experience," actor Billie Whitelaw has remarked, recalling, "With *Footfalls*, it was physically excruciating to maintain the posture required," and in … *but the clouds* …, "I had to keep my eyes open without blinking. Now I have weak eyes. Those hellish lights. It was terrible" (1992, 5, 9). Similarly, Irene Worth (Kalb, 147) and Juliet Stevenson (n.p.) have both testified to the injuries they suffered in performance due to the bodily restrictions demanded by the *Happy Days* script. *Not I*, in which the actor playing Mouth is typically strapped down to keep her mouth clearly in the spotlight, has become particularly infamous for the distress that it causes its female performers. Ruth Geller remembers, "I suffered physically and mentally" (Levy, 145), Billie Whitelaw called it the "most painful" of all Beckett's plays to perform (1992, 9), and Lisa Dwan describes the blood left on the stage set each night during her run (Lane, n.p.). Citing her own short-lived rehearsals of *Not I*—before she withdrew from the role—actor Joy Coghill-Thorne goes so far as to assert, "I believe that is wrong … to be used that way … […] I think [Beckett] went too far and this is a form of torture" (Levy, 141). This intense disciplining of the female actor's body chimes disquietingly with what McTighe describes as the "everyday abuses of power and compromises with authority [which] are eclipsed in the moment of the theatrical event" (32), and theatre and human rights scholar Gay Gibson Cima has criticised how Beckett's female actors so often "suffer unusual physical pain in staging the playwright's vision of women" (220).

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year. See Breiding 2015 and Spitzberg 1999 for twenty-first and twentieth-century estimations respectively of sexual violence, and Rutherford 2017 for particular attention to sexual assault on university and college campuses.

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As with other claims regarding Beckett's allegedly tyrannical nature as playwright and director, there is much that needs to be nuanced in discussions of the pain that Beckett's female actors undergo. Beckett's male actors, for example, also often suffer as a result of the scripts' demands—Whitelaw herself cites David Warrilow's agony in performing *A Piece of Monologue*, for example (1992, 9)—and I ask my students to consider why we are so affronted by suggestions of actors enduring bodily pain when we routinely accept the physical suffering of other professional performers such as dancers and elite athletes as an occupational necessity. Notwithstanding these caveats, however, we are still left facing the irreducible fact that scripts such as *Happy Days*, *Not I*, *… but the clouds …* and *Footfalls* ask that their female actors do a certain bodily violence to themselves on stage. As Paul Stewart notes, "if such suffering is to be staged, then the body of the actor may become the site of suffering. The forms of sadism [that we find in Beckett's prose] take on a more embodied, and so possibly more troubling, actuality within the theatre" (183). As one student half-jokingly put it, "People have been cancelled for less."

This article works from the basis that we can learn much from our students' responses to Beckett's work, particularly with regard to moments of apparently gendered or sexualised violence and coercion. However, we need to properly interrogate loaded and contextually specific terms such as 'sadist', 'torture', 'consent', and 'subjugation' when dealing with both fictionalised texts and actual performance practice. Scholars have already begun to explore how Beckettian performance foregrounds alternative modes of agency that arise directly from the playscripts' framing of discipline and compulsion.[2] Developing this discussion with a particular eye to sexualised violence, coercion and consent, this article focuses on *Not I* as a playtext that combines allusion to sexual violence with a history of female actors suffering physically in performance. I use the lens of rape play, enacted for therapeutic value within the BDSM community[3] and psychosexual therapy more broadly for sexual assault survivors, in order to read *Not I* as an embodied trauma narrative and to tease out questions of coercion and consent as they apply to Beckett's work.

2 See, for example, Dennis, Johnson, Simpson, and particularly Preston 223–242.

3 The acronym 'BDSM' combines a shifting constellation of associated terms: bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism or sadomasochism. See Barker, Iantaffi and Gupta, 106.

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1 *Not I* as Trauma Narrative

That there are sexual undertones to Beckett's *Not I* is no longer an original claim. Many scholars have noted the visual parallels between Mouth and the vagina, particularly in the 1976 BBC film version.[4] The script itself alludes to sexual practice both explicitly, as in Mouth's tale of her father leaving her mother "no sooner having buttoned up his breeches" (Beckett 2006, 376), or more implicitly, in the recurrent image of the "godforsaken hole" or Mouth's memory of "the odd time … in her life … when clearly intended to be having pleasure … she was in fact … having none" (376–377, 381–382). Beyond the relatively common identification of the generalised sexual elements in *Not I*, however, we also find specific resonances of sexual assault and trauma. There has already been some speculation as to the suggestion of rape in the script. The play's first actor Jessica Tandy and director Alan Schneider both came to the conclusion that Mouth had been raped after their first readings of the play, to Beckett's distress (Beckett 2016, 305; Knowlson, 591). Enoch Brater sees "an ominous sexual assault" in Mouth's description of her distress lying "face down in the grass" (Beckett 2006, 381, 382), noting sardonically that "Beckett said he was not thinking of a rape scene, though his text seems to think otherwise" (45). Lois Oppenheim (196), Sandra Wynands (103), and Daniel Albright (6) have all speculated likewise.

Rather than trying to argue for an explicit interpretation of rape in *Not I*, however, I suggest that it is enough that we recognise the recurrent hints of sexual trauma and trauma symptomology in both script and staging mechanics, in order to read *Not I* as a trauma narrative. The psychoanalyst Dori Laub offers a description of trauma testimony in the therapy context that reads like an account of *Not I* itself:

> The pressure to testify is like an instinct. There's an urgency to deal with the experience, to shape it, to make it happen, and it's like something is born. And survivors definitely have the pressure to do so. They need appropriate circumstances—a totally present listener who creates the holding space for them to do it. But once they find it, they really allow it to come. And it comes out with a force. They don't want to stop. And sometimes even when you try to let them know that you have to keep to a timetable, they disregard you until you say it several times. There is a force to have it happen.
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4 See, for example, Bryden 117–120, and Wilson 195–199.

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Not I's frenetic pace and angry assertions certainly replicate this "pressure," this "urgency" or "force" that Laub ascribes to the trauma testimony, and the scripting of the Auditor offers a "present listener" whose own interruptions are, in turn, disregarded. Mouth's testimony is also intensely reminiscent of trauma symptomology in other ways. Trauma psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk describes how trauma memory is often constituted of "isolated fragments of experience," sensory imprints lacking linear narrative coherency which, even after "years of apparent forgetting," can suddenly intrude into the present "where they are literally relived" in somatic re-enactment (2015, 40, 174, 66). Likewise, Mouth continues to repeat, to relive, a fragmented version of her own unspecified trauma, "dragging up the past … flashes from all over," prompted by some apparent environmental trigger: "always winter some strange reason" (Beckett 2006, 380, 382). Another widely recognised trauma symptom is dissociation (Herman, 44–46), the splitting or evasion of selfhood that permits a self-defensive bracketing of the traumatic event as though it occurred to someone else—"Not I! … She!" (Beckett 2006, 377)—which Jonathan Boulter has linked to Mouth's "wish to deny a connection to her own story" (73). Sexual trauma frequently triggers somatic dissociation in the victim, and Mouth's bodily numbing mimics many accounts of rape survivors: "feeling so dulled," "so disconnected," "like numbed" (Beckett 2006, 377–378). *Not I* replicates much of the common symptomology of trauma, and of sexual trauma specifically.

Mouth's verbal drive to "piece it together […] make some sense of it" is also significant here (Beckett 2006, 380). Given the repetitive and fragmented nature of post-trauma memory, treatment typically involves 'narrativising' the incident: helping the survivor to make sense of what happened to them, and to understand it as a past event rather than a continuously re-lived ordeal. Trauma psychiatrist Judith Herman emphatically prioritises the process of "reconstructing the trauma story" so that "the patient is able to assemble the fragmented recollections into a coherent testimony", as crucial to the survivor's recovery (3, 182). Herman's practitioner-based explanation is unwittingly paraphrased by Beckett scholar Rosemary Pountney when she argues that in *Not I*, "the implication is that if this something is told, all will become clear. […] If Mouth could recognise that she is telling her own story, it is possible that she too would be allowed to stop repeating it" (47, 123). Yet, as closely as *Not I* parallels the trauma 'talking therapy', it crucially does not represent or even suggest the *success* of such treatment. We do not see Mouth achieving a comprehensible and healing narrativising of her experience. Rather, her fragmented recount begins again at the end of the performance.[5] Moreover, Mouth denies even the

5 See Tranter 2018, 113–128, for a fuller discussion of how *Not I* problematises the 'working-

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possibility of such healing. It is, she says, "nothing she could tell … nothing she could think" that will bring an end to her torment (Beckett 2006, 382). No neatly narrativised version of her traumatic experience is within reach, or promises an end to Mouth's suffering.

2 *Not I* and Rape Play

The emphatic failure of any verbalised resolution to Mouth's plight highlights just how insistently *Not I* presents an *embodied* trauma narrative, inscribed upon and continuing to disorder the survivor's very body. Van der Kolk underlines the crucially embodied nature of much trauma memory itself: "Trauma is stored as physical sensation in the body. You can talk all you want, and testify all you want, but until the internal wounds inside you have healed, that testimony may just tear you up" (2014, 167). It is precisely this felt need for an embodied form of therapy, a therapy that reaches and realigns the somatic experience of trauma, that has led some sexual assault survivors to turn to rape play as a means of post-trauma healing, a form of erotic role-play popular within the BDSM community in which consenting partners enact the illusion of rape. Thus we move to the question of rape play, an embodied therapy for sexual trauma survivors, as a lens for exploring issues of trauma, subjugation and consent in *Not I*.

The mechanics of *Not I*'s staging strikingly suggest BDSM practice, and more specifically bondage play. The parallels are both visual and psychological. The widely distributed backstage images of Lisa Dwan in Walter Asmus's 2014 production showed her face painted in close resemblance to the bondage hood or 'gimp mask' (see Figure 1), with bare limbs restrained behind a punishing-looking metal bar (see Figure 2).[6] Similarly, earlier photos of Billie Whitelaw in 1973 reveal her head clamped in place and hooded (see Figure 3). This physical control enacted on the *Not I* performer's body—"you are not even allowed to move your head a fraction of an inch one way or another," Whitelaw recalls (1992, 9)—replicates the physically submissive role of the sub partner in a dominance-submission role play.

through' process in relation to trauma memory, although without specific focus on sexual trauma.

6 Actor Jess Thom, who played Mouth in her TourettesHero 2018–2020 production, revealed that when her theatre company designed her stage set, "we didn't want it to look bondage-y" (qtd in Caird, n.p.), in what might be read as an indirect reference to the aesthetic of Dwan's recent staging.

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FIGURE 1 Lisa Dwan backstage in the Royal Court Theatre during the 2014 run of Walter Asmus's production of *Not I*
PHOTO: FINN BEALES

Psychologically, the testimony of actors who have played Mouth also parallels the defining characteristics of bondage and BDSM play more broadly. Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinplatz's five-point definition of BDSM (4) characterises it as involving:

– the appearance of dominance and submission,
– role-playing,
– consent—that is, each partner's voluntary agreement to enter into the encounter,
– a shared understanding of the encounter through negotiation,
– a sexual context.

The activity of 'role-playing', of course, is very obviously present in the theatrical performance. We have also already noted *Not I*'s sexualised elements, and the actor's submission to the physical demands or 'dominance' of the text's directions. That this submission is a consensual one, entered into willingly within a regulated context of theatrical performance, is also crucial. Indeed, we can trace a tradition of profound creative negotiation between actor and text—and even actor and Beckett himself—in past stagings of *Not I*. Hannah Hacohen, for example, recalls how "between me and Beckett a bridge of new understanding was built" by way of her performance as Mouth (Levy, 142); Whitelaw remembers "becoming joined to Sam by some sort of umbilical cord" as the two

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FIGURE 2 Lisa Dwan in rehearsal for *Not I* at the Royal Court, 2014
PHOTO: FINN BEALES

" 'conducted' each other" in rehearsal (1995, 125, 127). Both testimonies speak to an intense process of creative collaboration, paralleling the controlled scenario of typical BDSM play in which both participants guide the action, creating only "the *illusion* of an explicit power differential" (Newmahr, 69; emphasis added). Mouth's actor, like the submissive BDSM performer, is simultaneously "in control … under control," as Mouth herself puts it (Beckett 2006, 378).

What exactly do we gain by tracing these parallels between *Not I* and therapeutic BDSM rape play? This lens can help us nuance the terms we use to interrogate questions of violence and apparent subjugation as they apply to the staging of *Not I*. Crucially, the framework of established consent alters the significance of the action undertaken: the rape-play participant *consents* to the violence enacted on his or her body; the *Not I* actor *consents* to her physical suffering and apparent 'subjugation' on stage. To clarify this point, I turn here to the testimonies of two rape survivors, 'Marlie' and 'Sheila', who both engaged in

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FIGURE 3
Billie Whitelaw in rehearsal for Anthony Page's 1973 production of *Not I*
PHOTO: ZOË DOMINIC

rape play as a therapeutic practice, as recounted by the sexuality ethnographer Corie Hammers. Describing the value of the corporeal nature of rape play as a means of engaging with the lingering bodily affect of sexual violation, Marlie explains that traditional talking therapies did not alleviate the repulsion she felt towards her own body, where "the pain had not shifted": "I had to embody this stuff in order to really get it" (Hammers, 77). Likewise, Sheila reported no difficulty in talking about her experience of rape, but found that this narrativising had no effect on what she described as a chronic "dissociation with my body" and eventually discovered that only rape play allowed her to start "bringing my mind and body into alignment" (Hammers, 79). The consensual and controlled nature of the rape play offers a re-experience of the initial trauma that rescripts the event within the victim's control. Herman emphasises that "a rape survivor needs to establish a sense of autonomy and control" over their own body in order to recover from their trauma (65)—and it is precisely this regained control that rape play can offer. As Hammers outlines:

> While in rape play survivors relive the trauma, thus experiencing their powerlessness all over again, the stress on negotiation and the 'scriptedness' of the BDSM encounter (the survivor dictates the scene) provides

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> that necessary measure of control and safety such that the ineffectuality felt during the sexual assault gets interrupted.
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Sheila explains, "In re-enacting my rape I'm doing it on my own terms. […] I am giving someone permission to do these things to me" (Hammers, 79). Marlie concurs: "I'm doing it by choice. It's flipping a switch of 'Oh right I didn't have the choice then, I do now, I choose this'" (Hammers, 77). Likewise, for all the highly publicised commentary on how physically restrictive and painful it is to perform *Not I*, its actors are engaging in a carefully scripted and consensual performance. One can submit to pain and suffering in forms that heighten rather than negate personal and creative agency. To undertake the important task of parsing evocations of violence and sexual assault in Beckett's work, we need to be discerning in how we employ terms like 'abuse', 'subjugation', 'torture', 'sadism' and 'control'. We do not have to discount the female actor's own agency in the theatrical process, nor diminish the gravity of these terms for victims of actual abuse, in order to engage meaningfully with textual forms of sexual violence.

3 In Lieu of Conclusion: What Next?

Examining *Not I* as an embodied trauma text highlights the allusions to sexual trauma encoded in Mouth's dialogue and in the script's staging practice. Reading these scripted elements through the lens of rape play offers one means of acknowledging the specifically sexualised concerns embedded in the text, while also prompting a more nuanced engagement with ideas of control, coercion, and consent in Beckett's work. If we are sceptical—which I am not—about bringing contemporary reader responses to bear on non-contemporary texts, we might remember that much of Beckett's post-war work was written at the height of the second-wave feminist movement and associated debates on sexual violence in France, Britain and Ireland across the 1960s and 1970s, including the initiation of "Take Back the Night" women's marches, the foundation of the first Rape Crisis centres in England and Ireland, the creation of the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* in France, and the publication of Susan Brownmiller's ground-breaking anti-rape study *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975; published in France in 1977).[7] I do not attempt in this short

7 See Fitzpatrick 2018, 3–5, for detailed discussion of feminist campaigning and scholarship on sexual violence across the 1960s and 1970s.

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article to speculate on the exact nature of Beckett’s own attitude towards sexual violence; Emilie Morin’s observation, based on her extensive examination of Beckett’s political activities, that “feminism and women’s rights were not among his political priorities” does not bode well for those seeking to construct any straightforward or retroactively redemptive reading of ‘Beckett as feminist’ (23). As politically alert analyses of Beckett’s work demonstrate, however, the ideological weight of his texts is often directed towards correlated forms of suffering beyond the theatre building itself. It seems unlikely that there is nothing to be learned about Beckett’s works, or the cultural moment and milieu of his writing, by reading with an eye to questions of sexual violence.

Certainly, further work remains to be done in relation to what Brenda O’Connell has termed the field’s “polite silence” concerning evocations of gendered cruelty and sexual violence in Beckett’s corpus (109), building on the foundational scholarship by Mary Bryden (1993), and re-animated in recent years by Trish McTighe (2019), Kumiko Kiuchi (2021) and O’Connell herself. In particular, similar issues of physical restriction beset the actor playing Winnie in *Happy Days*, and similar evocations of sexual violence pervade the script. Actor Aideen O’Kelly recalls drawing on her own experience of extreme sexual abuse to play Winnie’s story of the mouse running up Mildred’s leg: “I use something from my life for this scene. When I was nine years old I was left home alone—my parents had gone out to the movies—with my uncle. He raped me. Then he made me promise I would never tell. Said he’d kill me if I did. That’s what I use when I play this scene” (36). Yet O’Kelly and many other actors who have played Winnie also testify to the qualities of “inner strength” (O’Kelly, 39) and “survival” (Marron, 44; Fehsenfeld 57) that characterised their experience of the role. As Carrie J. Preston observes, “Versions of agency may be achieved through a willing submission to a performance form and rigorous, even painful bodily practices” that might superficially seem constraining, abusive, or potentially re-traumatising (242).

Beyond the question of actorly agency, however, persists the recurrent evocation of sexual and sexualised violence in these texts. While Beckett’s scripting of physical suffering has frequently been read as a metaphor for the difficulty of artistic creation—“the torturous process of authoring the Beckettian work”, as Tyrus Miller puts it (257)—we also need ways of reading violence *as* violence, and sexual assault *as* sexual assault. Much of Beckett’s writing is indeed ‘about’ violence (including gendered and sexualised violence), consent and coercion, and the playscript’s modes of staging are carefully calculated to call our attention to these elements. To engage with sexual violence in Beckett’s work is not to misread from some passing ‘politically correct’ perspective: it is to confront

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the very content of these works on their own explicit terms, and to consider seriously what they would tell us.

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