

A Tale of Failed Feminism

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The book version of *The Vagina Monologues* (VMs) has received fair to good reviews. Toasting Eve Ensler as the *cheri du jour*, the elite print media describe both the book and its author as witty, frank, funny, never offensive, and—of course—always honest.

Recently, Fr. John Neuhaus cryptically dismissed the dramatized version of the book as “women getting their kicks by talking as dirty as possible about their sexual fantasies” (*First Things*, May 2005, p. 64). While his assessment is not inaccurate, the impressionable collegians that pack playhouses to participate in V-Day (as in Vagina-Day) deserve a more comprehensive critique.

PC Pornography

In my view, the VMs belong in the genre of politically correct pornography—porn that is ideological sexual propaganda. Ensler’s book (and its dramatization) replace the traditional adult rules of sexual behavior with those of adolescents. Stripping away every last remnant of human goods such as postponed gratification and altruistic love, the VMs enshrine a sexual agenda that celebrates the basest of human instincts. As such, they are a part of the much larger contemporary cultural movement to define deviancy down.

And Ensler’s tome accomplishes this in a duplicitous way. It attempts (under the smoke and mirrors of literature, art and prevention of male violence) to put a respectable face on what is nothing more than pornographic text and drama. It throws

sexual explicitness—nearly always vulgar, trashy and voyeuristic—in the faces of everyone. To what end?

Well, instead of expanding the reader's or participant's knowledge and understanding of human sexuality, the VMs reduce sex from an experience that should be private, holistic, and rich in self-giving into one that is exhibitionist, solipsistic and a matter of mutual sexual gymnastics.

Overcoming Sexism

Ensler would probably agree with me that overcoming sexism, one of the principal ills of marriage and male-female relations in general, is what would truly empower women. Eve and I are probably not in accord, however, about the definition of sexism, and most assuredly don't agree about how best to overcome this problem.

Here is my take on misogyny and how to end it. Sexism has been the root problem of married life throughout the ages. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not arguing that sexism has been the major difficulty of every marriage since the dawn of time. I am only asserting that sexism in marriage happened with enough frequency throughout recorded history that one can say it is a root problem. The male's greater physical strength and his freedom from child care, especially in a fallen world, has led to two misconceptions: that of manhood as characterized by violence and lust and that of women as sex objects and slaves. As a consequence, the flotsam and jetsam of rape, polygamy, premarital promiscuity, adultery, wife battering, and child abuse litter our cultural shores.

Until women dedicate themselves to correcting the false notion of manhood, there will exist "the war of the sexes." And the Ensler/radical feminist solution—distorting women's identity by over-independence and seductiveness or by hidden or not so hidden hostility toward, competition with, and segregation from men—will not and cannot correct the problem.

We will end male violence when vices such as aggression and abuse are replaced by true masculine values: protection, partnership and fatherhood. But—and here's the crux of the matter—true male virtues will flourish only when the natural female values of motherhood and companionship are honored.

Thus, to the extent that women are confused as to their nature and destiny, and I think Ensler is very confused on these matters, to that extent men are confused. That's just the way it is (and the way it will always be) with male and female human beings, each only one-half of humanity, each trying to find his or her true self so each can discover what it means to complete—and be completed by—persons of the opposite sex.

As more and more women become who and what they are meant to be, more and more men will get the message—or catch the message. Some men, perhaps even most, will see the meaning of their masculinity in the "mirror" that women provide in their authentic female personas.

The Male-Female Relationship

I just declared that Ensler's portrayal of women and the relationship of the sexes are fundamentally confused. Let me put some meat on the bones of that declaration.

First, while I would not want to underreport or suppress the evil of male violence against women, and while I think abusive men must be brought to justice, I also think the VMs describe the problem in a way that demonizes all men and canonizes all women. Ensler implies that women are incapable or innocent of all violence and abuse (whether toward self or others).

To set the record straight, the VMs need to address the following issues: 1) wives or female partners that verbally abuse and dominate husbands and 2) partner abuse amongst lesbians. Ensler also needs to galvanize women to work equally hard to resist what I would call *hidden* aggressors against them: contraception, sterilization, abortion, breast implants, starvation diets, etc. Eve needs to tell women that these activities and practices can kill them, injure them physically and spiritually, and destroy their unique feminine good of motherhood.

Second, the VMs hawk a lesbian genital sex which, just like failed heterosexual sex or lust, is a lose/lose or take/take kind of sex. Eve Ensler's brand of sexual activity is a version of genitality that I cynically describe as "filling-station-sex," an "all-about-me-sex" or a "fill-me-up-because-my-needs-must-be-met-sex." Twisted sex, whether between two

heterosexuals or two homosexuals, is twisted sex. It simply cannot make men and women happy in the sense of helping them become complete persons.

Referring directly to the VMs text for examples: How will Eve Ensler's espoused ideal of "women as sex workers serving women only" make women genuinely fulfilled? How will her description of a 24 year-old woman teaching a 16 year-old girl how-to-achieve-an-orgasm-*sans*-male further her goal of overcoming sexual abuse of women? And, in categorizing the latter experience as "good rape," the 24 year-old woman as a "savior," and the experience for the 16 year-old as "salvational," does Ensler mean to say that only *male* pedophilia is wrong?

Third, blindsided by her agenda of male phobia and hatred, Ensler fails to discuss that there *is* another alternative beyond hedonistic sex, viz., sexual relations that represent mutual self-gift between two heterosexual, loving, caring persons who are capable of entering into a lifelong, two-in-one flesh union.

As any good parent will confirm, the step from being a spouse to being a parent is gargantuan. Parenthood matures the person almost on the spot, and *only* this maturity helps to realize the natural feminine and masculine potential of both spouses. A wife who is mother calls from her husband the fullness of his manhood: the gravity, dignity, sense of responsibility and sobriety which characterize a father. The husband who is father calls from his wife her unique richness: the warmth and fierce tenderness characteristic of a mother. The fact of the matter is, no matter how many orgasmic groans the VMs attribute to lesbian genitality, non-procreative sex can never speak the language of totality, the language of mutual, embodied self-gifting.

Fourth, Ensler implies that one's sexuality is unimportant and that one's gender is nothing more than a social construct. This view, in my mind, muddies the waters of building genuine male-female relationships and of finding a way out of sexism.

Certainly nothing could be more controversial today than the problem of discriminating between those sexual differences that are innate (and, therefore, unchangeable) and those that are due to cultural custom and liable to change. Eve Ensler, I would suggest, is among the many today who believe that only the mere anatomical differences between the sexes are innate (and, for EE, even these are fungible). All

other divergences are cultural and can be altered with impunity.

However, when we carefully examine cultural variations regarding gender practices, we discover they are limited by fundamental biological factors: males are, on the average, physically larger and stronger than females; females alone bear and nurse the child and are needed by the small child for a number of years. Human experience teaches that, although these biological characteristics (to which men and women have also been psychologically adapted) are very general in character, they cannot be ignored without creating severe tensions in human development and sexual relationships.

Women and the Priesthood

In the introduction to the VMs, I read with great interest Gloria Steinem's reveries (and, by extension, those of Ensler) about overcoming a sexist Church that bars women from ministerial priesthood. I am compelled to share the following insights from Fr. Benedict Ashley ("Gender and the Priesthood of Christ: A Theological Reflection," *Thomist* [57, 3, 1997]).

Christ's priesthood consisted in his central act of humiliated, sacrificial love and hence also in his entire life as Suffering Servant: renouncing his rightful claim to kingship and dominion in favor of servanthood. This seems the reason why, in choosing to be incarnate, the Second Person of the Trinity chose to become a male rather than a female human being—a fact which is the ultimate stumbling block for feminists in the mold of Gloria Steinem and Eve Ensler. They suppose that this implies that God prefers men to women! But this is to miss the notion that for God to become a woman in order to be a slave who died on the Cross would have been pointless since, in fact, in first century AD society, it was expected that women be slaves.

No, in order to overcome all human pride and masculine claim to tyrannical dominion, a claim which is part of the sinful, sexist glorification of power and violence, God had to become a male human being who could deliberately submit himself to servitude for the sake of the poor and powerless, such as women. Consequently, an essential qualification for priesthood is that the priest symbolize Christ in His masculine

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humanity, i.e., as the one who deliberately renounced power in order to be a servant.

Motherhood

In one of the last chapters of her book, Ensler is so fixated on describing the “beauty” of her daughter-in-law’s vagina during childbirth (!) that she fails to see the wonder of her grandchild and the mystery of giving birth. Absent from her account is any ecstatic appreciation for the love that exists between hubby and wife and/or mother, father and

baby. Missing is applause and wonder over the most selfless, disinterested love possible this side the ground: that between mother and child, especially mother and newborn. The poignancy of that relationship—where the baby needs everything and the mother must give all—seems to have completely eluded the authoress.

Eve Ensler fails to learn a lesson she desperately needs to recall and recount to her audiences: the female hand rocking the cradle *is* the female hand rocking the world. And, perhaps this, more than any other error, is the most blatant shortfall of the VMs and its failed feminism. ☒