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"For better it is to dare mighty things, to win great triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."
—Theodore Roosevelt

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Cover design by Nilanjan Banerjee

Special Thanks to William F. Buckley, Jr.

THE DARTMOUTH REVIEW is produced weekly by Dartmouth College undergraduates for Dartmouth students and alumni. It is published by the Hanover Review, Inc., a non-profit tax-deductible organization. Please send all inquiries to:

The Dartmouth Review
P.O. Box 343
Hanover, N.H. 03755
www.dartreview.com

Subscribe: \$40

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P.O. Box 343
Hanover, N.H. 03755
(603) 643-4370

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Editorial

Vagina Friendly

Academics who enter college administration often do so because they can't produce scholarship, or at least good scholarship. It may be a generalization, but it stands to reason; most intellectuals, understandably, would rather produce weighty tomes on Western civilization than bicker with frat boys over the number of registered kegs to be permitted at every social event.

There are, of course, exceptions, and Dartmouth has known College presidents who were accomplished in scholarship and also possessed a bold vision for the institution's direction. The mathematician John Kemeny, for example, co-inventor of the BASIC computer language, made Dartmouth a pioneer in computer science instruction and research—after his predecessor, John Sloan Dickey, built the Kiewit Computation Center in 1966. James Wright's legacy for Dartmouth—the elimination of beer taps and the assured presence of "attractive non-salty food" at fraternity parties—places him squarely outside this tradition.

The Wright administration, indeed, proved itself unable to distinguish between good and bad scholarship last term, when it sponsored "The Sex Series," a program of Dartmouth's Women's Resource Center. The College sponsored seminars and workshops on "women's sexual pleasure," a screening of *Breasts: A Documentary*, and "Torrid Tuesdays Book Club" discussions in which students studied such seminal works as *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*. "It was heartening for many people to break through the taboos and the silence that often surround women's pleasure," reads the WRC's spring newsletter. "Our programming included a focus on the cultural meanings of women's breasts, masturbation, reclaiming taboo topics/words, and issues related to sexual intimacy for survivors of abuse."

On February 14, as part of The Sex Series, WRC workers distributed buttons that read "Vagina Friendly." A large audience had gathered in the Hopkins Center to see a performance of the award-winning off-Broadway play *The Vagina Monologues*, in which female students and faculty read monologues on their genitalia. The point of *The Vagina Monologues* is simple, and very silly: by saying the word "vagina" enough times, women will find empowerment. "I say 'vagina' because I want people to respond, and they have," writes Eve Ensler, author of the *Monologues*. "After you say the word the hundredth time or the thousandth time, it occurs to you that it's *your* word, *your* body, *your* most essential place... Here's the place to practice saying the word," she says of her play, "because, as we know, the word is what propels us and sets us free."

And so the word "vagina" and its various synonyms are repeated incessantly throughout the play. Ensler also poses questions like, "If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?" and "What does a vagina smell like?" "Peaches" is one response.

One monologue has a woman falling in love with her pubic hair, after her husband had insisted she shave it off. "I realized that the hair is there for a reason," she reports, "it's the leaf around the flower, the lawn around the house. You have to love the hair in order to love the vagina."

Another has a woman attending a "vagina workshop," in which she examines her privates in a mirror: "It momentarily occurred to me that it was *me*, my vagina: it was *who* I was." Of her clitoris, she concludes that "It was me, the

essence of me. It was both the doorbell to my house and the house itself."

"I discovered how deeply excited I got when other women moaned, when I could make other women moan," reports a lesbian dominatrix. "Discovering the key, unlocking the vagina's mouth, unlocking this voice, this wild song." She becomes particularly fond of toe-sucking.

A great deal of *The Vagina Monologues* is crass or purely stupid, and much of it is genuinely very funny. But throughout the work there's the peculiar ideology, shared by the Dartmouth Women's Resource Center, that female masturbation and sexual activity somehow constitutes political activism.

And the *Monologues* are often funny where they shouldn't be. One lighthearted skit has a twenty-four-year-old feed vodka to a thirteen-year-old girl and then have sex with her. It's all perfectly appropriate, of course, because it's lesbian rape. "Your vagina, untouched by man, smells so nice, so fresh, wish I could keep it that way forever," the female rapist tells the girl.

"She makes me play with myself in front of her and she teaches me all the different ways to give myself pleasure," the thirteen-year-old says in her monologue. "She tells me to always know how to give myself pleasure so I'll never need to rely on a man." It's an important lesson, apparently, because the girl falls in love with her rapist: "Now people say it was a kind of rape. I was only thirteen and she was twenty-four. Well, I say, if it was rape, it was a good rape then."

It's a bit surprising to hear feminists speak about "good rape" happening to a thirteen-year-old girl, but not so surprising when one considers the conception of rape, as articulated by the feminist Susan Brownmiller, that "it is not a crime of lust but of violence and power." Men, you see, are socialized by a patriarchal culture to want to dominate women, and they use rape in order to control and oppress women, and thus maintain the patriarchy. So women can't really commit rape; they're powerless in our society. And if they do happen to "rape," they're helping to subvert the patriarchy. Vive La Resistance!

The evolutionary biologists Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer have recently challenged the feminist explanation of rape, saying that it fits neatly with a political agenda, but not at all with scientific data. The choice between that explanation and "evolutionarily informed answers," they write, "is essentially a choice between ideology and knowledge." Dartmouth's professors face that choice, surely, in their scientific and sociological research. But Dartmouth's administration has a similar choice to make.

The Women's Resource Center provides lists of women-owned sex stores at which students can purchase "toys." Dartmouth faculty, for some odd reason, revel in increased sexual activity. The WRC conducts how-to seminars in sex and masturbation, and, perhaps more significantly, provides an institutional endorsement of those and other sundry activities—as if the College has some perverse interest in its students' sex lives.

The Sex Series—and many other activists and lobbyists that the WRC brings to campus—is politics masquerading as scholarship.

If Dartmouth's administrators fancy themselves the stewards of a serious academic institution, they should promote real scholarship instead.

