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 worthy tenons on Western civilization than bickering 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 Computing Center in 1966. James Wright’s legacy for Dartmouth—the elimination of beer taps and the assured presence of “atttractive non-alcoholic” 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 “Terror Tuesday Book Club” discussions in which students studied such seminal works as Coat: A Declaration of Independence. It was heavenward 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 role-play 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 part.”

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 public 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 pubic hair in a mirror. “It momentarily occurred to me that it was me, my vagina: it was who I was.” Of her climax, she concludes that “It was not the essence of me. It was both the doorstep 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 lightly-hearted skit has a twenty-four-year-old feel-good vodka to a thirteen-year-old girl and then has sex with her. It’s all perfectly appropriate, of course, because it’s lesbian rape. “Your vagina, serviced 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 rapist 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’s not a victim of her own violence and power. “Men, you can be 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 consent to 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 biologist 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 an scientifically informed answer, 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 recommends how to survive 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.