

**Review of Kathryn D. Blanchard and Jane S. Webster (eds),
Lady Parts: Biblical Women and The Vagina Monologues.
Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012.**

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Not that long ago, in 1996, when Eve Ensler first presented and published *The Vagina Monologues*, it was still pretty rare to hear the word ‘vagina’ in contexts other than the sex-education classroom or gynaecologist’s practice. And even here the articulation of the word could be startling, rattling, uncomfortable, blush-arousing. Words like ‘pussy’ or ‘cunt’ were in much wider circulation and both rather daring. The latter was reserved for particularly bold insults and otherwise more often substituted with the circumlocution ‘the c-word’. *The Vagina Monologues* has changed all that and very likely contributed to the coinage of such playful and fun-to-say words as “vajayjay” and “vajazzle” (first usage of both is dated by the OED to the early 21st century).

The Vagina Monologues is an episodic play focused on women’s experiences, more particularly on experiences of sexual self-awareness and sexual encounter. It is based on both Ensler’s personal experiences and her interviews with around 200 women. The play was widely endorsed by high-profile celebrities, many of whom participated in later public performances of the play. It has grown into a veritable phenomenon. The play has been translated into over forty languages and has launched V-Day (when the play is staged on campuses and in other community settings, with benefits raising considerable amounts of money for anti-violence groups) and, most recently, the education and activism project One Billion Rising. It has also generated spin-offs, *The Penis Monologues: Men Speak* and *The Queer Bathroom Monologues*—although these have not received comparable acclaim or made equivalent impact.

The Vagina Monologues has caused a big and sustained, near global, stir and has (like anything labelled ‘controversial’) been both enthusiastically celebrated and vehemently criticized, polarizing its audiences and readers. This book, *Lady Parts*, is the outcome of a collaborative project by biblical interpreters from a range of contexts—students, graduates, academics, laypersons, pastors—who have drawn inspiration from Ensler’s play and used women of the Bible to write their own monologues.

The introduction to *Lady Parts* makes it immediately clear that this is a book for the converted, for those who “do not need to be persuaded that the Bible is alive and well in the twenty-first century” and who agree that “at least some ... contemporary interpretations should make women and girls the primary interlocutors” (p. 1). Next, the editors state that it is the “shock value” of Ensler’s play that attracted them to using it as a catalyst for the contributions to follow, requesting compassion both for biblical women, who are often either invisible or

depicted as suffering, and for the contemporary authors writing in these women's personas, "working out their own theologies through first-person storytelling" (p. 2). It is clearly stated that the idea for the book grew from a pedagogical context (p. 3) and that it locates itself in a broader, well-established, predominantly feminist endeavour of uncovering and articulating biblical women's experiences (pp. 2, 4, 16). There follows a careful explanation as to how and why this endeavour is midrashic (p. 5ff.). The introduction is aimed at non-specialists and in accessible but not patronizing prose summarizes distinctive features of Jewish, Catholic and Protestant, and feminist interpretation. The notion that the interpretations in this book are embodied (pp. 4, 17) is stressed, which seems, essentially, to mean that "these monologues do not shy away from naming female bodily experiences such as rape and miscarriage" (p. 16).

The introduction recognizes that *The Vagina Monologues* has been variously, including disapprovingly, received. Nevertheless, the editors align both Ensler's play and the monologues inspired by it with (using Steinem's words) a "journey of truth telling" (p. 20). This practice, they (rather grandly) assert, is necessary "in order that the world ... be made whole" (p. 25). The editors acknowledge the "unpolished or 'amateurish' character of the collection" (p. 25), though the inverted commas imply that the writing is not *really* amateurish, only apparently so. According to the editors, negative criticism of the monologues is to be expected. After all, Ensler was widely criticized and attacked—but, while the book may be 'criticized for not meeting the standards of high art set by experts' (p. 25), the assertion is that it ought not to be thus. Instead, the writings should be admired for their pedagogical value, creativity and truth telling. The diversity of the contributors is asserted—they represent a range in terms of age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, marital status (p. 25)—and we are told that their engagement with the biblical characters has been 'not only educational ... but also existential—bringing catharsis and healing' (p. 26). The editors voice that they are "painfully aware" that the nature of their project makes them 'vulnerable to severe criticism' but they are fuelled by martyr-like zeal, because "Eve Ensler took a lot of heat for her play, and we have dared to add the fan of religion to the flame of vaginas" (p. 27). The editors repeatedly refer to their 'pedagogical conviction' (p. 25) and to their belief in the project (p. 27) and conclude that their ultimate desire and mission is "to end violence against women and girls" (p. 29).

All of this (occasionally rather fervent) rhetoric builds up quite a high pitch of expectation. This expectation is not necessarily satisfied. There are ten monologues channelling women of the Hebrew Bible, three from the deuterocanonical books, six from the New Testament. And ultimately, for me, these monologues don't really "work." After reading all nineteen I simply could not see the point of the book. I am not shocked by Eve getting bi-curious and having a threesome with Adam and Lilith (p. 37), nor by Susanna's articulate vagina (pp. 93-97), nor indeed by Mary asserting that she was raped by God (p. 102) and I am all for bringing disparate ideas into dialogue, so I have no problem, in principle, with the strategy of taking Ensler's play and testing its creative possibilities. I would also endorse the effective combining of fiction with more traditional forms of scholarship and I welcome the shifting of our focus on to marginalized characters—hence, I admire and use in my teaching the fine example of Eleanor Ferris Beach's *The Jezebel Letters: Religion and Politics in*

Ninth-Century Israel (Augsburg Fortress Press, 2009). In my own teaching I advocate such approaches quite routinely (see Johanna Stiebert, *The Exile and the Prophet's Wife: Historic Events and Marginal Perspectives* [Interfaces Series, Liturgical Press, 2005]) and in fact I wanted to like this book and to be able to endorse it more wholeheartedly for all these reasons. I wanted to embrace its spirit and feisty experimentalism, because, let's face it, there is enough writing in biblical studies that is anything but daring and creative.

However, having read the whole book carefully, I am not clear as to either its intention or its imagined readership. What is this book really achieving? Who (other than a reviewer) would really want to read it cover-to-cover? This is clearly not a text pitched at scholars and its usefulness for either teachers or students is also limited. The introduction is mostly a defence of the idea of using Ensler's play as inspiration for the retelling of biblical women's stories. The monologues themselves are certainly readable (mostly) with one of them, Meredith Brown's "God's Wife," standing out as a superb piece of writing and imagination. But, as a whole, they don't really "go anywhere." They read like (well edited) undergraduate creative-writing exercises. Now, while I would find the exercise of writing first-person monologues based on biblical characters fun and potentially enriching and educational for incorporation into a module on biblical studies, reading almost twenty such pieces feels too much like hard work.

Some of the writing—Jephthah's daughter: "I am no patriarchal puppy" (p. 58); or Jezebel: "I googled my name the other day and I was very distraught about what I saw: porn sites, lingerie, and nudity" (p. 71); or Judith's maid Shua: "I rather enjoyed prettying [Judith] up for some man to objectify and use, the way she had objectified and used me" (p. 90); or Mary: "As my belly grew, my appetite for sex increased as markedly as my appetite for food" (p. 103)—is cringe-making. Other monologues, such as Anna's retelling of the story of Tobit and Tobias (pp. 83-88) or the tale of the Samaritan Woman do not add much of interest to the base story. (On this last point the essay offered in this volume is infinitely less interesting and thought-provoking than Musa W. Dube's startling post-colonial retelling, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Motswana Feminist Theological Reflection on Women and Social Transformation," *Boleswa Occasional Papers on Theology and Religion* 1.4 [1992], pp. 5-9). The stories of Mary Magdalene and particularly of Priscilla, meanwhile, seem to make a great deal of very little, which is all very creative but the question remains: Why would anyone want to read it?

In my view, the material in this book would have worked better within the framework of an unambiguous teaching text, supplementing informative passages with teaching exercises and select illustrative examples. As it is, the book is neither a straightforward teaching text (although the ideas and monologues are derived from pedagogical contexts and there are some useful 'Questions for Discussion' at the end), nor is it a straightforward work of fiction based on the Bible in the vein of Anita Diamant's (eminently more readable) novel, *The Red Tent* (Wyatt Books, 1997). Reframing this project as a squarely pedagogical text and using a few samples from the monologues to provide examples could have produced an excellent resource. The monologue by Jessica Paige, "The Levite's Concubine" (pp. 61-64), for instance, really drives home what the biblical text of Judges 19 obscures: that this is an acutely brutal and sadistic story. Similarly, the

words of Bathsheba, by De'Anna Daniels (pp. 68-70), forcefully remind us that 2 Samuel 11-12 does not focalize the narrative through Bathsheba, leaving questions (was she seduced or raped?) and silences (how did Bathsheba respond to the death of her child?). The former could have worked well in a lesson on how what purports to be history is conveyed in the Hebrew Bible, or in a lesson on gender dynamics (perhaps alongside Ken Stone's outstanding analysis of how women act as conduits in honour competitions between men, as expounded in his book, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* [Sheffield Academic Press, 1996]). The latter, meanwhile, could be very effectively combined with teaching Mieke Bal's literary analytical narratology (*Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* [University of Toronto Press, 2009]). As it stands, such opportunities were missed and the book is rather "betwixt and between"—and not a very satisfying read.



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