When I was invited by the Socratic Club to participate in this conversation, I was initially disinclined. I was thinking that while I have little respect for the *Vagina Monologues*, well, why do I want to be involved in this controversy. If some people want to chant about female genitalia, it is at least better for me if they do so within the confines of a theatre than out on the quad in proximity to my classroom window, which is what they were doing before. Besides, my wife, who is in her 31st year working in various Catholic high schools, assures me that mostly what this is about is the desire—so typical of adolescents—for attracting attention to themselves. If this is simply ignored, she counsels, the whole thing will dissolve soon enough.

What finally dissuaded me from listening to my wife (even though it always turns out badly when I don’t follow her advice) was reflecting on my students. Within the last several years, my classroom has become increasingly feminine, so much so that, at present, in my two upper division courses this term—courses for which students are more able to choose for themselves—a full three-quarters of the students are women, and in one section the percentage is over 80. Not only are these female students far more numerous than their male counterparts, but they tend to re-enroll for subsequent courses, and they earn the best marks, too. I should like to think that this feminizing phenomenon in my philosophy courses is due to my dashing good looks. I fear, on the other hand, that it may have rather more to do with the fact that college men are falling behind college women in reading ability, and I tend to emphasize reading in my courses. A lot of the women, though, tell me that they take my courses for reasons that have nothing to do with me at all: they are simply interested in the arguments of classical Christian theism. Some of these young women are disappointed that Gonzaga now sponsors these *Monologues*, and since they are my best students, and members of the vast majority of my students, without whom I don’t know how I could justify my continued employment at the University, it seems to me that I have something of an obligation to participate in the discussion.

The question is whether sponsoring these *Monologues* is necessitated by the GU mission, as the advocates of sponsorship were claiming last spring. The justification that was given for answering this question in the affirmative is that the monologues ‘raise consciousness’ about the evils of abusive sexual behavior toward women. But of course, if that were all the monologues were about, they wouldn’t be controversial at all. Everyone would be in favor of them, but few people would attend the performances, and discussions such as this one wouldn’t garner much of an audience. Indeed, I wish that that were all that these monologues were about, because I have a wife and two daughters and, as I said, a great many female students, and I would very much like to be able to join forces with all those who are opposed to abusive treatment of women.
If this were really all about sexual abuse of women, and we were looking for a quality literary treatment of the matter, I would recommend Tom Wolfe’s *I am Charlotte Simmons* as being far more worthy, simply on literary grounds. Wolfe’s novel revolves around a date rape; its setting is a college campus, a private college campus, one featuring a drinking culture, a hook-up culture, and a top tier NCAA basketball program. No, the setting of Wolfe’s novel is not Gonzaga; he uses a fictitious name for his school, but it is widely rumored that Duke University was the model. One GU student who has read the novel tells me that it depicts a school that differs from GU, but only in degree, and not in kind. So, I would agree that Gonzaga needs some serious consciousness raising about a whole array of pathologies, and the treatment of women by men is certainly high on the list. But why is it necessary to choose for this task a literary work so offensive to so many who might otherwise be willing to help?

But what was particularly discouraging to me about the claims made by the Monologue supporters last spring was the claim that the Monologues are necessary for GU because the Catholic church is a wicked patriarchal institution with a long history of suppressing and silencing women. To be sure, I have no desire to deny but that within Christ’s church there are plenty of sinners—indeed, there are only sinners. (The neurotic comedian Woody Allen used to quip that he would never want to belong to a club that would accept someone like himself for a member; needless to say, with such an attitude, Mr. Allen will never enter the Church.) Nor do I wish to deny that some of these many sins within the Church include sins against women. My own aforementioned wife has been harmed due to such sins, and in fact she lives during the week in Seattle, making gains for the Church there rather than for the Church in Spokane, because Catholics working within the Church’s schools there are willing to listen to the prudent counsel of women whereas at least some Catholics working within the Church’s schools in Spokane are not. But still, one would expect a fair—if critical—treatment of the Church from Gonzaga University, and a fair treatment yields a much more favorable view of the Church than the jaundiced one that was offered last spring.

Let us begin by attempting a fair—if necessarily brief—treatment of St. Augustine, who has been maligned as a woman-hater in these discussions. Indeed, time permitting, I could cite texts in which Augustine says bad things about women. The gist of his concern is that women sometimes lack tenacity; too quick to desire to please others, they sometimes succumb to inconstancy and abandon truth. Of course, Augustine says far worse things about men, himself included, and their tendency to immoderation and the arrogance that such immoderation engenders. But let’s consider the principal ways in which Augustine affected the lives of women: First, in elevating the text of Gen. 1:27, about the creation of the male and the female in the image of God, and subordinating Paul’s comment at 1 Cor 11:7, about the man being the image of God the women being the glory of the man, Augustine established the basic pattern of Christian interpretation on the matter. Second, in writing his *Confessions*, he elevates the status of Monica, his mother, from a very unimportant woman from a very backwater African town into the heroine of the most famous Christian narrative ever composed. Compare the role of Monica in the *Confessions* with the women in the narrative that the *Confessions* was intended to, and did, replace: Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Thirdly, consider
Augustine’s writings on marriage. By insisting on the good of marriage, by explaining not only how marriage could help heal the sins of men and women but even be a sacramentum, a symbol for the love between Christ and the Church, Augustine altered the nature of marriage and profoundly improved the prospects of women who do marry. Finally, by reforming the monastic way of life and providing for the establishment of a common Christian life for women as well as for men, he made it possible for a great many poor women to improve their meager prospects in the world. In terms of real consequences, Augustine did more to improve the lot of women in the ancient world than any other human being who lived in the whole of the ancient period. And one can say this even without listing the smaller, immediate things he did through his office as bishop: writing to encourage a young woman in her studies, responding to requests for counsel made by a struggling abbess, using church properties to buy back young women who had been sold into sexual trafficking schemes, insisting on the superiority of Christian rhetoric to imperial rhetoric because the former was used to educate both sexes in the sermons of the Church whereas the latter was used only for the ambitions of males. Of course, Augustine would be the first to admit that if his intellectual and rhetorical powers helped to make a dent in the long narrative of human sinfulness, the credit should go to God and not to himself, but it seems to me that if God is willing to pour out that much grace on his Church, the proper response should be tremendous gratitude on the part of men and women alike.

In the interests of time, I’m going to skip over similarly misleading remarks the advocates of the Monologues have made about Thomas Aquinas and turn instead to contemporary times. Within the last few months, I have come across the stories of three rather remarkable women. Abby Johnson worked within the abortion wing of Planned Parenthood for many years before a recent re-conversion; now, claiming that society owes women something better than abortion, she has become a leading voice in the pro-life movement. She spoke in Spokane last spring, but of course not at Gonzaga, as we were pre-occupied with the monologues. Teresa Tomeo worked in the communications industry as a television and radio reporter for many years; she has recently published *Extreme Makeover: Women Transformed by Christ Not Conformed to the Culture*. I still have a few chapters to go, but the book seems to be ably described by this sentence from its blurb: “Packed with not only persuasive statistics but also powerful personal testimonies, *Extreme Makeover* shows that it is not the slogans of the sexual revolution and the women’s liberation movement that free and dignify women, but the beautiful teachings of the Catholic Church.” And then, last Sunday, I happened to hear, at Christ the King parish in Seattle, a short talk by Theresa Deisher, Ph.D. in molecular and cellular physiology, Stanford, and a leading researcher in stem cell therapies who first identified the stem cells within the human heart. Dr. Deisher is also the founder of “Sound Choice Pharmaceutical Institute,” which is developing a certification program that would clarify for consumers which vaccines, medicines, and cosmetics have been developed without experimentation on the remains of elective abortions. All three of these women tell a similar story about their lives: a timid, ineffective religious education at a Christian high school, where people seemed afraid or unwilling to articulate the Church’s teaching on sexual morality, a subsequent fall during the college years into the culture of sex for pleasure alone, the culture of sex outside marriage, the culture of
abortion, and all the rest. This is followed by a rejection of what they perceive as the false promises of the women’s liberation movement and a turn to the Roman Catholic Church, for which they are exceedingly grateful, except to say that the Church should be far more confident in its teaching about sexual morality. Well, if the Vagina Monologues are somehow necessary for Gonzaga’s mission, wouldn’t a set of monologues done by these or similar women, be far more necessary to GU’s mission?

In concluding, I consider a final example, and here I am in danger of being tempted to anger. The advocates of the Vagina Monologues last spring appealed to the writings of John Paul II as implying that the Monologues are necessary for the mission of Gonzaga University. The claim that the author of Dignitatis Mulieribus, “On the Dignity of Women,” would be an advocate for something that so reduces the dignity of women, is implausible on its face. But this gives rise to a really outrageous proposition: What if those who claim to be attentive to the GU mission actually brought to our attention something written on the subject by John Paul II? What if we were asked to read Dignitatis Mulieribus rather than the Vagina Monologues?

I simply ask: How did Gonzaga University, a Catholic University, a Jesuit University, a University whose patron had a deeply developed devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, a University whose patron was the prized student of Robert Bellarmine, about the ablest defender of the papacy one could imagine—how, I ask, could Gonzaga University manage to get itself into a position wherein the Vagina Monologues receive the support of the university’s administration, much of its faculty, and, I guess, many of its students, but the words of one of the Church’s most remarkable popes in this or any age, including his words insisting on the dignity of women, be generally ignored as lying beyond the pale?

Despair, the Church teaches, is a sin, but I confess I don’t have a lot of hope that those in authoritative positions are even aware that we have a serious mission problem. So, I return to those female students I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, who, despite what Augustine may have thought, display a great tenacity for independent thinking. I point out to them that Teresa Tomeo’s book can be downloaded for about $10. I note that while the GU Right to Life club doesn’t have much of a budget, perhaps Theresa Deisher would do a pro bono talk. I’ve recently purchased a copy of the critical edition of John Paul II’s “Theology of the Body,” but I don’t have time to read it just now, so I’m willing to loan it. And, I will be offering a course on St. Augustine next spring, despite the harsh words of his Gonzaga detractors. Registration begins November 1. Yes, men, too, are permitted to enroll . . . if they can squeeze in before the female students take all the seats.