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Daddy's Little Girl: **A Provocative Feminist Critique of Purity Balls**

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Amandajeon Freking Nolte's 2009 production of Daddy's Little Girl critiques the recently popular upsurge of purity balls through her sexualized staging of a hymen-enforcing ball: a wedding-like event that exposes the heteronormative romance narrative, the commodification of girls' bodies in a system of social exchange, and the eroticized sexual control of girls' bodies by their fathers. Daddy's Little Girl situates audience members as co-participants in a purity ball, then distances them through its materialist feminist critique of the event as it unfolds. I analyze how Nolte's textual and production choices function as public critique on purity balls specifically, the culture of chastity and abstinence-only education generally, and the societal control of girls' bodies—namely, their sexual desire and agency—systemically through the institutions of education, religion, and the nuclear family.

Director's Note:

In 1998 Randy and Lisa Wilson of Generations of Light Church held the first Father-Daughter Purity Ball in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Since that time, they have become a national movement. Reminiscent of a wedding, Purity Balls include a tuxedo clad father and an exquisitely gowned daughter. The two arrive at a stylishly decorated reception hall where a nice dinner, elegantly decorated wedding cake, formal dancing, and couple photo opportunities await. At the conclusion of the ball's festivities, a covenant is shared between the fathers and daughters. The father pledges to protect his daughter's purity until he gives her to her husband, and the daughter pledges to remain pure for both of these men.

The underlying desire for a father to want to care for and protect his child is not one I am willing to criticize, nor do I want to attack a virginity pledge that a young woman comes to of her own free will. Instead I want you as an audience to look at the underlying themes that make a Purity Ball problematic for both the young women that are in attendance and the young women and men that are noticeably absent.

This show is dedicated to my wonderful sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews. May you never second guess your worth and let all of your decisions regarding your sexuality be educated ones made by you, for you. (Nolte 37)

* * *

Jennifer L. Freitag is a Doctoral Student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. She would like to thank Amandajeon Freking Nolte for granting her access to the script of *Daddy's Little Girl* and permission to quote it at length in this essay.

In her book, *Virgin: The Untouched History*, historian Hanne Blank explains, “By any material reckoning, virginity does not exist” (3). It has existed as a human invention, socially constructed as exclusively heterosexual (10); it was created as “an attribute of being civilized, which was to say Christian, European, and white” (11); and it has been primarily female: “The male body has never commonly been labeled as being virginal. . . . virginity has never mattered in regard to the way men are valued, or whether they were considered to marry or, indeed, to be permitted to survive” (10). Jessica Valenti argues, “The lie of virginity—the idea that such a thing even exists—is ensuring that young women’s perception of themselves is inextricable from their bodies, and that their ability to be moral actors is absolutely dependent on their sexuality” (*The Purity Myth* 9). Although seemingly less pervasive in contemporary Western societies, women’s virginity, and the culture of chastity designed to enforce it, has gained considerable momentum in the last fifteen years. Valenti states, “Remember how back in the day, your virginity was a valuable commodity and your ‘purity’ was pretty much what your dad banked on to get a good price for when you got married? You think that’s all in the past? Not even close” (*Full Frontal Feminism* 25).

An Introduction to Purity Balls

In March 2009, Amandajean Freking Nolte staged *Daddy’s Little Girl* at the University of Northern Iowa Interpreter’s Theatre. A self-described “performance art piece” (Nolte 1), *Daddy’s Little Girl* invites audience members to an exaggerated, hypersexualized purity ball that critiques the Christian practice of adolescent girls pledging their virginity to their fathers through wedding-like ceremonies. Breanne Fahs states, “Recent years have seen a surge in public attention to the culture of chastity, including purity balls, chastity clubs, and other public declarations of abstinence and asexuality” (116). Not only are such practices ineffective for preventing sexual activity and for decreasing sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (Dailard; Manlove, Ryan, and Franzetta; *Medical News Today*; Pillow), they also function to oppress women and girls within a culture of patriarchy and sexism. Fahs argues,

. . . our obsession with restraining sexual expression has led to a sex-obsessed culture of chastity. . . . this particular construction of sexuality in a highly gendered social space that reinforces women’s oppressed sociosexual status as the property of men, inadequately prepares them for negotiating the terms of their sexual health, and encourages them to seek out chastity clubs and social spaces that construct an identity based on enforced repression of sexual desire and expression. (117)

One such space is in the evangelical Christian movement, which promotes the father-daughter purity ball as a “Christ-centered evening that

encourages biblical values and strengthens the bond between fathers and daughters” (*Purity Ball.com*).

In her 2007 article in *Glamour* magazine entitled, “Would you Pledge your Virginity to your Father?” Jennifer Baumgardner explains purity balls:

Dozens of these lavish events are held every year, mainly in the South and Midwest, from Tucson to Peoria and New Orleans, sponsored by churches, nonprofit groups and crisis pregnancy centers. The balls are all part of the evangelical Christian movement, and they embody one of its key doctrines: abstinence until marriage. Thousands of girls have taken purity vows at these events over the past nine years.

In addition to girls’ contractual agreement to abstain from sexual activity, fathers, often designated as “warriors,” sign commitments to be men of integrity who fight to protect their daughters’ sexual purity. Generations of Light, the Colorado Springs-based leader in the father-daughter purity ball “national movement,” asserts that purity balls are now hosted in almost every state in the U.S. According to their website, the purity ball ritual involves the following:

The Father Daughter Purity Ball is a powerful ceremony for fathers to sign commitments to be responsible men of integrity in all areas of purity. The commitment also includes their vow to set the standard of honor and integrity in their daughter’s lives and to encourage them in their choices for purity. The daughters silently commit to live pure lives before God through the symbol of laying down a white rose at the cross, as we believe the purity of the daughters rests on the shoulders of the fathers. (*Generations of Light*)

Fahs explains that, “purity balls make literal the chastity pledge” for daughters and that “fathers can and should guard their daughters’ chastity as their own property” (132). In other words, purity balls function in a highly ritualized way to enforce the practice of virginity and maintain men’s social control over female bodies.

Daddy’s Little Girl as Critique

As public critique, *Daddy’s Little Girl* functions to expose the conditions in which girls’ bodies are controlled, commodified, and oppressed through societal constructs in the purity ball context. Nolte’s foundational claim is that purity balls (and abstinence-only education at large) deny girls’ sexual desire and pleasure and therefore cause potentially detrimental effects, negatively impacting girls’ agency, sexual subjectivity, and healthy sexual development. April Burnes and María Elena Torre argue that abstinence-only policies threaten young women’s “critical intellectual engagement”—

engagement that is very important for their entitlement and self-advocacy (135). Deborah Tolman identifies societal control of girls' desire as a risky misrepresentation of sexuality:

Abstinence implies an absence of (girls') sexuality, which denies the fact that we are all sexual beings. To deny adolescents their sexuality and information about it, rather than to educate them about the intricacies and complexities and nuances of their feelings, choices, and behaviors, is to deny them a part of their humanity. What "choice" do girls have when their own sexual feelings are not supposed to exist? (203)

Through *Daddy's Little Girl*, Nolte provocatively critiques societal control of girls' bodies, the contradictions inherent in this control, and girls' struggles to negotiate the constraints that characterize their lived experience. She invites her audience to participate beyond spectatorship to dialogue and social action, and she embodies bell hooks' call for future feminist struggle, a struggle that "must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have long-range impact" (hooks 33). Through performance, Nolte exposes the patriarchal tools used in sexist oppression and calls for a "reorganizing [of] society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires" (hooks 26). Nolte positions audience members as co-participants and uses Brechtian theatre techniques to make *Daddy's Little Girl* a strong catalyst for audience members to imagine radical structural change. She dismantles the seemingly normalized dominance of the father-daughter purity ball construct to reveal a system of sexism needing societal transformation. Nolte's show leaves audience members with the reality she imagines of the girls' lives in the purity ball culture: "These are girls who may never find out what it means to make decisions without a man involved, to stand up for themselves, to own their sexuality" (Baumgardner).

Daddy's Little Girl is grounded in a materialist feminism framework. Jill Dolan explains materialist feminism as that which considers women to be a class of people oppressed by an overarching structure of sexism that affects them in material ways (10). Nolte especially considers how class, sexual identification, and age influence the ways their bodies are negotiated in this system. Dolan states:

Here, gender becomes a construct formed to support the structure of the dominant culture. Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes, an arrangement of relations that also prescribes sexuality. As another construct, sexuality is also an expression of gender relationships within a power dynamic. The social relations of sexuality

demand compulsory heterosexuality and the constraint of active female sexuality. Rubin emphasizes that through a system of social relations, females are fashioned into gendered products that are exchanged on a political economy that benefits men. (11)

Through *Daddy's Little Girl*, Nolte makes these dynamics explicit. In this essay, I explore how Nolte stages her material feminist critique of purity balls as a catalyst for increased public dialogue about the culture of chastity.

I begin with an introduction to Nolte's performance. Then, I move through three themes I have identified in *Daddy's Little Girl* that make clear contributions to a materialist feminist discussion about purity balls and the culture of chastity. First, Nolte exposes the heteronormative romance narrative as a construct that sets up compulsory heterosexuality and the social relationship between women and men—a construct identifiable in the larger dominant culture but specifically foundational for reinforcing the importance of the purity ball ritual. Next, Nolte comments upon how purity balls dictate and commodify female sexuality through enculturation and the social exchange of female bodies. Finally, Nolte eroticizes the father-daughter purity covenant to problematize issues of power, control, and girls' sexual agency in the purity ball ritual.

As I move through my discussion on these themes, I draw upon theories of feminist criticism of drama, literature, and film. Dolan states, "One of the tools of materialist feminist criticism is a systemic dismantling of the assumptions that underlie psychoanalysis," (11) and I note these moments in Nolte's scripting and staging choices. In *Daddy's Little Girl*, Nolte embodies Judith Fetterley's notion of a "resisting reader," which calls for the following:

. . . the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us. . . . While women obviously cannot rewrite literary works so that they become ours by virtue of reflecting our reality, we can accurately name the reality they do reflect and so change literary criticism from a closed conversation to an active dialogue. (xxii-xxiii, qtd. in Austin 27)

Although Nolte's critique is not a literary one, her critique of the purity ball ritual functions as a resistant reading of the culture of chastity and the patriarchal foundation in which it is embedded. In addition to her intention of starting dialogue about purity balls, she also challenges the ritual by exaggerating certain elements to draw attention to the cultural systems and patriarchal social reality in which they take place. And because Nolte's critique is staged, she also invites her audience to participate in the event as resistant readers to both purity balls and Nolte's critique itself.

Daddy's Little Girl: An Analysis of Nolte's Purity Ball

Setting:

An elegant, intimate ballroom in Middle America. At first glance the scene is beautiful with expensive touches. The longer the audience looks . . . things are not quite right. The floor is off kilter, the decorations are gaudy, and there are phallic symbols and condom bouquets throughout. (Nolte 4)

* * *

In *Daddy's Little Girl* Nolte uses a combination of visual cues, traditional dramatic script, frozen and moving images, popular music, and epideictic rhetoric to critique the purity ball ritual and the cultural institution in which it is situated. She begins her performance art piece by positioning audience members as automatic co-participants in the event taking place, though she immediately makes clear through the setting that the event is not a "real" purity ball. As the attendees arrive, they are asked by the purity ball photographer to pose for pictures underneath the condom balloon arch. The ushers and house manager welcome the guests and thank them for fighting for young girls' purity.

Scene 1, "The Unveiling," introduces the event in ceremonial fashion. Its highlight is a prayer to the "Celestial Chastity and Intact Hymen Enforcer" to "be with these young women tonight as they make a pledge to remain pure for the holy trinity in their lives: you, their fathers and their future husbands. There is worth in their . . . untouched peak [their virginity] and [it] must be protected at all costs" (6-7). Scene 2, "Consumption and Exchange," features a contemporary pop music montage with fathers feeding cake to their daughters and the daughters moving frantically about the stage in right angles and straight lines. In scene 3, "Stripping Bare," a mother at the ceremony explains the virtue of purity as the daughters wrap one female in toilet paper like a bridal gown. Scene 4, "Pleasure," involves the telling of a Cinderella story told to draw attention to themes of virginity, self-image, and heterosexism. In scene 5, "Oral Contraception," the girls are put through the "Dad's Purity Machine" to program each for chastity, heterosexuality, traditional female gender roles, and Christianity. The girls make vows to their fathers as some girls perform resistance to this ritual, and the fathers commit themselves "as her authority" to "prey over her / my baby / my daughter / mine." (22-23). Here Nolte uses word play to suggest oppressive power and control in the father-daughter relationship. Scene 6, "Bump and Grind," features a father-daughter dance that is interrupted by Lady Gaga's song, "Love Game," in which the girls break out and dance with one another in an act of defiance. Scene 7, "Wham Bam, Thank You Ma'am," stages the girls in a processional line to receive their final blessings at the cross. This final scene features internal dialogue of both the daughters and fathers in which hopes, fears, concerns, and resistance are expressed by all characters. The show ends with a layered chorus of single words (Proud / Pressure / Safe /

Special / Scared / Girl / Protected / Want / Stop!) spoken by the fathers and daughters until all yell “STOP!!” together, followed by one line spoken by the one mother at the ceremony: “And they lived happily ever after” (31).

Nolte’s purity ball is followed by an intermission and an invitation for audience members to stay for a public dialogue about issues of agency and responsible sexual behavior through Boalian forum theatre techniques facilitated by the SAVE Forum Actors, a University of Northern Iowa peer theatre troupe. This invitation makes Nolte’s desire for social change clear; it builds upon her use of Brechtian and performance art strategies—namely, the framing of the performance as a live event in which the audience members are co-participants, the centrality of the body (both its staged and material reality beyond the performance), the exaggerated presentation of the purity ball, and the ways in which the performance pushes the boundaries of appropriateness and audience comfort—to create an explicitly feminist critique of purity balls. Nolte’s goal is to provide this critique in order to catalyze dialogue around issues of purity balls specifically and the culture of chastity more generally.

The Heteronormative Romance Narrative

Once upon a time in a faraway land lived a young princess and her father. The princess loved her father with all of her heart and her father held this little girl on a pure, white pedestal. Every night before bed the young princess would climb into her frilly pink bed and her father would tell her a story that ended with . . . and they lived happily ever after. (Nolte 12)

* * *

Adrienne Rich defines compulsory heterosexuality as “a political institution which disempowers women” (11) and is sustained through male domination, assumed heterosexuality, and limited sexual agency. Compulsory heterosexuality dehumanizes and oppresses women through patriarchal power that manifests itself upon women in numerous ways, including the denial of their sexuality and the forcedness of sexuality upon them. Tolman argues that Rich makes clear “how the institution is maintained or reinforced by the constant threat of violence or other negative repercussions for refusal to comply with such restrictive norms of normalcy and femininity” (17). In the case of purity balls, the threat is punishment or ostracization from the family, especially on the part of the father, peers, and others within the community promoting a culture of chastity.

One way Rich points out that sexuality is forced upon women is through the “idealization of the heterosexual romance in art, literature, the media, advertising” (Tolman 18). Nolte uses a “resistant reading” of the Cinderella fairy tale as entertainment at the ball to draw attention to how the purity ball relies on compulsory heterosexuality through its emphasis on traditional femininity, female sexual purity, and father-daughter intimacy (as I will discuss more later). Nolte expands the traditional Cinderella story by emphasizing the oppressive constructs in which Cinderella operates. Because

she “always looked dusty and dirty,” the stepsisters call her a slut, whore, skank, and bitch (13-14). Still, Cinderella is described as being “pious and good,” to which several of her peers react, “Bitch, please” (16). Cinderella’s stepmother remains committed to marrying off the stepsisters to the prince, emphasizing the heteronormative narrative that each female has a male soul mate for which the shoe will fit perfectly.

Nolte’s Cinderella story points to the compulsory heterosexuality inherent in purity balls. Fahs argues that chastity-focused organizations promote an idea that instead of desiring sex, what girls really want is romantic love (121). This “master narrative of romance” forms a template for how men and women should operate in the heterosexual institution—women as passive and men as aggressive and dominant (Tolman 81). Tolman argues that this narrative “entices and invites girls into trading in the full range of the real feelings, including sexual desire, taboo emotions, and knowledge of what is actually happening in relationships and reality, for male commitment, care, and attention” (81). Thus, the heterosexual romance narrative functions to control women’s bodies.

The romance narrative is also predicated on the maintenance of a male/female gender binary that prescribes an extremely narrow definition of women’s sexuality that in the context of the purity ball is framed as freedom. Fahs argues:

The concept of purity as freedom from that which it contaminates or debases (the commonly held definition) situates sexuality as dirty, sinful, and potentially polluting—for women. This definition encourages women to construct sex not as a normal part of human existence, but as something that fundamentally corrupts them and brings forth disease and contamination. Not only does this language hinder women’s ability to construct sexuality in more complicated ways, but it also strengthens gender dichotomization, as men do not become similarly contaminated, polluted, and damaged when having sex. (134-35)

Nolte highlights the double standard of female sexuality through the prince’s dance with many girls; here, Nolte’s story, which depicts the prince as loyal to the maiden Cinderella, is juxtaposed on stage with the images Nolte presents of the prince’s nonmonogamy.

Nolte’s Cinderella story revolves around men (the father and the prince), offers no positive female role models (only the wicked stepmother), and highlights girls’ own participation in the patriarchal system that oppresses them (the stepsisters and other girls at the ball). Nolte also makes apparent how fathers are the determiners of girls’ sexual behavior. Mothers with agency are both absent in the framing of the Cinderella story (a father telling the story to his daughter) and the Cinderella story itself. Mothers are also largely absent from the father-daughter purity ball, although Nolte does write one

mother, a sort of emcee for the ball, into her script. These choices emphasize the romance narrative as situated within a patriarchal context that renders females (daughters *and* mothers) powerless.

Powerless, that is, without divine or magical assistance. In Nolte's story, when Cinderella expresses she is pure, her female peers react with a "Bitch, please," thus emphasizing the impossibility of maintaining such purity. Although Nolte's telling of the story emphasizes Cinderella's purity as the reason for being happily united with the prince, this surely would not have been the case if it were not for magical intervention. Cinderella's own happy ending actually occurs through the granting of her wishes at her mother's burial tree. This parallels the purity ball prayer to the "Celestial Chastity and Intact Hymen Enforcer" and suggests that girls' purity is only achievable with divine assistance. Nolte thus exposes a double bind: the girls are ultimately set up for failure by societal standard impossible for them to uphold.

Nolte offers resistance to compulsory heterosexuality through one character (Emily) who interjects, "I don't want a husband" (210) early in the ball, seeks a dance with another female, and repeatedly expresses her thoughts throughout the ball: "I don't even like boys and I'm starting to think I never will" (27). Thus, Nolte offers space for moving beyond the heterosexual norm, further exposing the patriarchal and homophobic context in which purity balls are situated. She highlights the normalization of fairy tales as prescriptions for girls' sexuality that ultimately result in their placement into the construct of the traditional nuclear family. Nolte's choices therefore reflect the compulsory heterosexuality not only of purity balls, but also of U.S. society at large. The societal expectation for girls' marriage to men, as well as the traditional practices that surround these rituals, are not only heteronormative and sexist; they also contribute to the exploitation of female bodies in a men's marketplace of social exchange.

The Commodification of Girls' Bodies

The "Dad's Purity Machine":

Enter here. / Chin up. / Smile big. / Clasp hands. / Straight.

Back here. / Shoulders back. Show teeth. / Follow Jesus. / Straight.

Try harder. / Grace and poise. Innocent eyes. / Live pure. Straight.
(Nolte 20-21)

* * *

The commodification of female bodies is made explicit in *Daddy's Little Girl* in two primary ways: first, the daughters are physically moved through the "Dad's Purity Machine," an assembly line intended to produce traditionally feminine, heterosexual, and sexually pure female bodies ready for consumption by husbands. Christine Griffin comments, "'Girlhood,' and the bodies of girls and young women, are frequently represented both as consuming subjects and as objects of consumption, especially as objects

of male heterosexual consumption and desire” (35). Nolte exposes the patriarchal system that maintains the superiority of female virginity for men’s pleasure and reinforces virginity, passivity, and femininity as necessary for male consumption and fulfillment through heterosexual marriage. The purity ball ritual ensures that daughters are commodified as products that will be desired and passed to other men.

The commodification of women is also made clear by the ways Nolte points to the purity ball as similar to the wedding ceremony. She opens the purity ball event with a father’s exhortation, “Tonight is a celebration. We men are God’s warriors sent here to defend our daughters’ worth. Enjoy each other tonight. Dance, eat wedding cake, and bestow a ring to your daughter as a symbol of your love and commitment” (8). Jennifer Baumgardner says of the girls at purity balls, “some look disconcertingly like wives” and Nolte capitalizes upon this notion. In this context, fathers are set up as the sole proprietors of their daughters’ sexuality until they are married; Nolte thus draws attention to the extremely traditional practice of fathers’ “giving away” brides in Western society. Although purity balls represent the “extreme edge” of the abstinence-only movement (Baumgardner), Nolte makes clear that the social exchange of women’s bodies as commodities is still common in contemporary society.

Daddy’s Little Girl exposes the exploitation inherent in girls’ presentation by their fathers to their grooms as gifts by drawing attention to girls’ bodies as having “use-value” (Rubin 178). One father at the purity ball says to his two daughters, “You are perfection, the fruit born from the relationship between your mother and me. Worship yourself and allow yourself to be a gift to your future husband. Until the day I hand you over as a present to him, I will help you remain my innocent little girls” (Nolte 7). Not only does the father denote his daughters as objects to be exchanged, he refers to them not as individuals, as people, but as “fruit,” material objects purposed for consumption. Later, the girls make their commitment to purity “until the day I give myself as a wedding gift / present / souvenir / reward / to my husband” (22). Their exhortation should not be mistaken for an embodiment of agency, however, as they have merely adopted their fathers’ and the church’s view of themselves as objects of social exchange. Rubin describes the patriarchal power and male benefits of female use-value:

If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social exchange. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges—social organization. (174)

The practice and social exchange value of fathers giving away brides hinges on the presentation of brides as clean, pure, and untouched. In *Daddy's Little Girl*, Nolte's characters refer to a girl's untouched vagina as a "sanctuary," "grotto," "secret garden," and "untouched peak" which "must be protected at all costs" (7). In her discussion of purity balls and female chastity, Lily Matson Dagdigian explains: "Sexual desire is . . . supposed to be invisible for these girls; your virginity is something you should safeguard, and patiently watch over, until the day when the right man will kindly take it off your hands for you" (47). The daughters at the ball wear white wedding dresses like those still traditionally worn by brides in contemporary United States society. Although virginity may not, in the twenty-first century, be as integral to the practice of the social exchange of the bride, the white dress and practice of "giving away" still hint at its historical underpinnings and current influence on the way we view women and girls, especially in evangelical culture, in which "teenage girls' purity is endlessly discussed in the name of protection and the sanctity of marriage" (Dagdigian 36).

Nolte situates the purity ball daughters as victims of the patriarchal institutions of family and religion; they do not reap any benefits from their enculturation in this system other than institutional approval and protection from consequences that might result from breaking out of this system. Although Nolte's script does offer the audience some insight into what the daughters are thinking throughout the ceremony, she largely depicts the girls as passive participants without voice. This becomes increasingly more problematic when considered in a frame of sexual domination.

The Eroticization of the Father-Daughter Covenant

Tonight you have shown your commitment to keeping your daughters pure and her treasure unpenetrated. We live in a time where the hymenally challenged speak loudly, but your dedication tonight shows that you men of virtue are ready to fight and destroy the enemy. Let us begin our meaningful time together with a prayer. (close eyes and pray) Celestial Chastity and Intact Hymen Enforcer, be with these young women tonight as they make a pledge to remain pure for the holy trinity in their lives: you, their fathers and their future husbands. (Nolte 6-7)

* * *

As Fahs asserts and Nolte makes clear in *Daddy's Little Girl*, These ceremonies—in which women essentially "marry" their fathers (until their wedding day, when they are given away), sign chastity pledges, and accept rings or other jewelry that literally marks their body as property—situate women and their bodies in a model of sexual commerce. . . . fathers becomes the mechanism through which young women channel and suppress their sexual urges. (118)

Nolte challenges her audience by exposing the sexual domination of daughters by their fathers through provocative images and scripting choices. In Scene 2, "Consumption," Nolte presents the following:

As the scene opens JASON enters carrying a large tray covered with mini pieces of cake. Once he is set the DADS enter and take a piece of cake to feed to their GIRLS. The DADS take their cake and freeze in a feeding position. Once they hit their mark the GIRLS enter the space and enter the image. They freeze in a provocative eating of cake pose that could be interpreted as sexual. After two beats, the GIRLS are fed the cake and the men leave the stage. (9)

Adrienne Rich argues that one way male sexuality is forced upon females is through father-daughter incest. *Daddy's Little Girl* depicts the father-daughter relationship as sexualized through montages of fathers standing, sitting, or on one knee with daughters in sexual poses, legs spread, rears protruding, lips pouting. Nolte makes a choice here to use real cake in this scene, creating a spectacle of the common "cutting the cake" ritual at weddings. At Nolte's event, however, the spectacle becomes one of disgust for its spectators. Nolte flips the idea of girls as consumers (as they eat the cake) to girls as objects of their fathers' consumption, a sexualized extension of what Nolte does to illuminate girls' bodies as commodities in social exchange. Nolte uses provocative images again later in the script that are even more repulsive when one father commits to "smother" his daughter "as her authority" (22) and another to lead, guide, and "prey over her," echoed by the other men who refer to their daughters as "my baby/my daughter/mine" (23).

Nolte's explicit rendering of the father-daughter relationship as incestuous accomplishes several things theoretically. First, Nolte makes an intelligent argument about the displacement of desire from girls' healthy erotic agency to fathers' incest. In their essay on abstinence-only education, Burnes and Torre argue that abstinence-only tactics in schools function to displace girls' sexual desire for that of academic success, thus resulting "in a reordering of the erotic, away from an erotics of the body as a site of pleasure and the self as sexually desiring, to an erotics of achievement and material success" (133). Similarly, Nolte suggests that through denial of girls' sexual agency and emphasis on the intimacy of the father-daughter bond (through the purity contract), sexual desire becomes displaced onto the father, whom she is supposed to worship. Girls' sexual desire, therefore, cannot be squelched but only displaced onto other subjects or objects.

Another way to conceptualize Nolte's depiction of incest is through Freud's psychoanalytic theorization of women, especially in the Oedipus phase. It is at this point the girl becomes embittered at her mother for depriving her of a penis and so turns to her father, fantasizing that he will give her a penis and later a baby. Girls may remain in this Oedipus complex "for an indeterminate amount of time" which they may never come out of, a

condition that Freud argues contributes to “the average feminine character” (Freud 129). Nolte’s incestuous images put Freud’s penis envy on display, revolting the audience and deconstructing Freud’s theory in the process—utilizing it to call attention to the structures that reinforce the sexist oppression of women—namely, male superiority and traditional femininity.

Nolte’s choices can also be discussed in terms of Laura Mulvey’s extension of Freudian and Lacanian theory in film. Mulvey posits that scopophilia (the pleasure of seeing another as a sexual object) and narcissism (derived from pleasure of identification with the image seen) objectify women and cause identification with male protagonists. She calls for film tactics that disrupt the male gaze, a “passionate detachment” which Gayle Austin identifies as having high similarity with Brecht’s own distancing technique in theatre (Austin 85) that, as Jill Dolan comments, estranges “the spectator from the conditions of life outlined by the representation” and “denaturalizes the dominant ideology that benefits from such ‘natural’ social relations” (107). Nolte’s positioning of the audience as co-participants situates them not as spectators but as community members who participate in the action. She works against audience members’ default into spectatorship by disrupting the male gaze through the depiction of incest. Her approach is Brechtian in nature, and it serves a materialist feminist purpose; Nolte denies spectatorship in these moments of disruption in order that audience members form social critiques about the issues before them—a catalyst for potential social change.

Combined with her focus on the heterosexual romance narrative and the commodification of girls’ bodies, Nolte’s suggestion (or exaggeration) of the sexualized father-daughter relationship invites audience members to form their own opinions and critiques of purity balls and abstinence-only education. She does not provide a conclusive, concrete argument regarding the extent to which father-daughter purity contracts are incestuous, but her solid arguments regarding compulsory heterosexuality and commodification invite the audience to move further into the speculation of her incest theory.

A Call for Revolutionary Feminist Praxis

SAMANTHA: I love my dad. I know he wants what’s best for me and I try really hard, but I feel guilty all of the time. Guilty for leading my boyfriend on. Guilty for not being pure enough. Guilty for not being a good enough role model for my sister. Guilty for having sexual feelings that I try to suppress but can’t. I wish it would just stop. (Nolte 27)

EMILY: He doesn’t know anything about me. He’s always so busy with work I don’t feel cared for at all. I don’t even like boys and I’m starting to think I never will. I probably won’t end up married and I feel all of this pressure to remain pure now. Where does that leave me? (27)

ASHLEY: *It's not like I planned it, it just happened. I was ashamed but it just kept happening. My dad's controlling because he doesn't want me to grow up. He just pretends that he doesn't see and hear things. I wish he'd just accept me for who I am. (28)*

JOHN: *I'm scared. I want Taylor to lead a good life full of happiness and laughter. I want her to lead a better life than I have. This is the only way I know to show her how to achieve all of these things. (28)*

* * *

Daddy's Little Girl is a catalyst for critical thought, a smart example of revolutionary feminist praxis at work, and a call for the liberation of girls and women from an oppressive, patriarchal system that sexually objectifies, commodifies, and controls female bodies. Nolte's commitment to the eradication of sexist oppression, her dedication to research and theory on girls' sexuality, and her creative and intellectual ability to stage accessible materialist feminist critique are remarkable and exemplary of future directions for feminist theatre praxis. Although limited in scope, my hope is that this essay contributes to needed analysis and discussion of such contemporary praxis. Austin argues:

there are advantages for the feminist critical project of studying plays. Plays allow the reader and audience to visualize, to fill in blanks and gaps. They provide the frameworks for productions that can bring out many of the issues feminism finds pressing. They combine verbal and nonverbal elements simultaneously, so that questions of language and visual representation can be addressed at the same time, through the medium of an actual body. They contribute a unique field of examples to women's representation. (Austin 2-3)

We surely need more performances like Nolte's that bring feminist issues into various contexts for critical exploration and public dialogue, and we need to discuss creative projects like Nolte's that work to challenge problematic systems of oppression and make engaging the social problems in contemporary culture. This is a theatre and a politics of intervention.

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