

# Nurturing Voyeurism, Vibrant Sexism, and Violence: Why We Can't (Yet) Afford to Forget about *Wild at Heart*<sup>1</sup>

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I have long deliberated the possible efficacy of another *Wild at Heart* critique. Although many excellent critiques arose in the years after the book's initial release in 2001,<sup>2</sup> it still sells unusually well, progressively working its way into churches, homes, and minds. The English language version has sold over 4.5 million copies,<sup>3</sup> annual sales exceed 100,000,<sup>4</sup> and it currently holds the #1 Best Seller spot in Christian Men's Issues on Amazon.<sup>5</sup> To date, the book has been translated into thirty languages. Beyond this, the ideologies of *Wild at Heart* find expression in subsequent books written by John and Stasi Eldredge, most notably *Captivating*,<sup>6</sup> as well as numerous contemporary Christian works on sex and gender that display direct influence from the Eldredges' teachings or promote similar ideas.<sup>7</sup> Hardly a year passes without some popular Christian book on gender or parenting acknowledging the Eldredges and their teachings or listing *Wild at Heart* as recommended reading.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Mansfield, for example, calls the book "masterful," listing it first in "The Ten Essential Books for Manly Men," because it provides men with "the tools for understanding and living out the essential passions of manhood."<sup>9</sup> For Eldredge himself, such steady reception confirms its timeless truth. It is somehow paradoxically "truer" than before, because "it rings eternal, and universal. God was in it then; he is in it still."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps, then, the unremitting popularity of the book *despite* multiple well-argued criticisms urges us to address its "theological and cultural vices"<sup>11</sup> anew. Detractors may be tired of talking about *Wild at Heart*, but, nevertheless, the book and its ideas still find favorable reception in the Christian community. Its sustained influence fifteen years later suggests that there are still valid and pressing reasons for questioning the legitimacy of Eldredge's version of masculinity. This task is also important because *Wild at Heart* is not really new or unique. It is a standard-bearer in a particular and recent (though durative) "movement"<sup>12</sup> of Christian masculinity that draws from a complex nexus of cultural norms whose roots extend back into the early modern period. The sheer ubiquity of these ideologies can hinder critical evaluation, since their prevalence sometimes is taken as evidence for universality. The book's success exacerbates the problem because it puts a Christian stamp on *counter*-biblical popular ideologies about gender that have debilitating consequences both in and out of the body of Christ.

Below I outline newly refined perspectives on ways that Eldredge recapitulates conventional gender ideologies. The narrative I develop builds upon past critiques, especially Smith and Mulder (2004) and Camery-Hoggatt and Munn (2005). I orient toward a few interrelated aspects promoted by *Wild at Heart*—voyeurism and sexual exploitation, consumerism, and violence toward women—to more explicitly detail potential interdiscursivity and enculturation. Ultimately, while there are many problematic issues in Eldredge's book, I focus on sexism and false conceptualizations of gender because they are dangerous (and not in the sense of "dangerous" that Eldredge praises), and they continue to be propagated in the Christian world.

## A Beauty to Rescue, or a Damsel in Distress? Engendering Objectification

Feminist scholars and activists have repeatedly chosen media as a point of critique. This is because literary works, movies, TV shows, and video games commonly perpetuate sexism through their portrayal of stereotypical gender roles, such as the "damsel in distress." This popular trope extends over centuries of literary use, centering on a weak and helpless (often intellectually incapacitated) woman who is in dire need of rescue by a male protagonist. One of the three core "desires" that Eldredge attributes to all men is "a beauty to rescue;" likewise, he attributes to women a "desire" to be "pursued." In this way, Eldredge's gender ideologies are a form of the damsel in distress trope, and he frequently supports his views by making recourse to pop culture archetypes of masculinity built on this theme. In his depiction of gendered souls, then, Eldredge participates in particularizing versions of masculinity and femininity that are woven deep into contemporary US and evangelical society.

As a literary device, feminist scholars target this conventional trope because it disempowers and objectifies women, evoking the image that their agency is either severely mitigated or removed completely.<sup>13</sup> Its use in popular culture is extensive and persists even today. For example, in 2013, as a reaction to the trope's continued prevalence, media critic Anita Sarkeesian released a three-part video blog exposing the pervasiveness of the damsel in distress as a narrative tool in modern video games.<sup>14</sup> Notably, many games offer an embodied interactional experience where *Wild at Heart*'s central theses are played out, especially the particularized roles of men and women informed by male aggression and female passivity. The Eldredges' gender performances in *Wild at Heart* and *Captivating* thus mirror resonant themes in video game narratives: men are typically the protagonists, women "share" in or are an instrument for the protagonist's "quest," and violence/aggression is normalized. Possibly in response to initial criticisms, *Captivating* and materials on the Eldredges' Ransomed Heart Ministries website now emphasize the "irreplaceable" nature of the female and her role, but this gesture seems akin to "token gestures of pseudo-empowerment" in video games that "don't really offer any meaningful development to the core of the [damsel in distress] trope."<sup>15</sup>

From a Christian perspective, however, one might wonder whether criticizing this trope undercuts the biblical metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ. I do not believe that this is the case for the following reasons. First, on a basic level it should be noted that gender-based metaphors, images, and tropes are not sexist by necessity. Second, Carolyn Osiek raises important points when she notes that misinterpretations of one such "beautiful" passage (Eph 5:22–33) have yielded negative consequences when appropriated to support patriarchy, and that modern-day application is problematic.<sup>16</sup> In this passage "the text very quickly moves away from marriage to ecclesiology,"<sup>17</sup> and I take it that this shift cautions against over application to marriage

relationships. Gordon Fee also echoes the problems inherent in directly applying the household code in the Ephesians text “to us and our homes.” Since they depend on foreign “cultural givens . . . the structures are ultimately irrelevant.”<sup>18</sup> Instead, the point is that Christ’s love fills and informs our relations. Moreover, the fact that marriage and ecclesiology are in view in Eph 5:22–33 suggests that broader extension to women and men is blatantly inappropriate.

Even if we consider this metaphor in light of a narrative where Christ the “hero” pursues and saves his bride, the church, any potential “disempowerment” at issue does not concern only one gender and thus is not analogous to the damsel in distress trope. The shift toward ecclesiology in Eph 5 signals an intentional blurring of gender boundaries to show that women and men stand equal together as the “new humanity.”<sup>19</sup> The church as bride metaphor thus humbles all of humanity with respect to Christ regarding salvation; this is symmetric concerning gender, entailing mutuality and equality. Alternatively, the damsel in distress trope disempowers women with respect to men, which is inherently asymmetric, entailing subordination and inequality.

Another problem with how the damsel in distress trope is rehearsed in contemporary US culture and in *Wild at Heart* is the visual objectification of women through portrayals that are often highly sexualized. Perhaps, then, what Eldredge attempts to achieve in *Wild at Heart* is the liberation of some intrinsically good pursuit that has been hijacked by game designers and other producers of popular culture. That is, perhaps Eldredge wants to alleviate the objectification of women while holding on to something he sees as good in the gendered concept of “a beauty to rescue.” But Eldredge does little to relieve the sexualized objectification of women in his employment of the damsel in distress trope; instead, he contributes to it. For example, one of Eldredge’s prototypes of masculinity is James Bond. Female characters in Bond films offer an interesting take on the damsel in distress motif: they are not typically weak and helpless, except in their inability to resist Bond’s powerful attractiveness and seduction. Nevertheless, they always represent Hollywood standards of feminine beauty, and their names are often risqué—even blatantly sexual—double entendres like “Pussy Galore,” “Octopussy,” “Plenty O’Toole,” “Xenia Onatopp,” “Fiona Volpe” (Italian for “fox”), and “Holly Goodhead” (some of which have video game counterparts). Rather than representing biblical masculinity, Bond is a caricature of “phallic masculinity”<sup>20</sup> replete with gender stereotypes and the sexual exploitation of disempowered women. *Wild at Heart*’s rigid complementarity effectively attempts to naturalize the damsel in distress cliché—men need to be a “hero” and women need to be “rescued”—proof texting from pop culture rather than offering a counter-cultural paradigm.

### Sanctioned Voyeurism and Sexual Exploitation

Eldredge’s idolization of Bond and Indiana Jones as among those exemplifying the masculine ideal is problematic because it promotes the objectification of women, in part, through a culture of voyeurism and sexual exploitation. Moreover, Eldredge’s failure to separate his version of masculinity from such sexualized representations—indeed his very alliance

with them—is telling. The male desire for “a beauty to rescue,” coupled with the superficial Hollywood-style nature of “beauty” in *Wild at Heart* and the attribution of “goodness” to certain male sexual behaviors, all within a Christian context, together engender a sanctioned voyeuristic mentality.

Eldredge’s use of “beauty” is often ambiguous, but when he is explicit the descriptions are sensual and visual.<sup>21</sup> His “beauty” is “young with a youth that seems eternal;” she has “flowing hair . . . deep eyes . . . luscious lips” and “a sculpted figure.”<sup>22</sup> Implicit, therefore, in Eldredge’s take on “beauty” is an exaltation of the physical, and the presence of this in a book as influential as Eldredge’s is further dangerous because of the function of female sexuality it constructs. Recently, Everest Bryce has drawn from Eldredge’s (mis)interpretation of the OT book of Ruth to argue that a woman’s beauty and sensuality can and should aid in effecting masculinity, because a woman “waits and yearns to give of herself.”<sup>23</sup> Accordingly:

How does a good woman help her man to play the man? John Eldredge answers the question spot on, “She can use all she is as a woman to get him to use all he’s got as a man. She can arouse, inspire, energize . . . seduce him.” . . . He goes on to say, “She wants to be swept up into an adventure with him.” The irony is that as soon as she captures him and marries him, too often her wounds and fears take over, and she tries to tame him. If she is successful, they both lose.<sup>24</sup>

Bryce’s take on *Wild at Heart*’s gendered roles treats the female body in part as a resource, and the boundedness he imposes on femininity aligns with Eldredge’s rigid male-female stereotypes. Thus, effect-valued beauty has a purpose, but to a point—it is meant to be noticed, but the effect is negative if it degrades the “wild.” Wildness is viewed as part of the infinite spirit of men and women, and God “shares a special closeness”<sup>25</sup> with those who are wild.

Women are thus encouraged to exploit their beauty to “arouse” the passions of men. Again referencing *Wild at Heart*, Bryce praises Ruth for “crawl[ing] into bed with a man she knew had too much to drink, seduc[ing] him with her beauty and brash.” Such behaviors should be lauded, because, as John and Stasi Eldredge maintain, “*God holds it up for all women to follow* when he not only gives Ruth her own book in the Bible but also names her in the genealogy” of Christ (Matt 1:5, emphasis added).<sup>26</sup> John Eldredge even asserts that Bathsheba’s not being mentioned by name in Matthew’s record “tells . . . of God’s disappointment with her, and his delight in . . . Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth.”<sup>27</sup> Apparently, what Eldredge deems “biblical femininity” involves using one’s body for sexual advantage because this is “wild” rather than “safe.” It also involves God’s denouncing women like Bathsheba who were *targeted for sex without their consent*. The conclusion to be drawn here is that, in the logic of *Wild at Heart*, God delights in David for his voyeurism and Ruth for her (supposed<sup>28</sup>) seductive prowess, but disapproves of Bathsheba simply because she was sexually assaulted. What Eldredge and Bryce crucially fail to acknowledge is that descriptive accounts of biblical persons and events should be interpreted according to context and genre, and including does not equal condoning. The presence of Ruth, Tamar, and David in

Jesus's genealogy displays God's lavish grace, not a template for gender and sexuality. Eldredge's masculinity thus falls well short of redeeming sexism in secular culture, and instead provides a Christianized version of a dehumanizing trend where women's bodies are resources for discovery, exploration, and exploitation.

### Consumerism: Women as Commodities

*Wild at Heart* promotes a related problem regarding masculine desires: consumerism. By "consumerism," I have in mind "a particular interpretation of 'getting,' and one that treats the goods and resources of creation as things that exist for *my* interests and happiness."<sup>29</sup> It entails "a tendency to reduce everything . . . to a commodity able to be exchanged."<sup>30</sup> Additionally important for a consumerist mentality is the transformation of dissatisfaction into something pleurably addicting, "the satisfying nature of dissatisfaction,"<sup>31</sup> and this feeds into a desire to consume perpetually. Moreover, in consumerism, this temperament is wed to a "detachment" that keeps "desire on the move."<sup>32</sup>

Throughout *Wild at Heart*, Eldredge encourages men to treat women as commodities "out there" for consumption. Specifically, he encourages men to relate to women in a way that first objectifies them as a "good" ("a beauty to rescue") and then values their importance in an egocentric and discriminatory way, prioritizing men's "needs." These needs center on the Eldredges' gendered desires, which they promote as biblical ideals. Since men are said to have a deep-seated need for "an adventure to have," women are portrayed as satisfying an additional need: companionship for the man's adventure. How serendipitous it is for Eldredge that he has also discovered complementary aspects of women's "souls"! They innately yearn to be rescued, "wanted," and "pursued"; they want to "unveil" their beauty, and, while some women may want to wrongly "control" their own adventure, *all* women want "an adventure to *share*."<sup>33</sup> Effectively, then, women are, in Eldredge's framework, commodities that primarily exist for the happiness of men. Similarly, Camery-Hoggatt and Munn note that Eldredge portrays women as a mere "conjugal prop," since "a woman's capabilities are evaluated strictly according to their effect upon her mate."<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, William Cavanaugh relates the emergence of this new consumerism to the ideologies and practices of the Industrial Revolution, when mass marketing helped generate mass consumption. His observation is instructive because it may help determine the trajectory of how women were (re) conceptualized in the modern period, including the centuries prior to the Industrial Revolution. In line with this, Carolyn Merchant argues in *The Death of Nature* that the Scientific Revolution engendered a mechanistic view of nature and women, which encouraged the subjugation and domination of both. Her book examines the implications of these ideologies for the present, showing that early modern representations of women still find expression today. *Wild at Heart* in particular draws from ideologies deeply rooted in the philosophies of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. Throughout *Wild at Heart*, women are mechanistically viewed as resources available for male exploration and exploitation as part and parcel of their "adventures" and "battles."

Eldredge's take on pornography and his archetypal masculine heroes further illustrate a consumeristic attitude toward women. He identifies at some level the "good" desire for a beauty to

rescue and fight for as motivating men's engagement in viewing pornography; a man "longs for the woman" but does not realize that he needs to "fight" for her.<sup>35</sup> The problem with pornography, according to Eldredge, is that it does not "require" anything of a man.<sup>36</sup> Michael John Cusick agrees with this assessment in his 2012 book *Surfing for God*, noting that pornography "allows us to have our cake ('I feel strong and masculine') and eat it too (no strength or masculinity required)."<sup>37</sup> Significantly, for Eldredge this lacking of "requirement" is a "weak" and "passive" characteristic that he feels is present in "emasculated" and "feminized" men.

Eldredge fails to take into account that his narrative actually supports a consumerist detachment and alienation that pornography exploits for its perpetuation and consumption. Pornography does "require" something from men (and women) who view it—it requires a consumeristic pursuit of the commodified, sexualized object. Moreover, it evidences an attitude of "disposability" that "consumerism lives off."<sup>38</sup> The desire for "a beauty to rescue" (especially if blended with the need for constant adventure) betrays the deep association between dissatisfaction and satisfaction that is emblematic of the new consumerism. As Eldredge's heroes Indiana Jones and James Bond ceaselessly demonstrate in their movies, "a beauty to rescue" is not about *one* beauty but rather an indefinite amount of beauties to capture and discard in an endless quest for sexual expression, control, and exploitation. Appealing to Indiana Jones and James Bond further illustrates the disposability of women as female objects that have been commodified. Thus, men engaging in viewing pornography are not necessarily "passive;" they are active participants deeply involved in the logic of consumerism that feeds on the need to pursue adventuresome dissatisfaction in detached relationships.<sup>39</sup> Oddly, this logic forms the backbone of *Wild at Heart*.

### Violence toward Women

Many critics of *Wild at Heart* note Eldredge's infatuation with an incitement to violence. This is perhaps most obviously manifested in his constant attention to figures like *Braveheart's* William Wallace and *The Gladiator's* Maximus.<sup>40</sup> Eldredge even recounts (imagines?) God praising him for a job well done during a conference tour by speaking personally to Eldredge, likening him to Henry V and "the man in the arena, whose face is covered with blood and sweat and dust, who strove valiantly . . . a great warrior . . . yes, even Maximus."<sup>41</sup> Such palpable references to violent figures only make sense in his overall narrative, which articulates "power" and "aggression" as intrinsically masculine. For Eldredge, these are characteristically male by virtue of God's intent in creation: "aggression is part of the masculine *design*; we are hardwired for it," and "every man *needs* to know that he is powerful."<sup>42</sup> Sometimes Eldredge suggests bounded aggression, noting that this "design" can "have a dark turn, as it has with inner-city gangs,"<sup>43</sup> but his allusions to wrongful expressions of power are so cliché and vague that they are meaningless. When one considers the archetypes of masculinity that are unabashedly glorified in *Wild at Heart*, Eldredge's attempts at hedging seem strangely contradictory.<sup>44</sup>

It does not take much imagination to envision how divinely ordained male aggression could be appropriated to support

violent acts. Sadly, one does not need to explore the imaginary realm to find an example of this. In 2009, authorities learned that one of the most deadly drug cartels in Mexico, *La Familia Michoacán*, distributed copies of the Spanish translation of *Wild at Heart* (*Salvaje de Corazón*) as reading material for cartel members. Eldredge officially condemned the cartel's violent acts and distanced himself and his teachings from the practices of *La Familia*. His reaction was not unlike his response to critiques of his book: he positions himself as a Jesus figure whose teachings have been abused and misappropriated.<sup>45</sup>

I believe Eldredge's denouncement of *La Familia* and their application of *Wild at Heart* is wholly genuine. However, Eldredge is displaying a degree of naïveté by dismissing the strong parallels between his teachings and ideologies that are used to justify horrendous acts of violence and aggression. This could relate to Eldredge seeing his ideas closely aligned with biblical truth, so much so that it is as if his own interpretations are scriptural paraphrases. Eldredge explains, "People have used *the Bible* to justify a lot of evil actions. . . . It brings me sorrow and anger to know that they are doing this, and I renounce their use of *my words* in this way."<sup>46</sup>

Apart from the general exaltation of violence in *Wild at Heart*, the potential for violence toward women is highly problematic. Given that historically and globally, even today, women are disproportionate recipients of violent acts,<sup>47</sup> addressing this issue is paramount. It is tragically incongruous that Eldredge decries the antagonist of *Braveheart*, Edward the Longshanks, by noting his being a "ruthless oppressor . . . raping her [Scotland's] daughters."<sup>48</sup> At the heart of violent acts toward women lie ideologies that make women sexualized objects to be aggressively pursued and captured ("rescued"). And at the heart of these horrendous acts lie ideologies that appeal to men's "needs" that *Wild at Heart* endorses unequivocally: the need for power, a "beauty," and an adventure. Eldredge even appeals to games and video games "where bloodshed is a prerequisite for fun" as evidence for the "ferce" and "warrior"-like "universal nature" of boys and men right before advocating that a man needing to be "ferce" is "especially true in . . . relationships."<sup>49</sup> What will happen when men, drunk on Eldredge's fictional masculinized power, realize that they can, under divine sanction, combine the need for power, aggression, a beauty to rescue, and risk-taking adventure in their relationships with women? After all, "a boy wants to attack something—and so does a man."<sup>50</sup>

I am not claiming that Eldredge overtly condones violence toward women. However, normalization of violence, commodification of women, and employment devices such as the damsel in distress trope are dangerous because they contribute to sexism and pervasive violence against women.<sup>51</sup> The church cannot afford for these images of masculinized power over women to be branded as biblical, especially since violence against women remains an insidious problem in Christian contexts.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, since Eldredge recapitulates patriarchal ideologies salient in pop culture, media, and the church, and naturalizes both the disempowerment of women and male aggression, we must take into account the risk of intertextual linkages with resurgent expressions of these themes elsewhere (e.g., media and video games that promote male-hero fantasies incentivized by violence toward women).<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

*Wild at Heart* opens with a request for "permission." However, it is not permission to be men in the *imago Dei* that Eldredge ultimately advocates; it is permission to be "men" as construed in misguided visions of hyper-masculinity in American culture. Though Eldredge claims to develop a radical, counter-cultural, biblical view of masculinity, he instead propagates "normative beliefs about males": "that boys and men *should* be tougher, more aggressive and violent, more assertive, less caring and nurturing and sexually more assertive and voracious than women."<sup>54</sup>

In *Wild at Heart* we find a space in which sexism and male dominance are not only vibrant, they are nurtured. The pervasive dual-sexism in *Wild at Heart* draws from complex cultural norms recapitulating modernist ideals about gender and perpetuating consumeristic attitudes toward women. Eldredge interprets the book's success as evidence that "God is in" the work. But Eldredge is simply repackaging popular tropes and ideologies, drawing from "pervasive and allusive" stereotypes and "tapping deep into collective fantasies."<sup>55</sup> It is alliance with cultural norms and stereotypes that fuels the book's popularity, providing a false sense of divinely-ordained universality. The book indexes and participates in systemic and institutional sexism and male dominance, the consequences of sin (Gen 3:16) that Christians are called to resist.

Eldredge's ideas are dangerous. They are dangerous because they are misleading in the way they appeal to biblical authority. They are dangerous because they promote sexist ideologies and male dominance that inform subjugation of and violent acts toward women. They are dangerous because they continue to exert substantial influence within the church. Revisiting *Wild at Heart* may continue to open up avenues for investigating how certain conceptualizations of gender may be detrimental to the social fabric of the body of Christ.

## Notes

1. This essay blossomed out of many conversations. Many thanks to my wife, Monica Duncan, and to friends whose discussions helped shape this essay—especially Jon Huffmaster, Cameron Bernard, and Taylor Scott.

2. E.g., Vincent Bacote, "Battle Cry" [posted Nov 1, 2003], available from *Christianity Today* at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/november/34.84.html>; Randy Stinson, "Is God Wild at Heart?" *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 56–58; Ruth Etheridge III, "God in Man's Image"; available at <http://www.churchofthegoodshepherd.info/WAHcritique.html>; James K. A. Smith and Mark Mulder, "Are Men Really Wild at Heart?" [posted Oct 2004], available from "Perspectives" at <http://www.rca.org/page.aspx?pid=3382>; Brynn Camery-Hoggatt and Nealson Munn, "Wild at Heart: Essential Reading or 'Junk Food for the Soul'?" *Priscilla Papers* 19, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 24.

3. As of October 2016. Approximately 2 million copies sold in the first four years, and another 2.5+ million after. This 4.5+ million figure includes hard cover and trade paperback versions of the book (original and revised). It excludes ancillary products, such as *Wild at Heart Field Manual* (2002), *Wild at Heart Journal* (2003), *Wild at Heart Facilitator's Guide* (2004), *Wild at Heart: A Band of Brothers Small Group Participant Guide* (2009), *Wild at Heart Video Discussions* (2009), *Wild at Heart Advanced DVD* (2012), or the various CDs that comprise *Wild at Heart Boot Camp: The Platinum Collection - Compact Disc* (2011).

4. To put this number into perspective, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* sells 100,000 copies annually.
5. Confirmed in both July 2015 and Oct 2016. Similarly, in Oct 2016, the Kindle version of *Wild at Heart* was ranked first in Kindle Store for Men's Christian Living.
6. The popular follow-up to *Wild at Heart* offering insight into a "woman's soul," *Captivating*, sold more than 1 million within the first year of its release in 2005 (rev. ed., 2010). Additional books with either Stasi or John as sole author or co-author building on *Wild at Heart* include: *The Way of the Wild Heart: A Map for the Masculine Journey* by John Eldredge (2006), *The Way of the Wild Heart Manual: A Personal Map for Your Masculine Journey* by Craig McConnell and John Eldredge (2006), *Love & War: Finding the Marriage You've Dreamed of* by John and Stasi Eldredge (2009), *Becoming Myself: Embracing God's Dream of You* by Stasi Eldredge (2013), *Killing Lions: A Guide Through the Trials Young Men Face* by John Eldredge and Sam Eldredge (2014), and *Free to Be Me: Becoming The Young Woman God Created You to Be* by Stasi Eldredge (2014).
7. E.g., John Sowers, *The Heroic Path: In Search of the Masculine Heart* (New York: Hachette, 2014); Jim Snyder, *Resurrection of Your Inner Hero: Rendering Passivity Obsolete* (Bloomington: WestBow, 2014); Stephen Mansfield, *Mansfield's Book of Manly Men: An Utterly Invigorating Guide to Being Your Most Masculine Self* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013); James C. Dobson, *Dads and Daughters* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2013); Everest Bryce, *Drop the Fig Leaf: Dropping Barriers to Freedom for Men and Women* (Bloomington: WestBow, 2013); Rebecca Merz, *Love at First Sight: Stepping Out on a Maybe* (Bloomington: WestBow, 2013); Michael John Cusick, *Surfing for God: Discovering the Divine Desire Beneath Sexual Struggle* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012); James C. Dobson, *Bringing Up Girls* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2010); Stephen James and David S. Thomas, *Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2009); Walt Larimore and Barb Larimore, *His Brain, Her Brain: How Divinely Designed Differences Can Strengthen Your Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); Robert S. Paul and Donna K. Wallace, *Finding Ever After: A Romantic Adventure for Her, an Adventurous Romance for Him* (Bloomington: Bethany House, 2008); Jill Rigby, *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* (New York: Howard, 2006).
8. As an extreme example, the anti-Islamic group "Understanding the Threat" lists it among its recommended reading, saying, "Before we can change America, change begins in each of us, especially men. American men must stand in the authority in which they are born and lead. As spiritual heads of the household and defenders of our faith and nation, men must courageously step up to the plate now. There is a great war raging and we need all warriors on deck. *Wild at Heart* clearly lays out the core desires with which every man is born. This is a must read for any man who wants to join this fight" (<https://www.understandingthethreat.com/research/>).
9. Mansfield, *Mansfield's Book of Manly Men*, 265.
10. John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), xii.
11. Vincent Bacote, "Battle Cry" [posted Nov 1, 2003], available from *Christianity Today* at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/november/34.84.html>.
12. Brandon O'Brien, "A Jesus for Real Men: What the Masculinity Movement Gets Right and Wrong" [posted Apr 18, 2008], available from *Christianity Today* at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/april/27.48.html>.
13. I use the phrase "evoking the image" with respect to loss of agency because, in reality, authors do not have the actual power to mitigate or remove women's agency.
14. Anita Sarkeesian, "Damsel in Distress (part 1): Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" [posted Mar 7, 2013], available from *Feminist Frequency* at <http://www.feministfrequency.com/2013/03/damsel-in-distress-part-1>.
15. Anita Sarkeesian, "Damsel in Distress (part 2): Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" [posted May 28, 2013], available from *Feminist Frequency* at <http://feministfrequency.com/2013/05/28/damsel-in-distress-part-2-tropes-vs-women>.
16. Carolyn Osiek, "The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33): A Problematic Wedding," *BTB* 32, no. 1 (Feb 2002): 29-39.
17. Osiek, "The Bride of Christ," 32.
18. Gordon D. Fee, "The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18-6:9," *Priscilla Papers* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 8. See also Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 271-90.
19. Timothy G. Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity: The Function of the *Haustafel* in Ephesians," *JETS* 48, no. 2 (June 2005): 325.
20. Lisa Funnell, "Negotiating Shifts in Feminism: The 'Bad' Girls of James Bond," in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. M. Waters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 199.
21. Visual representations of women on Ransomed Heart Ministry's website (as of July 10, 2015) provide further support for the Eldredge's view of beauty as sensuality.
22. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 180.
23. Bryce, *Drop the Fig Leaf*, 73.
24. Bryce, *Drop the Fig Leaf*, 64.
25. Bryce, *Drop the Fig Leaf*, 65.
26. Bryce, *Drop the Fig Leaf*, 65; Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 157. Everest also praises David for his divinely approved wildness, noting that he was "an adulterer, conspirator, and murder" (Bryce, *Drop the Fig Leaf*, 65).
27. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, rev. ed., 192.
28. While the scene at Boaz's threshing floor may have sexual overtones, Ruth's aims are not necessarily primarily sexual in nature (Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 203-12). Uncovering Boaz's feet and asking him to "spread [his] wings" over Ruth is symbolic of her taking "refuge" under God's "wings" since Boaz is her kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 2:12, 3:9).
29. James K. A. Smith, *The Devil Reads Derrida: Essays on the University, the Church, Politics, and the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 40.
30. William T. Cavanaugh, "When Enough Is Enough: Why God's Abundant Life Won't Fit in a Shopping Cart, and Other Mysteries of Consumerism" [posted May 2005], available from *Sojourners* at <http://sojo.net/magazine/2005/05/when-enough-enough>.
31. Cavanaugh, "When Enough Is Enough."
32. Cavanaugh, "When Enough Is Enough."
33. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 16, 51, emphasis original.
34. Camery-Hoggatt and Munn, "*Wild at Heart*: Essential Reading or 'Junk Food for the Soul?'," 26.
35. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 44.
36. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 44, 187.
37. Cusick, *Surfing for God*, 17.
38. Smith, *The Devil Reads Derrida*, 41.
39. Eldredge explains "the sinister nature of pornography" as stemming from a man "using" a woman in order to "be energized by a woman" (Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 187). This is problematic for him because, in such a case, the man is trying to get masculinity from something outside himself (i.e., a woman). Therefore, Eldredge's solution is that men look internally toward their nature (since Eldredge prioritizes gender in how humanity images God), even though elsewhere he claims that masculinity is an "essence" that has to be "bestowed" (Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 62). However, as I and others have noted, Eldredge's very premises are questionable, which leads me to reject his simplistic treatment of pornography as well as his inability to recognize how his teachings are complicit in the visual objectification of women.
40. Following Smith and Mulder, Eldredge's account actually de-masculinizes Jesus and is radically *un-counter-cultural*, since it

unabashedly exalts Hollywood caricatures like William Wallace in *Braveheart* and Maximus in *Gladiator* as the archetypes of masculinity. Camery-Hoggatt and Munn additionally reveal the irony inherent in Eldredge's exaltation of "masculine" pop icons by noting God's reversal of such practice in his act of choosing "the psalmist David" over "muscle-bound Goliath."

41. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 135.

42. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 10–11, emphasis original.

43. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 11.

44. In fairness, Eldredge sees violence as "a cover-up for fear" (Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 56). But this is at odds with the implicit (and, at times, explicit) condoning of violent behavior in *Wild at Heart*. Essentially, violence ends up being permissible if enacted under the guise of "every man's" three desires (a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue).

45. Douglas LeBlanc, "Too Wild at Heart?" [posted Aug 1, 2004], available from *Christianity Today* at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/august/15.34.html>; Trevor Persaud, "Eldredge Denounces Drug Cartel" [posted June 29, 2010], available from *Christianity Today* at [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/06/john\\_eldredge\\_s.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/06/john_eldredge_s.html).

46. Persaud, "Eldredge Denounces Drug Cartel," emphasis mine. Eldredge closes the introduction to *Wild at Heart's* revised edition with two quotations that together illustrate this point. First, he cites Teddy Roosevelt, who notes that "It is not the critic who counts." This is immediately followed by Jesus's words in Matt 11:12: "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." It appears that Eldredge here aims at his critics, and, if so, this again perspectivizes his claim that his teachings are biblical.

47. See, for example, Jimmy Carter, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

48. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 22.

49. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, rev. ed., 11.

50. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, rev. ed., 11.

51. Statistics about violence against women are ever-changing. See The United Nations' report, "The World's Women: Trends and Statistics," the most recent version of which is 2015 (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/worldswomen.html>).

52. J. Alsdurf and P. Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998); Andy J. Johnson, *Religion and Men's Violence against Women* (New York: Springer, 2015).

53. Sarkeesian, "Damsel in Distress," pt. 2.

54. David Benatar, *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 85.

55. Robert H. Woods Jr. and Paul D. Patton, *Prophetically Incorrect: A Christian Introduction to Media Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 59.



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