Our Vampires, Ourselves by Nina Auerbach: Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood by Bram Dijkstra

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constructed by the medical profession but then does not apply the same scrutiny to the sole article by a medical doctor about chlorotic girls.

I have a more serious critique, however, of Dixon’s thesis that the medical profession exercised such an overwhelming authority that it caused women to become “riddled with guilt” and therefore to avoid “politics, science, and other traditional male intellectual spheres” (220). As Cohen’s analysis of seventeenth-century medical texts shows, the notion of a single powerful discourse that ruled the lives and aspirations of women is questionable, not least because medical, philosophical, and moral discourses were complex and full of contradictions (in Winkler and Cole, 67–90). Furthermore, it seems that Dixon has not researched some important Dutch studies of the low social status of the medical profession in seventeenth-century Netherlands, where it was perceived as not serious, not decent, and even improper. Only in the eighteenth century did Dutch medical science actually begin to gain higher social status and respectability.2 Despite these objections, however, I think that many lay readers of Perilous Chastity will enjoy the book and its many beautiful prints. As an academic text, however, it is likely to create legitimate irritation among scholars of medical, cultural, and art history.


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Vampire criticism, like vampire fiction, seems to run in cycles, and we are currently at the crest of a decade-long wave that has seen not only Anne Rice’s best-selling success but also the publication of a series of academic studies of vampire literature and film.1 Amidst this current flood,
what makes Nina Auerbach’s and Bram Dijkstra’s books particularly valuable is their historical perspective, the long glance they cast back over two centuries of literary and cultural production. As both volumes show, the continuing persistence of the vampire as a popular icon is linked to its ability to crystallize and express lurking cultural anxieties concerning gender roles and sexual relationships. The authors differ sharply, however, on the ideological implications of this process.

Auerbach’s Our Vampires, Ourselves builds on her earlier study Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth, which itself paved the way for Dijkstra’s Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture, to which Evil Sisters is an explicit sequel. While Woman and the Demon shared with Idols of Perversity a feminist concern over the misogynistic depiction of women, in late nineteenth-century literature and art, as devouring monsters, Auerbach was much more willing to concede that these negative images contained a progressive dimension, that the identification of woman as demonic—in, for example, Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897)—expressed desperate patriarchal fears about women’s growing social and sexual autonomy. While Dijkstra acknowledged this fact, he refused to see in the images of vampiric females anything but an unmitigated disaster for women, since they served to cement an invidious sadomasochism as the only possible model of social relations between the sexes. What Auerbach took as displaced embodiments of women’s empowerment, Dijkstra read as a confinement of women in a monolithic psychic structure of predation and victimization, a structure that came to achieve social hegemony in large part through the circulation of these images themselves. Thus, whereas Auerbach identified a dynamic tension between patriarchal norms and their displaced reflection in popular fictions, Dijkstra argued for a closed system whose influence was entirely pernicious.

His Evil Sisters continues this critique with a rhetorical force that at times reaches almost paranoiac intensity. The book is a sequel to Idols of Perversity in that it pursues Dijkstra’s arraignment of popular misogyny into the early twentieth century. Like his previous study, its focus is both broadly eclectic—drawing examples from high art and mass culture—and extremely narrow, since Dijkstra locates in these diverse cultural products the same malignant ideology. Evil Sisters also carries forward a concern with how sexist stereotypes intertwine with racist imperatives in a popular imagination saturated with social Darwinist notions linking women with “degenerate races” as mutual threats to white male cultural supremacy.

Dijkstra traces these ideas to turn-of-the-century discourses on sexology, zoology, and political economy, which in his view came to provide the "ambient knowledge" (78) governing the appearance of vampires and other predatory images in modern literature and popular culture.

While Dijkstra's wide-ranging research into early twentieth-century cultural history is nothing short of magisterial, his argument ultimately lacks nuance and is much too reductive. Driven by an evangelical zeal to expose the misogynist and racist structures that have "precipitated into our subconscious" (79) under the bombardment of vampire imagery—thus surreptitiously underwriting "the violent forms of gender hostility on which most social relationships are based even today" (123)—Dijkstra refuses to acknowledge any progressive potential latent in the iconography of vampirism, which exists, he claims, merely "to glorify . . . aggressive violence" and "perpetuate . . . sadomasochistic deformations of the principles of human community" (248). Dijkstra pursues this conviction so unremittingly throughout his book that crucial distinctions among diverse genres of discourse are collapsed into a vast ideological machine of repression, seemingly operating with faultless efficiency.

As a result, gender and racial hierarchies are seen not as the result of specific struggles for hegemony, in which popular-culture texts function as sites of potential contestation, but rather as the direct materialization of psychic injunctions encoded in those texts themselves. This process attains a kind of "logical inevitability" (73) made all the more powerful by new technologies of image dissemination such as television: "The average living room has become a passive indoctrination chamber without any exit" (443). Disparate texts pass indiscriminately before Dijkstra's baleful gaze—Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Sigmund Freud's *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905), Sax Rohmer's *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1913), D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) —to be uniformly castigated and condemned as chapters in the unfolding metanarrative of female vampirism that has doomed the twentieth century. At times, Dijkstra seems to anticipate readerly resistance to his breathless jeremiad, as when he begins sentences with phrases such as "it may at first seem foolish to attempt" (87) and "it may seem extravagant to suggest" (122). I must admit that I find the argument of this book both foolish and extravagant, but its dogged fury elicits a peculiar fascination.

Auerbach's *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, by contrast, is considerably more laid-back in tone and temper. Its structure is also more coherent than Dijkstra's sprawling tapestry since Auerbach focuses exclusively on texts featuring literal vampires, rather than images of predatory women more generally, tracing the vampire tradition from its roots in Byronic poetry through
Victorian variants and up to recent films such as *The Lost Boys* (1987) and *Near Dark* (1987). With a goal of reclaiming vampires “for a female tradition” (4), Auerbach details the dialectic of covert empowerment and patriarchal reaction that has characterized the genre, basically dividing the tradition into two broad camps: texts that evoke the vampire as a passionate mentor or friend—whose vampirism involves “an interchange, a sharing, an identification, that breaks down the boundaries of familial roles and the sanctioned hierarchy of marriage” (47)—versus texts that demonize vampires as psychic manipulators and arrogant tyrants (*Stoker’s Dracula* is the prototype here). What Auerbach reveals through this productive contrast is the vampire’s long heritage of expressing an alluring homoeroticism that unsettles patriarchal norms—a tendency Dijkstra’s study consistently ignores.

Though Auerbach writes wittily and well, her treatment is essentially impressionistic, and many of the claims that she makes for the vampire’s importance at specific historical moments demand more contextual support. But then any argument that proposes to tackle two centuries of cultural production in under two hundred pages is bound to wear thin in places, and the occasional lapses and gaffes are more than made up for by Auerbach’s many supple and engaged close readings. Above all, what *Our Vampires, Ourselves* accomplishes is a demonstration of the abiding relevance of the vampire icon to progressive feminist (and queer) concerns, something Dijkstra’s *Evil Sisters* might have led one to believe was simply impossible.

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For an assessment of the differentiated conditions of women internationally and a wide collection of the evidence of women’s specific local survivals through daily struggle and collective social movements, there is no better book of feminist scholarship today than M. Jacqui Alexander...