



Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture

Bram Dijkstra

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At the turn of the century, an unprecedented attack on women erupted in virtually every aspect of culture: literary, artistic, scientific, and philosophic. Throughout Europe and America, artists and intellectuals banded together to portray women as static and unindividuated beings who functioned solely in a sexual and reproductive capacity, thus formulating many of the anti-feminine platitudes that today still constrain women's potential.

Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity* explores the nature and development of turn-of-the-century misogyny in the works of hundreds of writers, artists, and scientists, including Zola, Strindberg, Wedekind, Henry James, Rossetti, Renoir, Moreau, Klimt, Darwin, and Spencer. Dijkstra demonstrates that the most prejudicial aspects of Evolutionary Theory helped to justify this wave of anti-feminine sentiment. The theory claimed that the female of the species could not participate in the great evolutionary process that would guide the intellectual male to his ultimate, predestined role as a disembodied spiritual essence. Darwinists argued that women hindered this process by their willingness to lure men back to a sham paradise of erotic materialism. To protect the male's continued evolution, artists and intellectuals produced a flood of pseudo-scientific tracts, novels, and paintings which warned the world's males of the evils lying beneath the surface elegance of woman's tempting skin.

Reproducing hundreds of pictures from the period and including in-depth discussions of such key works as *Dracula* and *Venus in Furs*, this fascinating book not only exposes the crucial links between misogyny then and now, but also connects it to the racism and anti-semitism that led to catastrophic genocidal delusions in the first half of the twentieth century. Crossing the conventional boundaries of art history, sociology, the history of scientific theory, and literary analysis, Dijkstra unveils a startling view of a grim and largely one-sided war on women still being fought today.

Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture Details

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From Reader Review Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture for online ebook

Kira Barnes says

Buy this book only for the beautiful pictures. This man doesn't know what he's talking about and pretends to be a feminist. Well, I as a woman am insulted by what he says about some of my favorite artists ever.

I think I read this book about 25 years ago. My opinion still stands. If you like this book I will hunt you down and hit you with a wet noodle.

Catherine says

Often fascinating analysis of depictions of women as symbolic of evil, real and metaphorical. Dijkstra covers art and literature primarily. I found the book quite thought-provoking when I read it a few years back and am still talking about years later. Highly recommended.

Macie says

This is an ambitious book, one of the most well-researched I've encountered, that very methodically lays out the snowball effect that stereotypes about women created in fin-de-siècle culture. While visual art plays the starring role, literature, philosophy, and scientific theories are each analyzed in turn. It's not perfect; the author sometimes overreaches, gets repetitive (I never want to read the phrase "nymph with a broken back" again), and occasionally goes on tangents that made no sense at all to me in the context of the book. I had to read this in pieces because I got so angry about how women were portrayed, and about how those Victorian-era ideas became archetypes in contemporary culture (watching an episode of Sex and the City is all that is needed to verify this). Rather than try to connect these ideas to modern culture, however, the author uses them to make the case that these dehumanizing ideas established the base for the Nazi regime. It's a fascinating read.

Kate says

A very interesting timeline of sociocultural changes in attitude toward women in the West--primarily Europe, with some U.S.--from the mid-1800s through the Industrial Revolution and into the disbursement of evolutionary theory and its subsequent influence into World War I, as reflected in the popular, praised art of the time.

Dijkstra takes a pretty strong anti-men tone in some places, to the point that I'd almost say it kills the message--except the message is so meticulously and repetitively documented that it's pretty well unkillable. Still caused raised eyebrows a few times, though.

Nicole says

Great book. Really helped me understand the evolution of the female form in 19th century art.

Karen Lynn says

"When women became increasingly resistant to men's efforts to teach them, in the name of progress and evolution, how to behave within their appointed station in civilization, men's cultural campaign to educate their mates, frustrated by women's "inherently perverse" unwillingness to conform, escalated into what can truthfully be called a war on woman - for to say "women" would contradict a major premise of the period's anti-feminine thought. If this was a war largely fought on the battlefield of words and images, where the dead and wounded fell without notice into the mass grave of lost human creativity, it was no less destructive than many real wars. Indeed, I intend to show that the intellectual assumptions which underlay the turn of the century's cultural war on woman also permitted the implementation of the genocidal race theories of Nazi Germany.

Some of the most vicious expressions of male distrust of, and enmity towards, women can be found in the writings of the medieval church fathers which late nineteenth-century writers liked to quote. These tireless purveyors of culture were also forever delving into the large fund of antifeminine lore to be found in classical mythology and the Bible." ~Bram Dijkstra's, *Idol's of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin De Siecle Culture*

Wendy Buonaventura says

This book charts ways in which women, notably in the Victorian era, were viewed as naturally sick and physically badly designed, and how Western art and literature reflected this in its portrayal of the female sex. A fascinating book, well researched and food for thought.

J. says

Haven't read in too long a time for accurate review. Will revisit.

Steve says

The chief merit of this book is that it collects hundreds of obscure fantasy paintings from the latter half of the nineteenth century. Academic artists here rub shoulders with Symbolists, Pre-Raphaelites, and Art Nouveau figures. Some of the artists like Klimt and Moreau will be familiar, but for every artist you've heard of you'll meet five you won't recognize.

Unfortunately, the author is only interested in passing moral judgments on the subject matter of these paintings, so all of the illustrations are black and white.

The author's dour and sour commentary on these forgotten masterpieces is ironically effective and adds piquancy to the pictures. It seems that the author's chief interest in these fascinating images is to judge them and find them wanting under an extremely narrow standard of feminist piety. Like Max Nordau's *Degeneration* from a century earlier, Dijkstra's moralistic commentary mostly serves to whet your interest and make the pictures that much more devilishly fascinating.

Taken as a whole, the commentary gets quite monotonous and is floridly overstated. Images of a gaggle of nude children in the water become precursors to the Holocaust:

How nightmarish painters' dreams of infantile flesh could ultimately become is graphically demonstrated in Leon Frederic's monumental triptych 'The Stream', in which this artist, ostensibly to illustrate Beethoven's 'Pastoral' symphony, created with insane literalness the ultimate representation of the familiar equation between water, women, and the world of the child in a carnal orgy of infant flesh. When images of this sort, of this extreme paranoia, arise in man's imagination, can Buchenwald be far behind?

It's mostly more of the same throughout the book. Just a few paragraphs are enough to give you an accurate impression of the whole. In the company of an interesting picture, though, Dijkstra's text adds some value and often rises to the heights of low comedy.

This isn't a book for reading; it's a book for looking at the pictures.

Lisa Mason says

Did you know that in 1896 an anorexic actress made a small fortune posing nude for portraits which were called "The Dead Lady Look" because tuberculosis (consumption in common parlance) was considered a glamorous way to die?

One of the most mind-blowing treatises on women in society and culture I have ever read. Picked this one up when I was researching my fin de siècle book, *The Gilded Age* (originally titled *The Golden Age*). You will never again look at our society's depiction of women in the media without considering the subtext of male-dominated society. Dijkstra draws upon the particularly virulent attack on women of the fin de siècle period I was studying, but the resonances of his analyses are everywhere around us today. It's all about money and power, who has it and who doesn't, and how that affects your life, your freedom, and your liberty.

This is scholarly—citations, an extensive bibliography, quotations, and best of all the art. Beautifully and engagingly written, with astute analysis of how money, power, and the striving for personal freedom affected relations between men and women (and gay people).

Partial chapter titles include such gems as "Raptures of Submission and the Cult of the Household Nun," "The Nymph with the Broken Back and the Mythology of Therapeutic Rape," "Women of Moonlight and Wax, the Lesbian Glass," "Gold and the Virgin Whores of Babylon, the Priestesses of Man's Severed Head," "Clinging Vines and the Dangers of Degeneration." A Must Read.

Alessandra says

A survey of misogyny in late-Victorian art. Extremely creepy. The evidence may be a bit wobbly in places, but the sheer number of appalling examples is extremely telling. One of those important, eye-opening books worth reading, but ugh.

Miriam says

An interesting study, although Dijkstra commits the all-too-common scholarly sin of ignoring masses of evidence that don't fit his thesis. He also erroneously treats this instantiation as unique, rather than as part of a recurring pattern of shifting attitudes toward women.

Marsha Altman says

This book is insane. If you see it in a discount bin, totally pick it up and attempt to read it.

From what I can gather, various intellectual circles at the 19th century in continental Europe didn't care too much for women and used theories from the early eugenics movement to justify for their misogyny. Then they made a lot of art, some of now surprisingly popular classic art. Bram Dijkstra collected this art and put it in a book with the widest margins I have ever seen. He has a lot of theories, some of them relatively sane but some occasionally crazy, as to why the artists drew women the way that they did. There are tons of pictures of named women lying around in fields, sleeping in a pile of leaves, which if you are a woman will drive you mad because none of us would ever do that - there are things called bugs and other things not to expose yourself to no more comfortable than flowerbed looks. Apparently it all ties into the prevailing theories of the day, which was that women were lazy, terrible and basically the opposite of guys. The writings of these artists contributed to the eugenics movement that eventually led to Nazi Germany, so that's interesting to think about.

My recommendation is to skim a lot of it, especially of the author's talking about intellectuals from, say, France from 1890-95 that you've never heard of and have no way of finding out more about. But he does have interesting things to say about the art, much of which is fascinating and beautiful.

Also if you live in a household with modestly standards, don't leave the book around because 90% of the paintings are sleeping naked women. They're not showing a whole lot, but they are naked.

Marley says

A friend of mine found this in the remainder stack and got it really cheap and sent it to me. We both love the Pre-Raphaelites. We're both perverse. The language is a bit flowery and the casual reader needs to know a bit of art history, but the plethora of pictures makes up for it. I recommend this book not only for those who enjoy art, but for historians, too. How depressing to learn your favorite art is woman-hating. Or rather so many Victorian artists were afraid of women. Really, though, this is a tour-de-force.

Carolynne says

An excellent book on how the view of woman in art transitioned from positive to negative as women in society looked to expand their roles in the world i.e. out of the house and into the world.
