

Christiansen on Faxneld (2017)

Faxneld, Per. *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*. Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 566, ISBN 978-0-19-066447-3

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To say that this study is exhaustive would be quite the understatement. Faxneld's statement of purpose is, in this light, worthy of quotation in full: "to map, contextualize, and discuss the discourse of more or less explicit Satanic feminism as it is expressed in a number of esoteric works (primarily by Theosophists), literary texts, autobiographies, scholarly (or in some cases pseudo-scholarly) books, political and polemical publications (books, pamphlets, and periodicals), newspaper reviews, editorials and articles, early works of cinema, paintings, sculptures, and even artefacts of consumer culture such as jewellery" (3). The works in question figure in the period between 1772 (the publication year of the earliest relevant source text) and the years preceding World War II, though most belong to a much narrower time frame, 1880–1910. Faxneld casts a wide net geographically, pulling together Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London, and New York, with occasional excursions into Scandinavia and Italy (and even Latvia). He is primarily interested in the process by which a disturbing figure like Satan came to be perceived as positive, with feminist connotations (4).

He defines his terms clearly. Regarding feminism, he is adamant about not making "anachronistic normative pronouncements" on whether historical figures were feminists according to our modern understanding of the term, especially in chapter eight, where he takes certain scholars to task for making that mistake (24). As for Satanism, he uses the label not in *sensu stricto* (with Satan "celebrated in a prominent position") but rather, in *sensu lato* (that is, for "celebrations of the Devil used as a discursive strategy in a fairly demarcated and restricted manner" [25], one example being Socialists' use of Lucifer to symbolize revolution). With the exception of the last two chapters, each a case study of a non-French writer, Faxneld adopts a thematic approach, showcasing a genre (e.g. Gothic literature) or a motif (e.g. Luciferian lesbianism) that allows discussion to unfold chronologically. For obvious reasons, this review will focus solely on the French works.

In his introduction, Faxneld lays the foundation for the rest of the study by surveying the longstanding misogynistic tradition of linking woman to Satan. He identifies three key female figures: Eve (the "prototypical first female transgressor"), the witch ("a sinister rebel against proper womanhood" and a member of a Satanic cult that inverts Christian values), and Satan's lover (72). He then looks at the intersection of literary and political Satanism, paying particular attention to the ways Romanticism and Socialism promoted a positive image of Satan; George Sand's *Consuelo* and Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* provide fertile ground for analysis in this context. Chapters on theosophy and the Gothic follow, with Jacques Cazotte's novella *Le Diable amoureux*, described as a "pioneering work" (150) whose themes of "diabolical temptation, gender dissolution, and demonization of freethinking pro-sensual women [...] continued to hit the right note with subsequent generations" (156).

Faxneld next takes up the case of the witch, in particular as Michelet conceives her in *La Sorcière*, striking for its construction of a counter-discourse aimed at undermining Christianity. In her roles as doctor, midwife, abortionist, and advisor to women burdened by childbearing, Michelet's witch engages in "a form of feminist practice" by affording women power over their own bodies (204). Psychiatrists like Jean-Martin Charcot likewise used their research on witches to attack the church, in part by redefining demonic possession as hysterical attack. Faxneld argues persuasively for aligning hysterics with feminists thanks to their mutual resistance against patriarchal constraints (212).

The chapter on women in Decadent literature and art is one of the book's highlights. Faxneld considers a wide range of artists, including Charles Baudelaire, Rachilde, Remy de Gourmont, and Jules Barbey d'Aureville, lingering on two figures, Félicien Rops and J.-K. Huysmans, whose respective *œuvres* dovetail nicely. Rops's work suggests that the cult of the Devil is the exclusive domain of women; though sexual intimacy with Satan is not necessarily represented as enjoyable (and sometimes involves pain), the frequency with which women are shown writhing in ecstasy when he penetrates them leaves no doubt about his ability to induce "erotic rapture" (295–96). In the literary realm, Faxneld identifies Huysmans's novel *Là-bas* as the most prominent representation of Satanism and its heroine, Mme Chantelouve, "a caustic caricature of an emancipated New Woman" (326). He cautions that although neither Rops nor Huysmans adopts an explicitly feminist stance, each plays a part "in the strange circularity between extremely misogynistic portrayals of evil women and some feminists denouncing patriarchy using a similar threatening symbolism" (326).

Faxneld's chapter on the convergence of lesbianism and Satanism in the fin de siècle is equally illuminating, thanks to insightful analyses of Catulle Mendès's *Méphistophéla* and Renée Vivien's poetry. Faxneld encourages readers to look beyond

the novel's overall negative portrayal of lesbianism to acknowledge certain pro-lesbian features, namely, that the main character is a female homosexual who is not only unashamed of her sexual orientation, but defiant in the face of societal condemnation (354). Vivien reconceptualizes Satan as a positive symbol of the emancipation and supreme value of women, going so far as to represent him variously as God of femininity, creator of woman, and protector of homosexuals (384). Finally, Faxneld scrutinizes three women who assumed the role of demon woman/femme fatale both on and off stage (386). One is Sarah Bernhardt (known for eccentric behavior that included sleeping in a coffin, keeping a menagerie of wild animals, and wearing a taxidermied bat hat), whose penchant for the morbid and diabolical, combined with her flouting of conventional womanly behavior, makes her a major player in Faxneld's study.

Given the book's daunting length and fine print, on the one hand, and its handy thematic organization, on the other, readers may be tempted to dip into individual chapters of interest or to page through the book just for the seventy-eight fascinating illustrations. That would be a mistake. It is only by reading *Satanic Feminism* cover to cover that the immensity of Faxneld's project and especially his expertise in weaving seemingly disparate threads into a cohesive narrative can be fully appreciated.

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