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□ Williamson, Milly:

The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom from Bram Stoker to Buffy

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A Review by Martin Barker

Milly Williamson has written a brave, wide-ranging and original book about the meanings and significance of vampire fandom. Based on some rich and fascinating research with fans both in London, and around the Ann Rice Lestat Vampire Fan Club in New Orleans, this book is very much one – and in my view one of the best – of the second wave of fan studies, which moves beyond the celebratory mode of thinking about fans that Henry Jenkins has famously developed. Her study is also based on a grasp of an exceptionally wide range of other work: from the history of vampire fiction itself, along with the range of approaches to the gothic and melodrama; through fan studies themselves – and a stringent critique of Jenkins is mounted in here – to a striking reconsideration of the work, and relevance, of Pierre Bourdieu for this field. I recommend the book very highly, as the foregoing sentences must hint. But it does have, to my eye, two lacunae which puzzle and bother me.

At the outset, Williamson revisits the history of vampire literature, moving beyond standard histories which put at their centre Bram Stoker's contribution, to look instead at the history of sympathetic vampires. She traces the reasons why such figures might have been attractive to working class audiences, and to women especially – because of the fears, rampant across the nineteenth century, of medical invasions of the body. Not just grave-robbers, but also the medical 'theft' of the bodies of criminals, the insane, the poor whose bodies could be cut up, put on display, used as public evidence. The sources of this tradition are older than Stoker, in for example the popular part-novel *Varney The Vampire*. But the impact of this implies that even Stoker's book, once encountered, might be read differently. Those most fearing such defiling of their bodies might see the stake-wielding Van Helsing who effectively also autopsies Lucy's body less as a 'good father' than as a threat:

Large numbers of working class Victorians probably would not have read *Dracula* as soon as it was published, because the first-edition hardback copy would have been too expensive ... However the publisher, Constable, brought out a paperback edition three-and-a-half years later in 1901 that was aimed at a less affluent readership ... I would like to suggest that *Dracula* may have been read by a poor, working class and female audience rather differently to the dominant discourses as represented by the Crew of Light [the four young vampire hunters of Stoker's book], not only because of the tale's divergence

from *Varney*, but because of these groups' attitudes towards, and experience of, the medical establishment that the Crew of Light represent. (21-2)

This rewriting of the history is intriguing, and valuable in its own right. It clearly has in part to be speculative (and there are quite a few 'may haves' and 'could haves' in Williamson's account as a result) since the evidence on who in that period read stories such as *Varney the Vampire*, and even more in what ways they read them, is inevitably thin. But it does offer the possibility of bringing contemporary fan studies into touch with the growing interest in the history of reading, in a potentially very productive way.

With almost one bound, then, Williamson does then leap forward to more contemporary examples, notably TV shows such as *Dark Shadows*, films such as *The Lost Boys*, and of course *Buffy*. On the basis of a series of fan interviews, she brings into view more aspects of this notion of the sympathetic vampire – showing indeed that it operates as a kind of filter for fans, sorting good from bad aspects of programmes, and even on occasion providing programme makers with a key to future developments – the development of Spike, the ambiguously charged character in *Buffy*, was clearly a response to his unexpected popularity with fans.

She then mounts a very substantial critique of the ways in which fan studies have appropriated the work of Bourdieu. Her argument is that this appropriation diminishes and caricatures Bourdieu's work, to a thin distinction between 'distanced' high culture associated with high status/upper class culture; and participative, and immediate 'popular culture'. Rather, she argues, Bourdieu's work emphasises conflicts *within* dominant culture, between those sectors celebrating 'culture for its own sake', and those involved in the production of commercial culture. There is a running conflict between the two. The implication of this is that popular participative culture cannot be characterised in itself as either progressive or conservative – that depends on the particular relations of force *within* a field at any time. Along with this re-evaluation of Bourdieu, Williamson looks at fan studies itself, and in particular the work of Henry Jenkins. She points up not only what others have addressed – the unsatisfactory populism to which he is prone – but also the ways in which he sidesteps the issues of power *within* fandom. Fan organisation is not, she argues, as Jenkins presents it an autonomous, democratic space. Rather it is thoroughly caught up in the commercial imperatives of the makers and distributors of these cultural forms, and their institutional apparatuses.

On the back of this critique, she turns to an examination of the Ann Rice Fan Club. This is to my eyes really original and important work, albeit constraints of space have meant that sometimes arguments get to be based on single quotations from interviews (I hope Williamson will find an opportunity to publish a fuller account of these materials, since they look so interesting.). On the basis of fieldwork in New Orleans, she presents an account of the fan club, particularly via an internal conflict over a Ball which was officially organised – in a way that led many unofficial fans to feel excluded, and cheated. What Williamson does so well, is to elucidate what we might call the 'rules of belonging'. The official fans, those with links to the Ann Rice Fan Club, are shown to have to learn rules of

respectful distance from Rice herself, whilst they talk dismissively about the 'obsessive' fans outside their circle. I must say that I immediately recognised these kinds of talk, from the time I spent inside the world of comic book fans. The operation of inner and outer circles here takes on a new significance.

All this is excellent. But I was bugged by two issues, which may be linked. The first, is Williamson's tendency to talk in very categorical ways of 'gender' as the distinctive component. The second, is a too light treatment of what is to me a key question also ignored in Jenkins: just what is it that fans *enjoy* in their materials? To take each in turn.

The issue of gender categories came most in view for me in her very interesting chapter on vampire fans and dress. This chapter, drawing heavily on the work of Elizabeth Wilson, argues that to understand the use of alternative modes of dress by women vampire fans (and male fans do just drop almost entirely out of view here) we need to grasp the context that women's lives are permeated by awareness that their bodies are under inspection all the time. The choice of dress, therefore, is always a response to this inspection. Drawing on interviews, she discusses the central choice of Black as a form of refusal, a choice of defiant visibility. This is certainly interesting, as a general account. But it leaves me unsatisfied on two grounds. First, I gain little sense of what *kinds* of women do this. This is surely important if we are to consider the cultural significance and consequences of vampire fandoms. Is this a cross-class phenomenon? Does it peak at certain points in women's lives? Is it associated with particular social situations of women – being single, having been through divorces, etc? Or are there ways of characterising them in terms of motivation, belief system, or cultural orientation? The risk of not asking questions of this kind is a retreat to a sort of gender essentialism, which would make it hard to see why vampire fandom is a minority choice. Not just this, but I also find myself noting, what does not appear to be noticed by Williamson herself, an oddity within the interview responses. Her evidence shows that the women who most self-consciously choose Black as an expressive form, choose it in opposition to Pink. Of course, Pink is the most gender-marked colour in contemporary culture. But it is also to a considerable extent a *fantasy* culture, closely associated for instance with young girls' strong first adoption of femaleness. It is certainly not a required, or a dominant colour choice among adult women. It is a *conception* of femininity. And I wonder what that says about the nature of the opposition within which vampire fans are constituting their identities.

My other puzzlement/concern revolves around a central question that I still feel, at the end of the book, is ducked: just what the nature of the *pleasure* is that associates with the idea of vampirism. Williamson describes very well the nature of the groups within which the fandom operates. She gives striking accounts of the self-presentations of fans, especially women. She writes interestingly (if to me less convincingly, because I couldn't see what the principles of selection were) about fan fiction. But not about the pleasures of the reading and watching in themselves. So, for instance, if unofficial fans become pissed off enough with Ann Rice and her fan club to walk out of a Ball in which they have invested large amounts of money, what keeps them coming back to the stories? This is a

core issue. Vampirism is about good and bad bodies. It is about biting and sucking. It is about penetration and hurting of bodies. It is about a fantastical afterlife/eternity. Her final chapter comes closest to discussing this, but to me never quite gets there. And I sense that there is a hesitation at the end of the road, which connects with her hesitation in the chapter on fan fiction. There is a distinct unwillingness to engage with the pornographic elements of fan fiction, the sheer eroticism of the idea of the vampire, its sexual perversity.

The point where Williamson comes nearest to exploring this, is also the point where a component of the very approach she has so powerfully criticised appears to me to creep into her own approach. She is discussing the nature and role of fan fiction within vampire fandom, and in particular around *Buffy* where, interestingly, it appears to have been more tolerated, if not encouraged, by the show's producers. In a brief discussion of the kinds of stories that are produced, Williamson acknowledges that a good deal of it is not only sexually explicit and detailed, but sets out to depict perverse and violent sexual encounters. Williamson comments on this:

It seems that many of the slash stories based on *Buffy* characters are primarily intended to sexually arouse the reader through the graphic depiction of forbidden and polymorphous sexual encounters. Much of the writing in *Buffy* slash fiction is pornographic, whether it is nice to admit it or not. I am not suggesting that this makes slash unacceptable politically, for I concur with Penley that slash exists as imaginary sexual encounters and not real ones. But neither is slash simply to be celebrated; it is hard to celebrate erotically depicted rape and torture sequences even if they are only fantasy. (173-4)

This reads oddly to me. It is odd for three reasons. First, it takes 'pornography' to constitute some overriding categorisation. If stories function to arouse sexually, then that in some way overbears all other functions. But that is a historically specific conception of pornography, and one which I would want to contest. Second, it operates with a rather bald fantasy/reality distinction. Either such stories are 'only' fantasy, or they are real – and thank goodness they are not the latter. This is a very diminished notion of the nature of the social imaginary. Third, it returns to a rather Jenkins-ish framework, of trying to decide if this is 'progressive' or not. Aside from a wish to question the notion of some singular dimension here ('progressive' to 'conservative' maps rather too closely for comfort onto the categories of current American party politics), I am unwilling to join in this rush to make judgements.

Suppose we put it differently. Vampirism itself is not read in this mode. Taken literally, vampirism supposes a minority of people who bite innocent citizens, drain their blood, kill many and infect others in the process. Well thank goodness that is 'only fantasy'. But of course Williamson's whole argument is charged with making this opposition look too easy. Vampiric stories are a form of cultural imaginary, complexly formed, in and through which conceptions of the body are put in play. The real worth of her book is her explication of many of the processes involved in this. But something in our culture resists

us carrying that through to talk about sex stories ('pornography' as a similarly complex cultural imaginary. And I think it disables the possibility of understanding the pleasure-dynamics of the vampire.

These critical debates aside, I loved this book. It is a major contribution to the field of fan studies, but with implications going way beyond that field.

Postscript: Hurricane Katrina, Anne Rice and her fans

While I was writing this review, it occurred to me to think about the ways in which Hurricane Katrina had impacted on fans of Anne Rice. Given that she and her novels are so firmly based in New Orleans, what had she said? How did she respond to the disaster, and its political fallout from it? This is surely a relevant question to ask, given the debates (to which Milly Williamson's book makes such an important contribution) about the so-called 'progressiveness' of fan cultures. What if the radicalism, in as much as it is there, were entirely internal to the fantastical story-worlds which provokes fans' interests? Given the reorientation Williamson proposes, to the hierarchical management of fan communities, in which the 'voice of the author' carries more authority than many other researchers have conceded, Anne Rice, Katrina and its aftermath offers a potentially very interesting case-study.

What I found in the course of a fairly cursory web search was thought-provoking. Rice wrote about Katrina regularly in her web-diary. Her comments range from some which are deeply self-involved ('I am sure my fans would want to know that my late husband's art collection is safe and well') to more generalised comments on the scale and impact of the disaster. What is striking is the ways in which her persona spilled into a statement which Rice released. In this widely quoted and recycled statement, Rice essentially denounces the 'American public' for letting New Orleans down. In May 2005 she wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, which talked powerfully about the nature of the suffering in the city, and explained why so many ordinary people were unable to flee the hurricane. It ended "But to my country I want to say this: During this crisis you failed us. You looked down on us; you dismissed our victims; you dismissed us," Rice wrote. "You want our Jazz Fest, you want our Mardi Gras, you want our cooking and our music," she continued. "Then when you saw us in real trouble, when you saw a tiny minority preying on the weak among us, you called us 'Sin City,' and turned your backs."

There is not one word, as far as I could find it, about George Bush, or the Republican Administration, or the systemic failures/racism of the rescue efforts. From the heights of her status, and from the safety of her home in California, Rice sets herself as spokesperson of the 'ordinary suffering peoples', and who welcomed Bill Clinton in almost fawning terms:

It fills me with relief and hope to see President Clinton working so hard with the survivors of the storm. This man emanates compassion and understanding.

Let me express my dream here that he will remain actively involved in helping the gulf coast come back. He is a brilliant and insightful man, full of love for his fellow Americans, and his words are a constant inspiration. Thank you, President Clinton. Please, please stay with the South and help it rebuild. With love, Anne Rice. (October 2005)

A number of blogger and other responses show the anger her statement aroused in some (including of course some rightwing writers). What I couldn't find out, and what would be really interesting to know, is the responses of her fans – the official and the unofficial, the local, national and international, to this piece of gratuitous 'position-taking' by Anne Rice. It would be a logical extension of Williamson's ideas, and I am grateful that she provoked me to think to ask this.

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