

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Jean H. Hagstrum, *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart*

Alicia Ostriker

*Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 18, Issue 1, Summer 1984, pp. 52-53



majority of those to whom wisdom is offered either reject it unthinkingly or fail to comprehend it. Nevertheless, the fact that Blake was heir to this Biblical tradition of prophetic utterance (with its own built-in obscurity) makes for one important difference between his work and emblem literature. Whatever the ingenuity of their conceits, the emblematisers were concerned with an extractable meaning, one which was more or less cryptically embedded in their text and pictures. But Blake's art derives much of its force from the controlled frenzy inherent in prophecy, and the energy of vatic possession. Its "obscurity" is a side-effect of its impetuous movement, and not the deliberately crafted crypticism of a symbolic collage.

In fact, it is this prophetic heritage that provides us with the historical connection between Blake and the emblematisers. Sanchez Perez points out that long after emblem books ceased to be a part of the intellectual mainstream, they remained popular among the literate Puritan middle class from which Blake took his origin. This class of conscientious nonconformists—strong among the London artisans—was heir to the vaguely millenarian dissenters of the seventeenth century. Raised on a diet of Milton's sonorities, Bunyan's vision of the Celestial City, and topical, alarmist readings of the Book of Revelations, they were by nature predisposed to the allegorical, visionary discourse of emblem literature. For them allegory was second nature, trained as they were in relentless typological interpretation of the Old Testament, and continuous anticipation of "signs" of the Final Days. This is Blake's tradition too. He is a creature of the Bible, Milton, and apocalyptically-tinged Dissent. He represents a Puritan-allegorical tradition that stems ultimately from Spenser, and which was mediated through Bunyan and the emblematisers.

Much of the foregoing paragraph is my interpretation, not necessarily that of Sanchez Perez. He is content to point out the strong connection that undoubtedly exists between some of Blake's graphic work and emblematic literature. The evidence that his book amasses is extensive and, to my mind, convincing. However, there are sure to be objections to his conclusions, precisely because of the theoretical possibility of coincidental similarities, and the impossibility of proving an artist has been decisively "influenced" by something. Sanchez Perez wraps up his discussion by saying that "the evidence in favour of influences from the emblematic tradition on the graphic work of Blake is sufficiently strong that it cannot be disregarded" (p. 169). But he is quick to add that "[t]here is no standard by which to measure that influence in a clear and precise manner" (p. 170). His book has over eighty illustrations, both from Blake and emblem literature, and some of the parallels are compelling. Yet he warns us that "we must bear in mind that some motifs, in fact, constitute commonplace topics of didactic literature" (p. 164). Prudence has dictated this politic hedging, and I would be the last to blame it.

So in the final analysis, Sanchez Perez steps back from the body of material he has gathered, as if unwilling to make too strong a connection between Blake and his putative sources. His caution is sensible, for the one thing that every student of Blake and the emblematisers agrees upon is Blake's absolute transmutation of the earlier tradition. What had been in the hands of lesser men a mere device for didactic moralizing became in Blake's hands a powerful instrument for visionary statement. No one who looks upon the graphics of Blake can deny that they are of an entirely different order than the emblem books. But it is good to take note of the debt, however slight, that a great artist owes to his humbler predecessors. And as for those who dislike admitting that Blake was anything other than *sui generis*, they should recall that originality in itself has nothing to commend it, and an overly self-conscious individuality can be a positive hindrance to substantial achievement. What matters in any art is obedience to creative energy—the spirit of Los. Sanchez Perez has shown that, whatever debt Blake owed to the emblematisers, he never disobeyed that spirit.

**Jean H. Hagstrum. *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982. 368 pp., illustrated. Cloth, \$30.00; paper, \$9.95.**

**Reviewed by Alicia Ostriker**

That man must have a heart of stone, says Oscar Wilde, who can read through the death of Little Nell without laughing. This has always been my sentiment about the death of Richardson's *Clarissa*; *Clarissa* as a whole has always struck me as the greatest, most sustained piece of soft-core pornographic soap opera in English. That such a fuss should be made over the deflowering of a not otherwise interesting bourgeois young lady; that *Clarissa* herself, her abductor, everyone else in the novel, and ap-

parently all of Europe from Dr. Johnson to Diderot and de Sade, should agree to apprehend the young woman's steady and humorless concentration on her own purity as the symbol not only of virtue but of Virtue, sensibility, nobility, sublimity, greatness of soul, angelic exaltedness and even sainthood, to me seems marvelous. I can imagine that the novel, and the feminization of culture it represents, would have deeply offended and irritated Blake; cf. the "subtle modesty" passage in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, "My Spectre Around Me," and much else.

Far otherwise is it in *Sex and Sensibility*, Jean Hagstrum's monumental survey of love in the Restoration and the eighteenth century. Hagstrum's admiration for Richardson's "amazingly perspicuous and intense portrayal of love" extends to exclamations of his own about Richardson's heroine ("How profoundly inner and intuitive the Protestant Clarissa is!") and to the urgent insistence that she is no prude but "deeply a woman" who would have loved Lovelace had he been worthy of her. Clarissa "dreamed of a man who would combine virtue with physical charm. . . . One of the most poignant of the letter fragments that survive the rape shows that Clarissa really wanted marriage." Lovelace "is made to run the gamut of human evil" when he dreams of siring, by Clarissa and Anna, children who will intermarry. Yet he is an "appealing" being of "heterosexual exuberance" (Hagstrum defends his potency and masculinity against doubters), possessed of considerable though amoral "sensitiveness," a potential Man of Feeling capable of rising finally to a full appreciation of Clarissa's greatness; which, however, "cannot of course avail to salvation." Clarissa's death is "this great apotheosis."

That Hagstrum is not so much a theoretical analyst of the cult of sensibility as a member of it in good standing, is the chief defect and the chief strength of *Sex and Sensibility*. Literary issues of language, style, structure and genre scarcely concern him. Neither Freud nor De Rougemont, much less Foucault or Bataille, impinge, although the connection between love and death is one of his major topics. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century development of the "closed domesticated nuclear" family ideally based on personal choice and affection, documented by Lawrence Stone, is cited by Hagstrum as the social basis behind the cultural phenomena he investigates, but the relation between art and literature and social change is not his subject: the interpretation of characters and their feelings is.

To the post-Romantic reader, Hagstrum's inclination to moralize his song may seem excessive. Milton's ideal of wedded love and uxorial joy, love as an elevating and civilizing influence, the domestication of heroism, tender feeling in particular and heterosexuality in general, are approved of. Thus Dryden's works "often throb with a bold and hearty physicality." When the good Maria confesses her love for the criminal George

Barnwell on the eve of his execution in Lillo's *The London Merchant*, "seldom has the theme [of love and death] been more movingly exploited." The love of Pamela and Mr. B. "elevates a spirited and determined girl to high station and gives to the noble husband . . . a marriage of true minds, hearts and bodies." Hagstrum is unmoved by the ideal of "angélism," the female too pure for physical passion, or by any sort of platonism. He admires passionate heroines, and feels that Dryden's portrayal of Dido as weak and licentious is "perhaps unforgivable." In his chapter on "The Abandoned and Passionate Mistress," he asserts that the period took to exotic deserted heroines like Dido, the Portugese Nun, and Eloise, "not because it wanted to escape reality" but because it needed "to fuel the domestic enterprise" by depictions of women who feel "intense devotion to a single man that is lifelong and irreversible and that lasts to the very edge of doom."

Antithetic to normative heterosexuality is what Hagstrum calls "morbid" or "narcissistic" love, the *locus classicus* of which he finds again in Milton, both in the Satan-Sin relation and in Adam's antihierarchical attachment to Eve as "flesh of my flesh," i.e. his similitude. Incest, threatened and actual, is a huge and fascinating motif in this period; both incest and love for one's likeness or mirror-self belong in the category of "the narcissistic sins." Thus Southerne's stage version of Behn's *Oronooko*, which displaces the themes of "love of woman for disguised woman, love of woman for effeminate male" into a farcical subplot, may be a "healthy attempt to expunge a potential stain on the psyche and on society." Interestingly, Hagstrum does not disapprove the intense erotic friendships of Clarissa-Anna and of Julie-Claire in *La Nouvelle Eloise*, perhaps because they do not successfully challenge the primacy of heterosexual passion.

The primary advantage of Hagstrum's approach is that it enables him enthusiastically to consider an immense range of works, among byways as well as highways, more or less on their own terms. His investigations of Pope's, Swift's, and Sterne's quirky and poignant variations on the theme of sensibility are tolerant and tender. The subject of ungratified infantilized eroticism—the lover as son—in Goethe and Rousseau is finely handled. The sorts of questions he tends to ask—has the Portugese Nun really stopped loving her ravisher? Should Clarissa have married Lovelace? Why does Uncle Toby retreat from the Widow Wadman?—capture, one feels, the actual preoccupations of the authors and their original readers, far better than a cooler, theoretically-oriented reading could have done. So too, Hagstrum's inclination to moralize emotion places us squarely within the ethos he describes. A bonus, throughout *Sex and Sensibility*, is Hagstrum's discussion of sex and love in the parallel traditions of painting and music. The array of plates, reproducing a set of highly-charged erotic paintings from Barry and Correggio to Greuze, should convince anyone that the Age of Reason enjoyed its steamy side.