

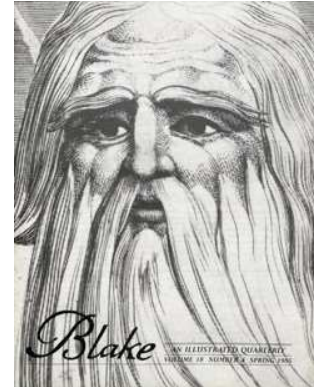
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D I S C U S S I O N

Reply to Hagstrum

Alicia Ostriker

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## Reply to Hagstrum

Alicia Ostriker

One can never be sure about such things, but I hope my opinions on *Clarissa* are unrelated to snobbery, of the Yale variety or otherwise. When I say that the novel is soft-core pornography, I mean that, like pornography, it creates a closed world in which nothing is important but sex—or, more precisely, sexual dominance. It is of the persecuted-maiden variety so thoroughly elaborated later in Sade's *Justine*, which uses many of the same plot devices (a useful book on this subject is Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, Pantheon 1980). It is soft-core because it merely teases, while feeding, the desires and anxieties of its audience. It is an ancestor of soap opera in its conduct of plot-as-ongoing-crisis, the attractive villainy and virtue of its characters, and its exclusive concentration on personal relationships. It is a work of genius in that it is able to sustain, for hundreds of pages, an interest in Clarissa's little curtain of flesh, while maintaining a perfect, pure, moral high-mindedness.

As to the impact of *Clarissa* on Blake: I have elsewhere presented my views on the complex issue of Blake and sexuality ("Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality," *Blake*, winter 1982–83). I agree with Hagstrum that Blake (in part) belongs to the Age of Sensibility. Pathos is, as Morton Paley has recently pointed out, one of his chief effects. The persecuted and suffering female recurs significantly throughout his work. Richardson's cankered-flower passage may well have inspired the rhetoric as well as the metaphor of "The Sick Rose." Nevertheless, Blake's letter to Hayley has to my ear the ring of something written under duress, and when we recall the gap between conventional piety and Blakean impiety, it is not hard to understand why.

Where would Richardson and his palpitating audience have been without Moral Virtue? But to Blake Moral Virtue was the result of a pathological failure of the human imagination; in his mid-thirties he was an advocate of free love and considered marriage a sick institution; at no time in his career does he admire sexual purity, much less equate it with sainthood. *Clarissa* expires in the arms of her bridegroom, Christ, but as an old man Blake was still exploding: "Was Jesus Chaste?" In the area of filial obedience we find the same distinction: Richardson approves submissiveness (even when the parents are monsters), Blake admires rebellion. At no point does Richardson question any of the social and religious institutions Blake spent his life trying to over-

throw. And so *Clarissa* was a pan-European bestseller, and Blake was an unknown.

One small point: Blake's gallery of types includes rapists but not rakes. I think it is a mistake to call the smooth, calculating and mannered Lovelace "Orcan," though he surely resembles Milton's seductive and self-deluding Satan.

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## NEWSLETTER

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### SONGS SUNG AND RECORDED

Christopher Heppner of McGill University, Montreal, sends us the following announcement:

A new work, *Songs of Innocence*, by David Patriquin was given its premiere on 28 March, 1984, by the St. Lawrence Choir at Christ Church Cathedral, Montreal. It consists of settings of some of the *Songs* for women's voices, harp, and flute. The work is now being recorded. Readers interested in acquiring either the score or the recording should write to Donald Patriquin, Faculty of Music, McGill University, 555 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3A 1E3.

### TRIANON PRESS FASCIMILES

Julie Fawcus of the Trianon Press would like for Blake scholars to have the first chance to purchase the remaining stock of Blake material published by the Press for the Blake Trust. The stock consists largely of individual pages, incomplete copies, and unbound copies. For a complete list of available facsimiles and prices, please write Julie Fawcus, The Trianon Press, 125 Avenue du Maine, Paris 75014, France.