

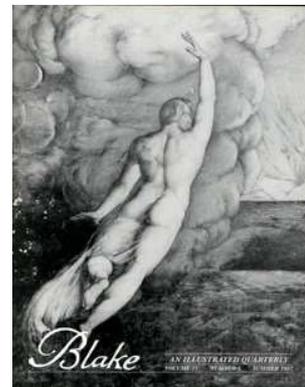
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

D I S C U S S I O N

Reply to Charu Sheel Singh

Mary V. Jackson

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 21, Issue 1, Summer 1987, p. 16



Reply to Charu Sheel Singh

Mary V. Jackson

Beneath the surface of Charu Sheel Singh's rejoinder to my review of *Chariot of Fire*, I sense feelings of both outrage and pain. For the pain of the person, I can only feel sorrow, and I do. But I feel a graver concern for the scholar, for his inability or unwillingness to look candidly at the quality of the work he has offered his colleagues. My criticisms of *Chariot* are just, indeed charitable—given such glaring flaws as arguments for direct influence on Blake by obscure writers unborn or in the cradle during his lifetime, combined with misleading data on the dates of their books. In any case, his book is "out," my review written, and his riposte duly recorded. It is now to be hoped that the scholar in Charu Sheel Singh will, at this remove in time, find the leisure and the calmness of temperament to assess rationally his beloved intellectual progeny, which he will find to contain much in need of mending.

More on *The Romantic Body*

Jean H. Hagstrum

I risk seeming ungrateful and even churlish in replying to so generous and appreciative a review (see below, 17) as Anne Mellor's of my latest book, *The Romantic Body* (Tennessee, 1985). Stimulated by the suggestiveness of her disagreements, I make a few comments, not, I hope, to quibble but to further argument on what I consider important issues and problems.

Mellor refers to my "effort not to read Keats too pornographically." I assure her that no energy whatever was expended in resisting erotic double entendres. If I missed sexual nuances, I did so because they slid silently past me unregarded. I pause on this point because ever since Freud we have been discovering innuendo everywhere, and in reaction I have successfully covered my gamesome critical eye. It is time to ask what, if any, critical tools are now available to tell us when we go too far. Because I insist on the physical basis of Keatsian love, Mellor wants me to see Psyche's "welcoming vagina" in the "casement ope at night / To let the warm Love in," the same opening that encloses Coleridge's Eolian harp, "that simplest Lute, / Placed length-ways in the clasping casement." But if Coleridge's casement is the vagina, the lute will have to be phallic and the desultory breeze will have to blow from the coy maid. So be it—or so *may* it be. But some will be disturbed by "length-ways," and

when, as the poem proceeds, the strings are "boldlier swept," the literal imagination can lead us to leering laughter. Honestly, I do sense sexual emotion in Coleridge's poem, but how far should I go in seeking literal referents? If the vagina is either vaguely or literally present in "The Eolian Harp," it is, I think, gratuitously discovered in the "Ode to Psyche." I argue in the book that the poem proceeds on two levels, the sexual and the mental-imaginative, and that in Keats's development the myth undergoes further refinement and transcendence within the compass of the poem. Keats, having already established the deliciously physical early in the poem, finally turns to domesticity, the working brain and shadowy thought. If this is indeed the movement of the poet's thought both within and before the poem, do we need or want a vaginal allusion at the close, in the "casement ope at night"? I do not, for critical and aesthetic reasons.

I am inclined to be more dogmatic about Mellor's suggestion that in the "Ode on Melancholy" the words, "whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine," reveal "a climax achieved by cunnilingus." I much prefer my own reading, which sees the orgasm under military and Christian veils. The tongue does indeed invoke that other boneless member, which, however, has powers and possibilities that the lingual cannot achieve. It stiffens to attention in saluting female space, and it buries seed (like the grain of corn in the Gospels) that can bring forth fruit. This troping better supports the Delight-Melancholy oxymoron than does cunnilingus, which strikes me as leading to an imagistic muddle. The tongue would remain literal while the palate would have to be figurative, even though it is "*his palate fine.*"

Before leaving Keats I must defend myself against the charge of ignoring his periods of irony and despair with respect to love. I lead the reader (admittedly using the letters more fully than the poems) to the depths of his "posthumous" existence. But am I wrong in reading "To Autumn" optimistically and in arguing, in a lengthy discussion, that Keats's art and spirit drive toward life rather than death? At least the argument should be fully described and answered point by point.

About Blake I must make a few corrective comments. Mellor says that my geographical metaphor of bordering countries suggests that I conceive of Beulah as being *beside* but not *below* Eden. True enough, I make the two contiguous, since I believe sexual energy flows back and forth between them. But I do not equalize these psychological, artistic, and moral zones. I say: "Why does Blake structure his Beulah as threefold? A very important reason is that *three* is one—but *only* one—digit less than *four*, the number of Edenic fulfillment and integration, and we shall make much of the fact that threefold Beulah is below, but not far below,