

# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

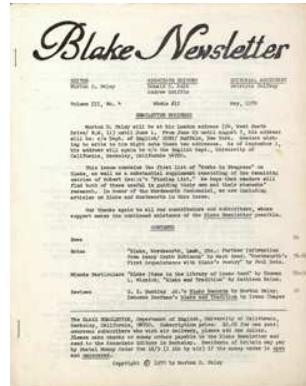
# BLAKE

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## The Devil's Syntax and the O.E.D.

Mary Lynn Johnson

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at least formally alive. Most of the books listed in William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols were published before 1900, and the commentators Damon calls on are among those Miss Dorfman discusses. In one instance, the much later Blake Dictionary (s. v. "Thel") preserves as biographical fact what she shows to have been Edwin Ellis' invention: the supposed unborn child of the Blakes, supposedly lost by a miscarriage.

The small irony that involves the author herself does not affect the genuine scholarly value of her researches, which also enable us to see that the subject does not belong wholly to the past and that neither 1893 nor 1924 really marked the beginning of the "modern" in Blake studies. If Blake's story is, as Miss Dorfman sums it up, "peculiarly a history of reclamation," it would seem that the greater part of the task--reclaiming the man and his work from his Victorian heirs and exegetes--is barely under way.

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#### DISCUSSION

##### "With Intellectual Spears and Long-winged Arrows of Thought"

###### 1. The Devil's Syntax and the O.E.D.

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How should we parse "Damn. braces: Bless relaxes"?<sup>1</sup> Does this proverb mean that damning braces [the one who damns] and blessing relaxes [the one who blesses]? Or are braces to be damned and relaxes to be blessed? The arguments on both sides are intriguing.

1. The act of damning is stimulating; the act of blessing is enervating. Although Damn and Bless are awkward nouns, the fact that they are capitalized, as well as the placing of a pause-period after Damn, strengthens the impression that they are nevertheless the subjects of balanced declarative clauses. The colon after braces and the period after relaxes further suggest the declarative sentence, the indicative mood, as in other paired statements among the Proverbs of Hall--"Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps" or "The cistern contains: the fountain overflows," for example. Thus the pronouncing of the word "damn" or the act of damning anything deserving of an honest man's indignation is healthy, toning up the nerves and girding one for battle. The weak, "angelic" act of blessing, on the other hand, weakens

and debilitates. Or if the verbs are intransitive, "Damn" itself becomes resolute and "Bless" becomes slack.

2. Curse everything that braces; bless everything that relaxes (or curse restrains; bless releases). A more vigorous aphorism, in the imperative mood, is this command to condemn whatever holds in and to bless whatever lets go. The punctuation does not suggest an oath or an ejaculation (several other proverbs do end in exclamation points), however, and relaxes is an even odder noun than Damn or Bless. Yet the formula "Damn \_\_\_\_\_; Bless \_\_\_\_\_" in ordinary English word order leads us to expect nouns. Other proverbs begin with such imperatives as "Drive," "Dip," "Bring," "Think," "Expect," and "Listen." The OED definitions of brace as a noun which are relevant to this proverb are "that which clasps, tightens, secures, connects" and "that which imparts rigidity or steadiness." Since--fortunately--the use of braces to mean suspenders does not appear until 1816, the noun braces is a good synonym for the Urizenic laws, "mind-forg'd manacles," Newtonian systems, the thou-shalt-nots under which priests are "binding with briars my joys and desires." Blessed by angels, all such "braces" are damned by the Devil.

The noun form of relax is rare, but it is used by Milton, and the OED records it as late as 1773. It has even been known to occur in the plural form, in Owen Felltham's Resolves between 1627 and 1677. It means "relaxation, or that which causes relaxation." The legal meaning of relaxation, "partial (or complete) remission of some penalty, burden, duty, etc.,," would certainly be considered praiseworthy by the Devil's party. Another definition, "diminution of, release or freedom from, strictness or severity," should be equally attractive to the apostles of exuberance. The religious would consider such "relaxes" a threat to the angelic code and its enforcement, but the Devil heartily blesses them.

Evidence from Blake's own usage elsewhere is inconclusive. According to David V. Erdman's Concordance (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), relax appears nowhere else in Blake. Brace, in its three other appearances, is a noun modified by iron:

- A. Nought can deform the Human Race  
Like to the Armours iron brace.

(Auguries of Innocence, ll. 99-100)

- B. The "golden builders" form Golgonooza from such materials as stones of pity, bricks of affections, tiles of merciful labor, beams and rafters of forgiveness, and  
the nails,  
And the screws & iron braces, are well wrought blandishments  
And well contrived words, firm fixing, never forgotten,  
Always comforting the remembrance.

(Jerusalem 12:33-36)

C. Los's sons Rintrah, Palamabron, Theotormon, and Bromion have endured long periods of anguish in the Furnaces at which they now labor. The machinery there includes

iron rollers, golden axle-trees & yokes  
Of brass, iron chains & braces & the gold, silver & brass  
Mingled or separate: for swords; arrows; cannons; mortars  
The terrible ball: the wedge: the loud sounding hammer  
of destruction.

(Jerusalem 73:9-12)

Damn and Bless are always verbs, although the direct objects of Bless are consistently ironic: Tiriel's bald pate or the seventh day on which the children of Urizen rest after having shrunk up from existence. Damn, on the other hand, is used as a straightforward expletive, as in "damn sneerers" in the annotations to Lavater (Keynes, p. 67, Erdman, p. 574).

It seems highly likely that "Damn. braces: Bless relaxes" has more than one infernal or diabolical meaning. E. J. Rose has commented on "Blake's synchronization of parts of speech with his symbolism."<sup>2</sup> In "Mental forms Creating," for instance, "Creating" is both a participle and a verb. When corrosives have melted away apparent grammatical surfaces, Blake's ambiguity of syntax (Empson's second type of ambiguity) emerges. Both the first and second meanings, at the very least, are simultaneously communicated in a double-edged statement of infernal wisdom.

<sup>1</sup>All quotations are from The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y., 1965).

<sup>2</sup>Edward J. Rose, "Visionary Forms Dramatic: Grammatical and Iconographical Movement in Blake's Verse and Designs," Criticism, VIII (1966), 111-125.

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## 2. Discussing the Arlington Court Picture Part I: A Report on the Warner-Simmons Theory

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Seminar 23, devoted to Methods of Interpreting the Illustrations of William Blake, met for the second time at the Modern Language Association Convention in Denver on December 28, 1969, from 10:30 - 12 Noon, at the Brown Palace Hotel. About forty-five people were in attendance.