

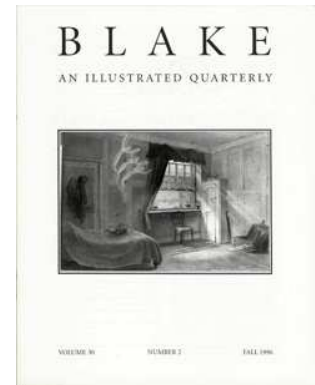
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Eugenie R. Freed, "A Portion of His Life": William Blake's Miltonic Vision of Woman

Sheila A. Spector

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 30, Issue 2, Fall 1996, pp. 60-62



attempting to be a study of both life and works. Yet this would be to concede that the works are too difficult in their detail to form part of a general biography, which would be a dismal conclusion in any case but especially dismal for someone who never travelled further from London than Sussex and whose life was *in* his works to such a great degree. I still resist such a conclusion and can only say that despite its impressive literary qualities, psychological insight, and sense of the period, Peter Ackroyd's *Blake* is a disappointment.

Eugenie R. Freed, "A Portion of His Life": *William Blake's Miltonic Vision of Woman*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994. \$60.

Reviewed by SHEILA A. SPECTOR

In his essay, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," Leo Strauss theorizes that during periods of political oppression, when "some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom" (32), iconoclastic writers developed a mode of exoteric composition, "writing between the lines," as a means of circumventing censorship.¹ In these Straussian texts, the surface argument would appear to be quite conventional, often even bland, to satisfy the more casual or careless readers. However, these writers would also employ specific structural and stylistic techniques by which the more persistent and intelligent readers could discern "the truth about all crucial things" (25). Although ours is not a period of overt governmental repression, still, as many on both sides of the political spectrum have argued, the numerous cultural *isms* dominating today's critical discourse have had the effect of enforcing orthodoxy through custom, if not law, to the point that writers often impose some form of self-censorship in order to avoid being labeled ideologically impure.² Such is apparently the case with "A Portion of His Life": *William Blake's Miltonic Vision of Woman*.

¹ Originally published in *Social Research* (November 1941): 488-504, "Persecution and the Art of Writing" was reprinted as the first essay of a book by the same title ([Glencoe, IL.: Free Press, 1952], 22-37).

² This is hardly an original observation. For example, Phillip E. Johnson, professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley, notes in a recent issue of *Academe*, "the principle threat to academic freedom these days comes not from ministers, or trustees, or university administrators, but from the dominant ideologies among students and faculty" ("What [If Anything] Hath God Wrought: Academic Freedom and the Religious Professor" in *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 81.5 (1995): 19).

Instead of presenting an explicit exposition of her revisionist interpretation of the female in Blake, Eugenie R. Freed seems to have placed "the truth about all crucial things" between the lines. While on the surface hers appears to be a conventional analysis of Miltonic influences on four major female characters in Blake's myth, in fact, formal and stylistic characteristics suggest that Freed's true purpose can be found only "between the lines," or, to be more exact, in the last seven pages of her text.

"A Portion of His Life" reads like a traditional study of the ways in which Blake absorbed and adapted Miltonic elements to create Thel, Enitharmon, Ololon and Jerusalem, major female characters in his myth. In the first chapter, "Blake's Miltonic Vision," Freed establishes the biographical, cultural and literary evidence for her belief that "Milton's poetry is not 'backdrop' alone, but *also* provides much of the raw material of Blake's" (19). As she notes, Blake did not passively incorporate the source material into his prophecies but, rather, "collapses Milton's universe into one of his own, which he has fabricated by the fusion of apparently conflicting Miltonic elements" (25). By transcending Milton's polarity of good and evil, Blake is able to focus on emotional and imaginative levels which supercede the conventional moral duality. As a result, while Thel, Enitharmon, Ololon and Jerusalem are obviously derived, respectively, from the Lady of *Comus*, Eve, Sin and Nature, their characterizations are based "even more on the *substance* of Milton's works, the transmitted words, phrases, images and ideas that had embedded themselves in the matrix of Blake's own imagination" (34). But in contrast to Milton, who subordinates women, Blake considers the "female portion" to be "an essential part of [man's] spiritual being" (31).

In the ensuing six chapters, Freed explores the Miltonic dimensions of these specific women. Chapter 2 is devoted to an analysis of the ways Thel can be viewed as laying the negative foundation for Blake's vision of woman. As a criticism of the idealized concept of chastity found in *Comus*, *The Book of Thel* provides the first example of the Female Will, a woman who erroneously withholds her sexuality. Thus, she is used ultimately to affirm a positive attitude towards sexuality as a necessary commitment to life on earth. Freed believes that "Thel, inspired by Blake's complex response to Milton's treatment of what appeared to Blake as obdurate chastity in *Comus*, deplores the loss of Paradise. And she rejects the only alternative offered to man: coming to terms with experience, which includes procreation and generation, in the fallen world" (43).

Next, Freed turns to Enitharmon as a woman who actualizes the choices rejected by Thel. Chapter 3 analyzes Enitharmon's birth, presenting her relationship with Los as a kind of "material matrix" for Los's own creativity. That is, as his female counterpart, she is essential for his artistic functioning, a necessary element to the androgynous union

required for any mode of human creativity. But when she is separated from Los or the Spectre of Urthona, she becomes like Milton's Sin, a function of the moral polarity governing the fallen universe. From this perspective, Enitharmon's union with her son Orc—comparable to Sin's with her son Death—takes us to the abyss of chaos, as discussed in chapter 4, "The Winds of Enitharmon." When she becomes a consolidated selfhood, Enitharmon personifies the malevolent Female Will, the impulse to dominate, and hence negate, rather than complement Los's creativity. Ultimately, she parallels Milton's Eve, whose attempt to establish dominion also yielded a disastrous train of events; and Los, like Adam before him, is forced to participate in what is tantamount to an act of anticreation.

After Enitharmon, Freed discusses Ololon. The first of the two chapters devoted to Milton's emanation takes a biographical approach, speculating that Blake attributed Milton's depiction of women and their relationships with men to his own problems in reconciling the demands of personal relationships with his artistic, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical needs. Freed also considers the possibility that Blake blamed these domestic problems for inhibiting or distorting Milton's creativity, just as at critical periods in his own life, problems with Catherine may have affected Blake's. Chapter 6, "Ololon II," deals with Ololon's epiphany as she realizes that only by leaving Beulah can she actualize her role as Milton's contrary. Yet, to do so she must herself become Milton's personification of Sin in *Paradise Lost*, for once they enter the vegetative world of time and space, they assume earthly human sexuality, become mortal and, perforce, embrace death. But by becoming "Sin," Ololon is able to shed the negation of the hypocritical virgin and become Milton's full partner, enabling the two of them to realize their full humanity.

Blake's Miltonic vision of woman culminates in the figure Jerusalem. Following the lead of St. John of Patmos, and later John Milton, Blake transcends his historical situation by depicting his beleaguered intellectual paradise as both a city and a woman. Like the phoenix, which is associated with divine wisdom and illumination, holiness and love, Jerusalem is emblematic of unconditional love, remaining faithful to Albion throughout his ordeal. As such, in contrast to Milton's Eve, Jerusalem inspires awe, for she is the essence of Divine Humanity, being predicated on a humanized ideal rather than a moral standard of redemption: "The divinity and beauty of *humanity* is Jerusalem's 'sublime ornament'" (120).

To this point, Freed's analysis comprises the painstaking research of a conventional source study, demonstrating how Blake adapted Miltonic materials to produce the part of his myth dealing with these four major female characters. However, the analysis leads Freed away from literary antecedents and towards modern criticism, with the iconoclastic conclusion that, contrary to the assertions of feminist crit-

ics like Alicia Ostriker, Anne K. Mellor, Susan Fox and Brenda Webster, Blake's myth does project a true androgyny. Inverting scholarly convention, Freed only here provides the kind of disclaimer normally found in the preface to this kind of monograph—that "I alone must be held culpable for the views expressed here" (148n1)—but, then again, it is only here, in her "Conclusion: Albion's Bow," that she articulates her own critical stance (121-27).

While noting that "Blake's treatment of femininity and of females in the course of the unfolding of his myth has, on the whole, displeased feminist critics," Freed still believes that "The female counter-part provides the male not only with 'the food of life,' but with the indispensable matrix without which there can be no creative conception, and hence no meaningfully *human* life at all." After explicitly expressing the "great respect genuinely due to Anne Mellor," Freed asserts that "There is nevertheless . . . evidence that Blake did attempt to develop 'an image of human perfection that was completely gender free' in the visual aspect of his work, as critical dispute over the sex of some of the angelic and 'regenerated' human figures in his designs attests." Acknowledging that feminist critics have generally been displeased with Blake's treatment of femininity and of females, she contends, "It would seem that critics who approach Blake's work with a feminist ideological agenda risk being blinkered by their indignation so as to see only gross deficiencies in his treatment of the female in his mythmaking."

Instead, she feels, Blake should be given credit "for a concept of gender that was remarkable for its time in its sensitivity to female sexuality, and its breaking down of sexual stereotypes, notwithstanding that Blake had only in part succeeded in freeing himself from the handicap of the culturally ingrained attitudes of his time."

Even though "*A Portion of His Life*": *William Blake's Miltonic Vision of Woman* was not published during a period of political persecution, it still embodies two basic characteristics of texts written between the lines. Probably the more significant, Freed's organization reflects an "obscurity of the plan." In the opening chapter, she does announce her basic approach, and each chapter does unify around a specific topic. But she withholds an explicit statement of purpose as well as the argument for each chapter, not to mention her own critical stance. Under the circumstances, readers must infer for themselves the underlying principle of structure which determined why she organized the study the way she did: why, for instance, two chapters each for Enitharmon and Ololon, but only one for Jerusalem?

So, too, with style. According to Strauss, texts written between the lines are for the most part "quiet" and "unspectacular": "Only when [a writer] reached the core of the argument would he write three or four sentences in that terse and lively style which is apt to arrest the attention of young

men who love to think" (24). Similarly, most of Freed's analysis is written in a subdued and gracious prose. Like many Blake critics, she supplements her ideas with a generous number of quotations—from Blake and Milton, as well as other source materials—which she often uses to make her point for her. Somewhat puzzlingly, she rejects parenthetical citations in favor of endnotes, averaging about a hundred per chapter. But quite refreshingly, she relies primarily on plain English, rather than the critical jargon that has become so fashionable of late. Finally, she very generously acknowledges published and private sources which furthered her argument, though when appropriate, she does not hesitate to express respectful disagreement, but without any hint of hostile confrontation. Yet, as with the Straussian text, when, in the conclusion, Freed presents the essence of her position, her language is both direct and explicit, clearly designed "to arrest the attention of [all] who love to think."

If used by novice writers, these techniques can prove quite maddening; indeed, in his essay, Strauss warns that only carefully written texts merit the kind of attention required for reading between the lines. However, on the whole, Freed's book is provocative, relevant, learned, erudite, well documented, and painstakingly designed—with illustrations not only attractively but strategically located. Therefore, her structural and stylistic peculiarities, like those of Straussian texts, appear to be deliberate, and consequently indicate a larger problem in academia. It would seem that the power of various ideological camps dominating the academy are perceived as having grown so powerful that at least some scholars believe it necessary to bury opposing viewpoints between the lines. If this is so, then regardless of our own political or ideological predilections, we should all be seriously concerned about how critical debate is being curtailed, if not actually stifled, to the detriment of scholarship as a whole.

E R R A T A

This section of Robert N. Essick's "Blake in the Marketplace, 1995, Including a Survey of Blakes in Private Ownership," was inadvertently omitted from the spring 1996 issue. The omitted section began at the bottom of page 117 and should have carried over to page 118.

Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 1809. Heritage Book Shop, Feb. private offer, small-paper issue slightly trimmed, Blake's pl. thinly printed but clean, full calf by R. De Coverly (\$1350). Adam Mills, March cat. 32, #117, contemporary ink signature of "William Bayly, Junr," and a later pencil note ("a friend of Blake's—and Johnson Cowper's editor"), some pls. spotted or stained in margins, contemporary half calf, joints cracking (£500); same copy and price, July cat. 33, #23, Oct. cat. 34, #20. I can find no other reference to Blake having a friend named "Bayly," but a "William Bayley" was a member of the jury that found Blake innocent of sedition and assault on 11 Jan. 1804 (G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* [Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969] 140). Did Blake have a "friend" on the jury? I can find no record of Bayly/Bayley having been involved in editing Cowper. Perhaps whoever wrote the reference to Blake was confusing "William Bayly" with William Hayley, Blake's patron and the author/editor of *The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper*, published by Joseph Johnson in 1803-04. The Antique & Book Collector, July cat., #24, Blake's pl. only extracted (£225). CE, 27 Sept., #138, some soiling, 19th-century half morocco worn (\$58). John Windle, Dec. cat. 26, #43, half calf, hinges repaired, from the Joseph Holland collection (\$450).

Hayley, *Little Tom the Sailor*. Broadside, printed in black. John Windle, Dec. cat. 26, #3, from the Joseph Holland collection, headpiece, tailpiece, and colophon illus. (price on inquiry; acquired by R. Essick). See illus. 6.

Hayley, *Triumphs of Temper*, 1803. James Burmester, Feb. cat. 27, #34, apparently small paper, contemporary calf rebaked (£300). Robert Clark, March cat. 39, #200, some foxing, contemporary calf rebaked (£285). John Windle, April cat. 24, #43, large paper, fine impressions, uncut in original blue boards, lower part of backstrip worn away, slight spotting in some margins (\$1975). E. M. Lawson, April cat. 272, #64, apparently small paper, contemporary calf rebaked (£220). Quaritch, June cat. 1208, #18, large paper, contemporary calf (£1200). John Windle, July "Summer" cat., #31, small paper, lacking the half title, some foxing and offsetting from the pls., calf rebaked, joints repaired (\$475); same copy and price, Dec. cat. 26, #206. The Antique & Book Collector, July cat., #20-23, 4 unidentified pls. extracted and sold individually (£125 each). Simon Finch, Oct. cat. 26, #70, small paper, contemporary calf worn, front joint restored (£380); same copy and price, Dec. "Occasional List" 13, #43. Wilsey Rare Books, Nov. private offer, small-paper issue in original boards uncut, "HAYLEY." neatly written in pen and ink on the spine, the