

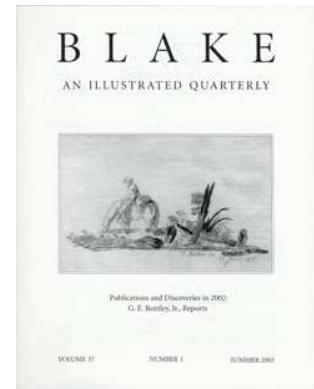
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R E V I E W

Christopher Z. Hobson, *Blake and Homosexuality*

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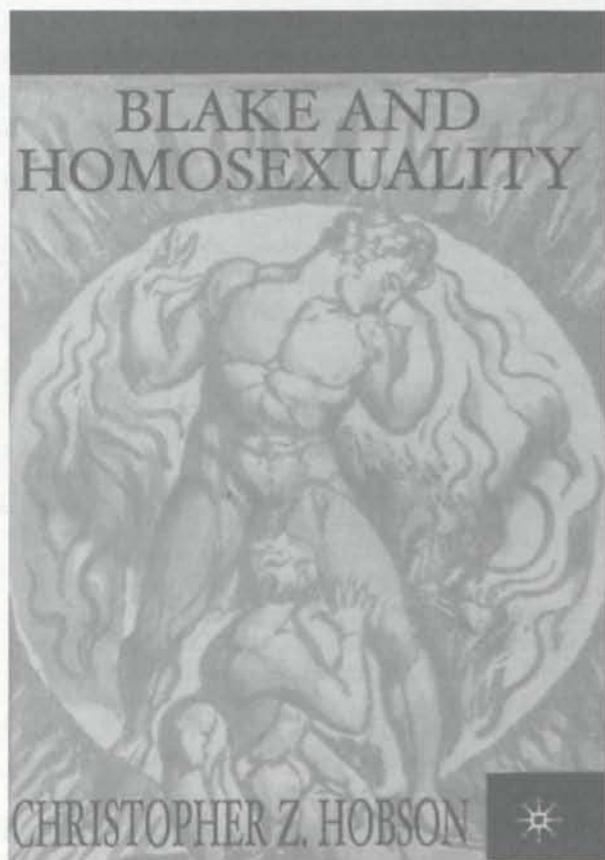
of any reader, and so the subject of the "Introduction," that opening road into Innocence ("Innocence sustains itself as a voice," writes Smith [181]). Of that plate's compressed narrative of individual/cultural progression from sound to words to writing Smith hears only "consonance between the world of the child on a cloud who sets the agenda of wholesome joy and tears and the piper who provides their artistic articulation" as he marks for us also the absence of any "felt contradiction between the downward triumphant narrative of the verse and the upward swing towards heaven of the design's vegetation" (159). The reason "Every child may joy to hear," one supposes, is that with the songs now written down, etched, and printed, they may be read aloud—perhaps even with real inspiration—by some knowledgeable (i.e. experienced) reader. But in either event There Is No Natural (or, unmediated) Access—the songs can never be "heard" before they have been analyzed—not by the reader, who must negotiate the signifiers ("Ill"? \*I'll?), nor by young listeners, with no voice about whatever reading experience they cannot choose but overhear. Several innocent references to "deconstruction" (above, and 85, 98, 151) add to the impression that, some useful if unexceptional contextualization notwithstanding, this effort does not live up to its claim to offer "An Analysis."

Christopher Z. Hobson. *Blake and Homosexuality*. New York: Palgrave, 2000. xxii + 249 pp. \$59.95/£40.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by MARGARET STORCH

Christopher Z. Hobson has written a welcome study of an important aspect of Blake that is too often ignored. People have noted the ideal beauty of Blake's male figures, his sometimes androgynous female figures, and the centrality of the theme of brotherhood in his work. Rarely has it been suggested that Blake had a specific homosexual sympathy.

Hobson presents the view not that Blake himself was necessarily homosexual or bisexual but that he came to empathize with male homosexuals and lesbians as he became increasingly aware of the prejudice and victimization they suffered. The study is well grounded in the social history of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when a specific awareness of male homosexual identity together with intolerance, greater legal repression, and mob antagonism came about. Even the republican tradition of reform which Blake espoused was inimical to sodomy. Hobson suggests that Blake's views may have developed in a way similar to those of Jeremy Bentham, his close contemporary, who over several decades moved to a position of acceptance of homosexuality as a variant of human nature.



Hobson considers that Blake's works before *The Four Zoas* reflect "the poetics of masculinity," including the tendency observed by feminists and others to treat desire and gratification in terms of heterosexual male dominance. The Preludium to *America* is a notably aggressive example. The illustrations to the poems may depict possibly homosexual figures, for instance the women in the opening plates of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, but they are absorbed in the overall heterosexual male-centered ethos. Hobson also discusses Blake's views on masturbation as shown in this period, which like his masculinist perspective are regressive. He suggests that masturbation, resulting from social repression, is an expression of "deformed desire." Thus, masturbation expresses and determines Urizen's negativity in the creation sequence in *Ahania*.

It is in *The Four Zoas*, that vast, many-faceted work that occupied Blake for more than ten years, that Hobson finds the first clear emergence of homoerotic expression and sympathy. Most prominently, homosexual acts are depicted as expressions of rebellion against the oppressive father, Urizen. Hobson suggests that in Blake's middle and later work depictions of homosexuality frequently accompany statements in the text of resistance to social oppression. Certain illustrations in the poem are studied carefully for evidence of homosexual activity or interest. One of Hobson's key examples is the illustration to page 78 of *The Four Zoas*, which, as he interprets it, shows a male figure, as-

sumed to be Orc, about to engage in fellatio with another male figure who is leaning over him. The accompanying text concerns Urizen's successful subjugation of Orc in Night 7. Hobson reads a sequence such as Orc's adoption of a phallic, snake-like form in Night 7a, at Urizen's injunction, as a criticism of male sexual possessiveness. In illustrations such as those for page 88 of *The Four Zoas*, where three figures are depicted worshipping an exaggerated phallic form, Hobson posits censure of masculine erotic aggression, the dangerous "secret religion" to which the text refers.

Hobson identifies various female figures in the poem as engaging in lesbian sexual activity, like male homosexuals, in defiance of the power of Urizen, and he discounts heterosexual interpretations such as those of Magno and Erdman. A problem in reading these illustrations of female activity as benignly intended by Blake is that the text of *The Four Zoas* contains significant misogynistic allusions, some on the same pages as the illustrations, as Hobson acknowledges. Thus it seems unnecessary to posit a positive interpretation of the female figures. Elements from the *Four Zoas* illustrations may be transferred with their original impetus to the finished works: the exquisite design for the title page of *Jerusalem*, plate 2, holds menace in its surreal female forms and the tripartite motifs associated with abstraction and denial of sensuality.

Blake's responses to Milton are central to Hobson's case. He discusses extensively both Blake's illustrations to Milton's works and the poem *Milton*. Hobson finds a homosexual character in the depictions of the brothers in the *Comus* illustrations with their classical warrior motifs, and also in the designs for *Paradise Regained*, in which Blake revises Milton's disdain for the body. His interpretation of the historical significance of the Bard's Song, departing from Erdman, is that Satan, here and elsewhere, is the English state in Blake's own time, applying the strictures of Moral Law to aspects of personal life, including homosexuality. Satan's expulsion of Leutha, his female principle, and her guilt at sexuality, are seen as an ironic condemnation of moral repression.

*Milton* is essential to any discussion of homosexuality in Blake, and Hobson persuasively places it in a new historical context. He puts forward the view that the revisions to the poem after 1811 in the C and D versions, entailing a stronger condemnation of Moral Law, may be related among other causes to a period of heightened prosecution and persecution of homosexuals during 1810-1811, the most notorious being associated with activities at the White Swan Inn in Vere Street. Prisoners were reviled by angry mobs, including many women. Blake does not mention Vere Street, but Hobson suggests that the episodes may have intensified his sympathy for the victims of homophobia and that "Calvary's Foot" in plate 4 is a veiled reference to the mob persecution, rather than specifically to Tyburn, the usual reading.

In discussing the two "homosexual" plates, 45 and 47, Hobson considers whether the contacts involve fellatio, and inclines towards the view that 45 depicts Urizen's fainting at the naked male body, while 47 may show Blake's genital kiss of the glorified form of Los. However, a most significant consideration is surely that in plate 47, as well as in 32, 37 and 45, Blake uses a homosexual image to express a theme of the utmost artistic importance—the incorporation of creative power. This possibly indicates not merely empathy with homosexuals on Blake's part but his own homoerotic, or bisexual, sensibility.

Hobson places homosexuality, with an emphasis on lesbianism, among the major themes that Blake resolves in *Jerusalem*. He focuses upon the sequence leading to the death of Albion in which Albion confronts Jerusalem in the arms of Vala (plates 19-25). This female embrace is depicted in the lily design, plate 28 of copy D, of which Erdman notes that the figure on the left was originally male and the embrace less chaste. The sequence has been read by others as lesbian. Convincing as this may be, the emphasis seems to be not upon eroticism so much as a powerful female partnership that will destroy Albion. Hobson goes on to show that in this culminating epic emanations are not specifically female, as seen in Shiloh, and states that hermaphrodites are sexually differentiated, removing threat and bias from gender relations.

Hobson's argument for Blake's sympathetic espousal of lesbians is less convincing than that for his empathy with male homosexuals. Female homosexuals were not subjected to the same legal and social persecution as males, and therefore presumably would not have evoked the same response. Hobson reads the attribution of sexuality and male organs to women as evidence of Blake's positive feeling. However, the illustrations of erotic lesbian poses and enlarged clitorises in *The Four Zoas* do not necessarily suggest a sympathy with lesbians: they may imply a prurient fascination pursued more fully in these private sketches than in the illustrations intended for public view. A phallic woman, as a mother figure, can be seen as threatening to men; a phallic woman as an object of desire may be reassuring, since she is already in possession of mastery. Both fantasies spring from anxiety.

Hobson's book opens up the important topic of Blake and homosexuality as never before. Blake's empathy with male homosexuality and his own sensibility that embraces the homoerotic are fundamental and revealing elements in his work.