

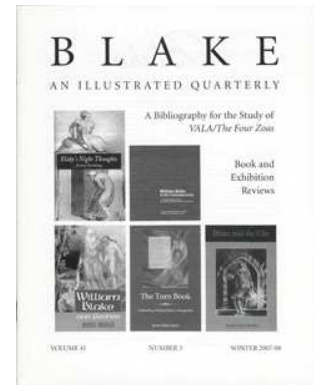
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R E V I E W

Magnus Ankarsjö, *William Blake and Gender*

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issues of production and reception in the period. The professional sphere that Blake (periodically) inhabited is embodied in the exhibition through the work and biographies of some of Blake's key associates: Cumberland, Flaxman, Fuseli, Linnell, Stothard, and Tresham. These six men, or alternatively, "Men who occupied the sixth chamber," appear here as artists in their own right as well as patrons, readers, or peers. Sometimes of course these roles converged, as in the case of Cumberland, whose literary manuscripts, scrapbooks, and sketches live alongside books embellished with engravings by Blake. Linnell is represented by an oil portrait sketch of Mrs. George Stephen (wife of a solicitor consulted by Linnell over the Blake estate), a kindly, intimate image that seems consistent with Linnell's handling of Blake himself. Stothard's tender watercolor *Infancy* (c. 1802) makes the sharp dealing of the Canterbury Pilgrims affair seem almost impossible. And Tresham's oil painting *Anthony and Cleopatra*, executed for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, calls up the aspirations and disappointments of a whole decade of British art.

The Bentley collection is both an entity and the emanation of a distinguished scholarly collaboration. As a "working library" in its richest sense, one that documents the material and spiritual labor of the subject, the biographer, and the collectors, its relocation to the Pratt Library at Victoria University in Toronto seems very appropriate. Here it is in close proximity to an important holding of Coleridge materials and the Northrop Frye papers, not to mention Douglas Martin's portrait of Frye composedly levitating. And here the lines of the collection are extended magnetically towards a new set of readers, scholars, and students. William Blake and His Contemporaries was opened in late 2006 with a gala reception, memorable on many counts, not the least for hearing a university president quote "When the morning stars sang together" rather than the passages of Job more habitual to administrators. But what struck me most forcibly was that the qualities that converge in successful collecting—knowledge and insight, judgment and good fortune—also shape the community one collects in turn. In a life lived with books the notion of provenance, like the "little lovely Allegoric Night" in *Jerusalem*, may be "stretchd abroad, expanding east & west & north & south."

Editors' note: Information on ordering the catalogue is available at <<http://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/libpubs.htm>>.

Magnus Ankarsjö. *William Blake and Gender*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2006. x + 210 pp. \$32.00/£20.50, paperback.

Reviewed by G. A. Rosso

IN this well-meaning book, Magnus Ankarsjö struggles with the complex and intractable issues of sex and gender in Blake's *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. Seeking to refute the argument that Blake was anti-feminist, Ankarsjö declares that he will "dismantle the claims that define Blake as condescending towards the female sex" (2). His goals are to demonstrate that there is much more positive "gender interactivity" in these poems than critics realize and that in them "Blake presents a gender utopia with a vision of complete equality between the sexes" (3, 2). With the burden of proof on his shoulders, Ankarsjö seeks to trace a "clear line of development" in Blake's portrayal of gender in the epics, but, in his attempt to manage the irreducible complexity of the narratives and of the sexual forces that energize them, he fixates on what he calls Blake's "single-minded idea" of achieving an apocalypse of gender equality through a unitary symbol, one that is realized only in the final plates of *Jerusalem* (3, 6). Despite the book's detour into history that briefly explores Blake's affiliations with Protestant dissent, English Jacobinism, and 1790s feminism, Ankarsjö's primary claim is that because *Jerusalem* is the culminating version of Blake's mythological system, we must read each poem from the vantage of the entire canon (6, 124, 189). He thus ends up reading from a teleological perspective that simplifies Blake's myth and the central role of gender within it.

Besides this methodological limitation, Ankarsjö does not sufficiently develop his conceptual vocabulary or provide adequate scholarship on the issues that interest him. In the first chapter, "Apocalypse, Utopia and Gender," he devotes only a couple of pages to each of his key concepts, relying on Morton Paley's *Apocalypse and Millennium* (1999) and Nicholas Williams's *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* (1998) for his understanding of these terms. And in a move that he repeats several times, Ankarsjö misreads Blake's text and takes selected passages out of context to serve his argument. For example, he cites the following bleak passage from *The Four Zoas* as an "anticipation of the utopian society" (15):

For when he came to where a Vortex ceas'd to operate
Nor down nor up remain'd then if he turn'd & look'd back
From whence he came twas upward all. & if he turn'd and
view'd
The unpass'd void upward was still his mighty wandring
The midst between an Equilibrium grey of air serene
Where he might live in peace & where his life might meet
repose (72:16-21, E 349)

We are told that these lines anticipate utopia because they describe Urizen's journey as an "upward, and forward progressive movement" (15). In the context of Night 6, however, as Urizen explores the "dens" of his rational cosmology, he attempts to order chaos by "throwing his venturous limbs into the Vast unknown" and building "a road immense" from "void to void" (E 349), echoing Satan's journey in *Paradise Lost*. Further, Urizen seeks to rebuild the fallen world by making himself king and commanding that "all futurity be bound in his vast chain," thus "Gaining a New Dominion" (73:19-24, E 350). Ankarsjö's positive interpretation of the passage thus excludes crucial counter-information.

Ankarsjö is on firmer ground in terms of gender, a topic he obviously has read and thought seriously about. He follows Helen Bruder's example in *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* (1997) and seeks to recontextualize Blake's handling of gender while opposing previous feminist critiques. Although he tends to make bogeywomen out of Anne Mellor and Alicia Ostriker, focusing primarily on their work from the early 1980s, his analysis of Blake in the context of French feminism and the work of Judith Butler is insightful and suggestive. But while chapter 2, "Blake's Radical Context," does offer feminist-historical analysis of Blake's early work, it too remains undeveloped. Citing work by Keri Davies on the important role of Joseph Johnson's bookshop in making Blake's work available to a female audience (52-53), Ankarsjö discusses potentially important connections between William Blake and Mary Hays, but the link is tenuously explored and superficially analyzed. We learn that both writers question the "governing paradigm of Enlightenment reason" by emphasizing passion, and that in Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) the two main characters are described by her as "[a]nimated ... by one heart and one mind" and thus resemble, according to Ankarsjö, "the male-female togetherness" of Blake's epics (57). Closer textual and deeper historical analyses are needed to establish specific and viable connections.

In the final three chapters, on the epics, Ankarsjö puts aside the feminist-historical approach to pursue the structural development of Blake's female characters. His focus on gender interactivity is relevant and important, but Ankarsjö again tends to misread and take things out of context. For example, in the book's central and longest chapter (on *The Four Zoas*), he states that criticisms of Vala as negative are wrong for two reasons: one, she is absent from most of the poem and two, when she reappears in Night 9, she becomes "the most important character at the inception of the apocalypse" and so "ends the poem as a more positive character" (69). Although Vala does end the poem on a more positive note, these claims downplay her complicity in dividing Luvah in Night 2 and disregard her affiliation with the destructive activity of "the Shadowy Female" and Rahab in Nights 7 and 8. Similarly with Enitharmon: Ankarsjö calls her "the most persistently evil of the four female characters" (72), but claims that she also ends positively because she helps Los take down "the crucified body of Christ" in Night 8. "It is essential to notice here that

Los and Enitharmon ... do this together," he writes, because it represents the "male-female co-operation" that enables them to "launch the apocalypse of the concluding Night" (77). But, again, this reading ignores context. In fact, there are two versions of taking down the crucified body, and both emphasize states of terror and despair. In the first, only Los takes down the body and then he and Jerusalem, not Enitharmon, bring it to the sepulcher (110 [106]:14-15, E 379). In the second version, the narrator says that Los and Enitharmon take the body down and that "Jerusalem wept ... two thousand Years" (114 [110]:30-33, E 385). Blake makes clear that what the actors share in the scenes of crucifixion and entombment is an overwhelming and historically catastrophic doubt, not hope of eternal life. This imagery is repeated nearly verbatim at the beginning of Night 9, suggesting that Blake's apocalypse opens on a note of despair that complicates a purely utopian perspective.

Similar problems also detract from Ankarsjö's treatment of gender and utopia in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, despite his valiant effort to bring attention to this crucial aspect of Blake's apocalypse. Ankarsjö shows that gender interactivity is more positive in *Milton* than in *The Four Zoas* and that Ololon "has no equal in *The Four Zoas*" for creating actions with positive consequences (124). But he again makes several assertions that are not supported by the text or that reduce narrative complexities. The most important, Ololon's final "reunion" with Milton, is crucial to his thesis. Ankarsjö says that *Milton* "must be read as a development" (155) toward *Jerusalem* and beyond *The Four Zoas* because it contains a "single representation" of gender unity (154), even though it stops short of apocalyptic merger: "Blake leaves the two main characters standing at the threshold, just about to enter the gender utopia of Eden" (157). But he does not tell us that Ololon ends by questioning whether she and Milton are "Contraries" and that her final union is with "Jesus the Saviour" (42:11, E 143). Ankarsjö is aware that female subsumption into the male may not be a feminist ideal, and he quotes Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* to the effect that masculine and feminine cannot both be represented when "the masculine constitutes the closed circle of the signifier and signified" (155-56n18), but he simply asserts that Blake shows otherwise. The same problem occurs in the chapter on *Jerusalem*, where the issue is even more important since this is, he claims, where Blake's gender utopia is fully achieved. Of the incorporation of Jerusalem (or Britannia) into Albion's bosom at the end of the epic, Ankarsjö announces that "Blake has erased all gender differentiation" and achieved the "complete absence of gender" (188, 189).

Some of the best recent feminist criticism of Blake questions the value of this erasure. Two challenging essays, both available but ignored by Ankarsjö, are particularly relevant in this regard. In "A Garment dipped in blood": Ololon and Problems of Gender in Blake's *Milton*,¹ Betsy Bolton gives a

1. *Studies in Romanticism* 36.1 (spring 1997): 61-101.

more nuanced and critical account of gender in the poem, arguing that while Blake's humanism seeks to transcend sexual division, he "does *not* succeed in writing beyond the sexes: the female remains within the structure of his prophecies as a degraded or an invisible term" (83). And especially importantly for Ankarsjö's reading, she claims that Ololon and Milton do not reunite but instead remain at odds, and that the figure she does merge with, "One Man Jesus the Saviour," sublates her identity: "this One Man seems to be grounded in a vanished female figure whose return to inanimate matter lends sacrificial strength to the prophet" (97). This is not to say that Bolton's reading is the correct one, but it does deserve scrutiny, especially since her approach has been extended in important ways by other scholars, especially Claire Colebrook. In "Blake and Feminism: Romanticism and the Question of the Other,"² Colebrook argues that Blake develops a positive theory of sexual difference, one which "dynamically sustains each term *in relation*" (4). She reads the ending of *Jerusalem* as more complex and ambivalent than does Ankarsjö, contending that in Albion's union with Jerusalem Blake recognizes the essential relation of two terms which are "never fully ... integrated" (6). Colebrook asserts that Blake's portrayal of unity actually includes a dimension of otherness: "Blake ... exploits the fact that Albion is specifically 'man' insofar as he needs to reinclude his female emanation; it is *this* aspect of Blake's figuring of gender which ... sustains an essential recognition of alterity" (7). These creative, subtle readings show that Blake can be placed in productive dialogue with recent feminist theory and literary scholarship.

The appearance of Ankarsjö's *William Blake and Gender* comes at an auspicious moment of renewed feminist interest in Blake's work. A recent collection, *Women Reading William Blake*,³ contains another solid essay by Colebrook, situating Blake in both feminist and literary history, and other essays that fill in contexts explored less fully by Ankarsjö, although his interest in Mary Hays and Blake remains a promising and unexplored connection. Along with Janet Warner's novel *Other Sorrows, Other Joys* (2003) and Marsha Keith Schuchard's *Why Mrs. Blake Cried* (2006), *Women Reading William Blake* indicates that the trend in feminist Blake scholarship is historical and biographical, with attention focused on Blake's wife Catherine and women in Blake's circle, including Ann Flaxman, and on his relation to contemporary women writers such as Joanna Baillie, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Tighe. Ankarsjö had the right idea at the right time, and his effort to uncover a more feminist humanism in Blake's work is laudable, but his study appears somewhat reductive in the light of resurgent feminist scholarship.

2. *Blake* 34.1 (summer 2000): 4-13.

3. Ed. Helen P. Bruder (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

MINUTE PARTICULAR

The Last Judgment by "B. Blake"

BY MORTON D. PALEY

AS is well known, William Blake exhibited three pictures at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1808. These are listed in the exhibition catalogue as "311 Jacob's dream,—vide Genesis, chap. xxviii, ver. 12"; "439 Christ in the sepulcher, guarded by angels"; and "477 The Last Judgment."¹ There is a peculiarity about the listing of the third that has been silently corrected in Blake scholarship. It seems indeed trivial, involving only one letter. The artist's name is given as "B. Blake."

Royal Academy catalogues were probably produced quickly and with little proofreading. Getting a letter wrong was nothing out of the ordinary. The miniature painter John Hazlitt's name was, for example, given as "T. Hazlitt" in the catalogue of 1802 in conjunction with Hazlitt's portrait of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.² However, there is an important difference here. There was in 1802 no exhibiting painter named T. Hazlitt, while John Hazlitt had exhibited every year from 1788 through 1801. The public could easily guess the real name of the artist who showed the Coleridge portrait and three others. In contrast, Benjamin Blake was the name of a painter of landscapes and of game who exhibited "View at Dumford, near Amesbury" (171) in 1808, and whose address is given in the catalogue as 37 Broad Street, Soho.³ (William Blake's address is correctly given as 17 South Molton Street, Oxford Street.) As the Royal Academy did not act as an agent for selling paintings, providing the artist's address was a way for prospective buyers to gain contact, and so giving the wrong artist's name for *The Last Judgment* was, though unintentional, a professional-disservice. It is also an indication of how obscure Blake was as he entered what Alexander Gilchrist was to call his "Years of Deepening Neglect."

1. *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy MDCCCVIII*.

2. See my *Portraits of Coleridge* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999) 28.

3. Some details about B. Blake, but not the confusion about *The Last Judgment*, are given in appendix 2, "Blake Residences," in G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004) 737. By 1811, when B. Blake showed "View at Great Dunford, Wiltshire" (*The Exhibition of the Royal Academy MDCCCXI*, 146), his address was Great Dunford, near Salisbury.

C O R R I G E N D U M

In "Blake's 'Annus Mirabilis': The Productions of 1795," *Blake* 41.2 (fall 2007): 52-83, illus. 28b is identified in both the text and caption (65, 66) as *The Song of Los* copy C, plate 3. It is in fact plate 7 of copy E, and the credit should be to the Huntington Library, San Marino, California. — Joseph Viscomi