

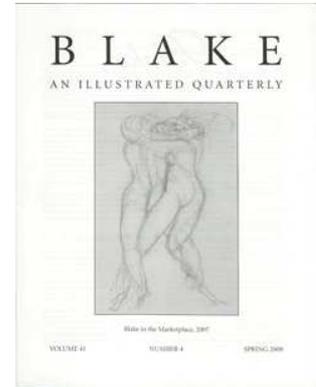
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Helen P. Bruder, ed., *Women Reading William Blake*

Anne K. Mellor

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And so it goes. There is the exuberant Philip Astley who mesmerizes the London populace with his circus and fireworks displays, his philandering son who seduces and impregnates Jem's sister, and Mrs. Kellaway, grieving over the loss of her boy, who fell out of a pear tree. There is also John Roberts of the Lambeth Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, who in response to the September massacres in France bullies people into signing an oath of loyalty to King George. Predictably he gravitates toward Blake's house and demands that he sign the document. In one of the novel's silliest moments, Roberts and his mob are paralyzed by Maisie Kellaway's dramatic reading of "London." Blake himself then takes the cue and begins to recite the third stanza "in a sonorous voice that froze the men at his door" (255). The plot then degenerates into Disney comedy as Maggie heaves a rotten cabbage at Roberts and the kids go to work.

The novel's most serious shortcoming for those interested in Blake is that it never finds a language adequate to convey the complexity of his art nor a means of limning the fiery eccentricity of the man himself. Unlike Vermeer in the earlier book, Blake's character is one-dimensional, kindly and avuncular, a bit too reminiscent of Grandpa Walton or Burl Ives (he says things like "Well, now, Maggie, ... Kate tells me you have something you want to say to us" [281]). He invites our heroes into his home, shows them his workshop, rescues Jem's sister from a tricky situation in the stables and eventually takes her in as a housekeeper. He's the stock figure of the wise artist, living peacefully in his cottage with his loyal wife, etching away at his little projects and dispensing moral lessons to the neighborhood children. In this sense he's strangely bland, domesticated and relieved of his rage. He does wander through the early pages wearing a *bonnet rouge* but he has none of the fire or energy of the dissident Blake, the man violently at odds with his own times. The spectacular explosion of Astley's fireworks depot burns far brighter than Blake's ideas. And it's the symmetry of "The Tyger"—stripped of its fearfulness—that structures the novel's action.

It is true that the book is sprinkled here and there with stanzas from the *Songs* and thus on the surface appears to be an homage to the artist and his work. But another source of disappointment for Blake enthusiasts is the book's failure to imagine a style or a form that acknowledges the rich complexity of Blake's multimedia art. Because of his visual designs, even the simplest of lyrics like "Infant Joy" bring with them a satisfying depth. The semiotic exchange between text and image always produces multiple meanings that happily vex easy understanding of the plates. The novel, by contrast, has little to say about the visual element of the poems, and the US hardcover version features only one image, the cover design, which reproduces an enlarged image of plate one of "The Little Girl Lost." It is faded, impossible to read in parts, and boldly overwritten in red by the author's name and the title of the book. The standard format of a prose novel combined with the absence of any imaginative visual concept for integrating text

and image not only defeats the uniqueness of Blake's idiom, but also takes us back 30 years to the anthologies that divorced Blake's words from his pictures. In its omission and implicit subjection of the visual, the novel is deeply reactionary.

It may be argued that a clear strength of the book is its historically accurate rendering of Georgian London. As the acknowledgments reveal, Chevalier has consulted a number of scholarly resources to ensure the book's verisimilitude. At times, however, it feels as if there's a great deal of wandering through each chartered street and not enough exploration of character. Long stretches of the book unfold like a moderately interesting walk through a reconstructed set. We pass the traditional tourist sites—Astley's Amphitheater, Bedlam, Westminster Abbey and Bridge, the London Wall—pause for refreshment at pubs and are treated to lengthy descriptions of artisans at work on Windsor chairs and Dorset buttons. But the pace is slow, the exposition often laborious and dull. There's simply not enough at stake in the plot, no urgency or sense of impending crisis that would warrant these excursions. Although the novel seems to side with Blake when he says that "the tension between contraries is what makes us ourselves. We have not just one, but the other too, mixing and clashing and sparking inside us" (177), it does not provide enough clash and spark or offer enough risk to hold our interest. Not fireworks but fire is what this novel needs, the howling of Orc, his flames and fierce embrace. By the end, we've spent too much time in the protected bower of "The Lamb," numbed by its lulling symmetries.

Helen P. Bruder, ed. *Women Reading William Blake*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xx + 286 pp., 7 b&w illus. £50.00/\$69.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Anne K. Mellor

WHERE has the study of Blake and gender come since the first explicitly feminist interpretations of Blake's poetry and art? Susan Fox's groundbreaking "The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry" in 1977, followed by Alicia Ostriker's "Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality" and my "Blake's Portrayal of Women" in 1982-83, appeared 30 years ago.¹ Helen Bruder is to be congratulated for raising this question now, in the aftermath of her own and several other recent books on gender and sexuality in Blake's art and poetry (most notably by Tristanne Connolly and Christopher Hobson). Among the 30 short essays

1. *Critical Inquiry* 3.3 (spring 1977): 507-19 (Fox); *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 16.3 (winter 1982-83): 156-65 (Ostriker) and 148-55 (Mellor).

included in this volume—which is deeply marred by unskilled editing and poor organization—are several that advance our understanding of Blake's conception of gender and/or sexuality.

If one is in the mood for autobiographical memoirs, there are charming essays of the "what Blake has meant to me through the years" variety. Addie Stephen provides a detailed memoir of her personal sexual history as inspired by Blake's concept of free love. The late and much lamented Janet Warner summarizes the intense "Blake Moments" in her life while Alicia Ostriker movingly recounts the connections between Blake's work and her own poetry, especially her recent concern with the *Shekinah*.

Several essays usefully place Blake's work in the context of the leading women writers of the day. Julia Wright explores Blake's and Joanna Baillie's mutually illuminating understandings of eighteenth-century sensibility. Harriet Kramer Linkin insightfully analyzes Blake's relationship to such female poets as Ann Batten Cristall (a relationship also discussed at greater length in this volume by Tristanne Connolly), Charlotte Smith, Mary Tighe and, most perceptively, Felicia Hemans. Jacqueline Labbe again places Blake's work in meaningful dialogue with that of Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson. And Shirley Dent takes us forward into the Victorian period, to discuss the impact of Anne Gilchrist on both her husband's biography of Blake and the Pre-Raphaelite reception of Blake's vision.

Other essays offer genuinely new insights into Blake's representation of women in his art and poetry. Catherine McClenahan provides a statistical overview of British working-class women's labor from 1750 to 1830 as background for her fascinating claim that Blake managed to locate the experience of the sublime in quotidian labor, especially that of women. June Sturrock develops a brilliant argument for the equation of the calumniated female figures of Dinah, Erin, and Jerusalem with Blake's vision of a way to overcome British nationalist chauvinism and Francophobia in the war years of 1800-15. These females, whom Sturrock might also have linked to the reviled Marie Antoinette, through their "fallenness," redemption, and capacity for forgiveness offer a model for a new British society that is "inclusive and interactive" (232). And Mary Lynn Johnson convincingly identifies and reevaluates the figures of Mary Magdalen and Martha in Blake's illustrations to the Bible, in particular *The Hymn of Christ and the Apostles* (Butlin #490).

Only a few essays take up the real challenge of such a volume: was Blake a misogynist? Can feminists learn anything useful from his work? Brenda Webster once again insists, as she did in her earlier Freudian book, *Blake's Prophetic Psychology* (1983), that Blake's portrayal of Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is a male rape and harem fantasy with which feminists cannot sympathize. Claire Colebrook offers a deconstructive analysis of sexual difference in Blake's work, relocating his feminism in his redefinition of sexual difference as the distinction between the (female) letter and the (male)

spirit. Irene Tayler offers a more nuanced argument that Blake wrestled throughout his career, not always successfully, with two inherited modes of thought concerning gender: that the female is innately inferior to the male, and that "Woman" is that which is veiled, and thus to be dis/covered. As does Sturrock, Tayler suggests that Blake, in the final pages of *Jerusalem*, was able to overcome his lifelong struggle with his own "selfhood" and find communion with the female other in the forgiven *human* body. Tayler's essay echoes what, to my mind, remains the most perceptive analysis of Blake's changing visions of gender and sexuality, Alicia Ostriker's "Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality." And finally, Susan Wolfson, in what is perhaps the most thoughtful and telling contribution to this volume, suggests through her subtle interrogation of "The Little Girl Lost" that the question of whether Blake is or is not a feminist depends not so much on the content of Blake's poetry and art as on the mindset with which a given reader encounters Blake's work.

The multiple problems with this volume lie primarily with the editor, not the contributors. Clearly wishing to attract a larger crossover audience, Helen Bruder—as the splashy banner on the cover of the book proclaims ("Featuring contributions from Germaine Greer and Tracy Chevalier")—invited a disparate group ranging from novelists to feminist critics who have not hitherto worked on Blake to serious Blake scholars to contribute. The result is, predictably, a hodge-podge. Since Bruder could find no coherent way to organize these multifarious essays, she simply put them in alphabetical order by author's last name. Thus one bumps from Bruder's substantive consideration of Blake's relationship with Ann Flaxman to Tracy Chevalier's shameless puff for her forthcoming novel on Blake (now published as *Burning Bright*) to serious essays on Blake's similarities to various women writers of the period to Addie Stephen's sexual confessions to Germaine Greer's ungrounded speculations concerning Blake's infertility to the state of feminist Blake studies in Japan and South Africa—and so on. Several of the essays do not even belong in this volume. Except for the fact that they happen to be written by women, they have almost nothing to say about Blake's visual or verbal construction of gender and/or sexuality—although they are informative about Blake's knowledge of lucid dreaming, Moravianism, Hinduism, Lavater, and Old Norse mythology. Even the serious essays on Blake and gender are so short (none more than 10 pages) as to be little more than introductions to their topics. Some, most notably Nancy Goslee's otherwise provocative analysis of Enitharmon in *Europe*, lack the illustrations that would be essential to persuade a reader of their claims.

In all then, this volume is deeply disappointing. Even the best work is hampered by its brevity, missing illustrations, and, most significantly, its lack of placement within an overall coherent argument concerning the state of feminist Blake studies at the present moment, the argument that the editor should have provided in her woefully inadequate introduction.