

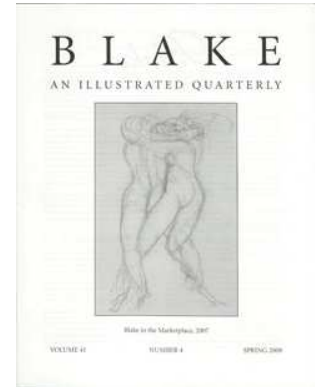
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Tracy Chevalier, *Burning Bright*

Grant F. Scott

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a. *Professor Loretta Innocenti*, Venice, Italy. Printed in black ink (possibly with a slight greenish hue) on a card pasted into a copy of George Cumberland, Jr., *Bristol Beauties 1848*. This work is "a made-up volume of works by George Cumberland (Jr.) printed at various times (dated 1847, 1849, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1858, 1860) with different paginations; the engraved titlepage applies only to the first 15 pages" (G. E. Bentley, Jr., *A Bibliography of George Cumberland* [New York: Garland Publishing, 1975] 34). According to its owner, "the book has an autograph dedication and is signed G. C. [George Cumberland, Jr.?] on the front page." No provenance information. Its card support and bibliographic context indicate that this impression was probably pulled before most of those on thinner papers in black and brown inks. On consignment with John Windle by Oct. 2007.

b. *Joyce Passaro*, Kingston, New York. Printed in black ink on laid paper, size of sheet unknown. Acquired at auction by Passaro early in 2007 as part of a collection of bookplates from the estate of George Viner, New York. Accompanied by manuscript notes by Viner about the pl.

Pp. 125-31, "Morning Amusement" and "Evening Amusement," after Watteau. See under Separate Plates and Plates in Series, above.

#### William Blake's Commercial Book Illustrations

Pp. 64-65, Hunter, *Historical Journal*, 1793. For a c. 1794 version of the design pictured in Blake's pl., dated Nov. 1792 in the imprint, see Baldwyn, the third entry under Interesting Blakeana, above. Another version of this design, "Drawn [i.e., engraved?] from a Sketch taken on the Spot" and signed by "Goldar" (John Goldar, 1729-95) as the engraver, appears in Michael Adams, *The New Royal Geographical Magazine* (London: Alexander Hogg, [c. 1793]), facing p. 9. The Goldar pl., titled "Man, Woman and Children of New South Wales," may have been engraved some years before its publication in Adams's book. The pls. in the Baldwyn and Adams vols. have a horizontal format and are much closer to each other than to Blake's pl. One of these 2 horizontal pls. is probably a copy of the other.

## C O R R I G E N D U M

In my note on Benjamin Blake, the landscape artist whom the Royal Academy exhibition catalogue of 1808 mistakenly credits with *The Vision of the Last Judgment* (Blake 41.3 [winter 2007-08]: 135), I wrote that this mistake has been silently corrected by scholars. G. E. Bentley, Jr., notes that it is explicitly corrected in his *Blake Records*, 2nd ed., 250fn. — Morton D. Paley

## R E V I E W S

Tracy Chevalier. *Burning Bright*. London: HarperCollins; New York: Dutton-Penguin, 2007. 311 pp. £15.99/\$24.95, hardcover; £7.99/\$14.00, paperback (2008).

Reviewed by Grant F. Scott

TRACY Chevalier is best known for *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), an ekphrastic novel based on Vermeer's famous portrait that was adapted into a modestly successful film a few years ago. The novel became a bestseller for its convincing depiction of seventeenth-century Delft and its winsome protagonist, a young girl who works as a servant in the Vermeer household and eventually becomes the painter's apprentice and model. A lot of the book trades in the soft eroticism of the central encounter, the innocent wide-eyed maid initiated in the ways of love and art by the experienced painter. But there is something to be said for Chevalier's evocation of Vermeer's aesthetic, her instinct for reflecting in prose the stillness and simplicity of his paintings. The transparency of her language ideally suits the pure stream of light bathing his solitary female subjects from every window. And the keen verbal sketches of the paintings effectively convey the spirit of Vermeer's art.

Unfortunately this is not the case with William Blake, who figures much less prominently in *Burning Bright*. In spite of publicity claims that the novel "tells the tale of an artistic genius and the lives around him as he writes his famous *Songs of Innocence and Experience* [sic]," it is the fictive Kellaway and Butterfield families who take center stage, Blake who flickers dimly in the margins. The protagonists are a pair of 12-year-olds: Jem Kellaway, who travels to London from Dorsetshire with his family, and Maggie Butterfield, a street urchin who lives in the city. Jem is the innocent country boy who spends a lot of the novel blushing and gaping, Maggie the experienced girl with a "hard, shrewd veneer" (65) who knows the back lanes of Lambeth and conceals a dark secret. Philip Astley employs Jem's father as a carpenter in his famous circus and secures the family a room in no. 12 Hercules Buildings, next door to William and Catherine Blake. The novel thus opens showing the two contrary states of the human soul, but like the volume of poetry it adapts and broadly interprets it gradually blurs the boundaries between them. Jem gains experience, Maggie softens into innocence as both children verge toward "the middle" in their journey toward adulthood. In a symbolic moment sure to delight eighth-grade readers, Blake gives Maggie a gift of *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. One volume is for Jem, but she forgets which one: "Well, I mixed 'em up in my pocket. I don't know which is yours and which mine" (306).



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.<sup>1</sup> 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).