

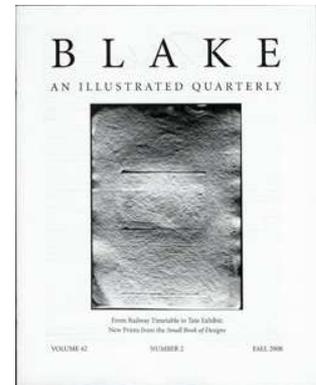
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D I S C U S S I O N

Response to Helen P. Bruder

Anne K. Mellor

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real challenge of such a volume," she insists, is the question "was Blake a misogynist?" This certainly was *the* issue in the eighties and nineties, and inspired by Mellor's writing (and that of a dozen other trailblazers, whose work I'm delighted my volume well represents), I made my own attempt to weigh the evidence.¹ Priorities change, though, and when I returned to survey gender studies in the early noughties, the well-nigh 100 pieces of scholarship I reviewed persuaded me that we'd entered a new era, characterized by diversity and profusion, of both concerns and perspectives.² Sadly, what hadn't changed much was the Blake establishment's reluctance to give women's varied voices a proportionate place within trendsetting collections, guides, surveys of Blake studies, and so forth, and it was my desire to redress *that* imbalance which shaped my collection. In essence, my book does what it says on the tin: women read Blake. Misogyny interests many of us, but not others, and that's up to them. What I wanted to produce was an accessible book which celebrated the vibrant intellectual passions of a community of female scholars, and Mellor's criticism that "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 ..." reveals her coolness toward my structuring premise. (It also, incidentally, indicates a somewhat blithe approach toward content, for the pieces on "lucid dreaming, Moravianism, Hinduism, Lavater, and Old Norse mythology" which she selects are *all* concerned with gender.)

Our views differ generically too. From my perspective the book is enriched by its mix of what she terms "disparate" contributors and "multifarious" tidbits, but for Mellor my alphabetical ordering of these 30 morsels characterizes a work "deeply marred by ... poor organization." That's a fair, if subjective, call, though "hodge-podge" is perhaps a drop acidic? Mellor is free, of course, to dislike the hullabaloo which accompanies my blatantly attention-seeking inclusion of pieces by Tracy Chevalier and Germaine Greer, but her own summary of the collection's other contents shows that many do in fact cohere around some broad, key themes (questions of sexual power, naturally, the role of Blake's art in women's lives, his relationship with his neglected female contemporaries, the importance of internationalism in Blake studies, and so on). Still, tastes do differ, and I can see there are those who will find a fistful of brief articles annoyingly unsatisfying. For a cross-over book like mine the observation that some pieces are "little more than introductions" isn't necessarily a criticism, but nonetheless I note her point. It's a case of horses for courses, and the virtues of length will always be a matter of individual preference.

1. *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

2. "Blake and Gender Studies," *Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies*, ed. Nicholas M. Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 132-66.

More curious are Mellor's sharp personal criticisms, directed especially at my "unskilled editing." I am, self-confessedly, a novice, happy to learn as I go,³ but with that acknowledged, I still find myself baffled that she concludes her assessment—which praises all the collection's academic work, some of it very highly (McClenahan "fascinating," Sturrock "brilliant," Wolfson "thoughtful," "subtle," even Bruder "substantive!")—with the damning judgment that my book is "deeply disappointing." Earlier, despite appreciative synopses, she finds "multiple problems" which "lie primarily with the editor." Given that I elicited and compiled all this valuable work, why such censure? The concluding paragraph is tougher and more perplexing still, as Mellor outlines her most serious criticism, namely that the book's contents suffer from their "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." As intended, this stings, but it also seems to be another instance of Mellor lambasting me for failing to hit a target I never aimed at. As I'm sure she knows, I've done more than most to chart and assess trends in feminist Blake studies. I clearly reference that scholarship in my introduction, and briefly locate the collection critically too, but as my title, "Introductory Note: 'look over the events of your own life . . .,'" makes patently clear, on this occasion I chose to open *my* book with some brief personal reflections. These chime very well, in fact, with the collection's many other "autobiographical memoirs" which, when springing from other sources, Mellor actually finds "charming." I guess, ultimately, that must be it: my origins and enthusiasms mean I lack the power to charm the reviewer? Certainly my lack of either the editorial or personal panache required to keep Mellor within the fold is deeply regrettable, for the article she withdrew partway through the project would doubtless have added something pungent and peerlessly distinctive.

3. I'm sure *Queer Blake* (forthcoming from Palgrave), which I am coediting with Tristanne J. Connolly, will show many signs of increased proficiency.

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I HAVE my opinion of the value of Bruder's collection, already expressed, and she has hers. I don't disagree with anything she says; I just didn't find her method of organization—or goals for the volume—helpful. Readers of course should consult the volume itself and make up their own minds.