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N O T E

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NOTES

I. A NOTE ON BLAKE AND MILTON

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Milton's early prose works--Reason of Church-Government, in particular; Of Reformation, Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, and Areopagitica, more generally--may (as I suggest elsewhere¹) have provided the immediate inspiration for Blake's philosophy of contraries as it is formulated in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. More recently, Michael J. Tolley² has observed a passage in Areopagitica parallel to Proverb 45 of The Marriage. To my previous comments, I should like to add several further observations.

(1) Among the numerous verbal echoes of Milton in The Marriage are the magnificent descriptive passages on Plates 17-20. The first of these passages reads, "we beheld the infinite Abyss, fiery as the smoke of a burning city; beneath us, at an immense distance, was the sun, black but shining" (Keynes, 1966, p. 156). In its general details, this passage closely resembles Milton's initial description of Hell, P.L., l. 51ff. In particular, it recalls line 63, "darkness visible," and ll. 405, "The dark unbottom'd infinite Abyss." Correspondingly, the description of the "monstrous serpent" in the following paragraph, obviously owing something to Rev. xiii, recalls in its details Milton's descriptions of serpents and Satan in Paradise Lost, especially P.L., l. 195-210, VII. 476-484, IX, 494-505. The last passage, which held great sway over the Romantic poets,³ seems especially significant. Milton describes Satan, "on his rear,/Circular base of rising folds, that tow'r'd/Fold above fold a surging Maze, his Head/Crested aloft, and Carbuncle his Eyes;/With burnisht Neck of verdant Gold, erect/Amidst his circling Spires, that on the grass/Floated redundant." Blake, on the other hand, envisions the serpent as "a fiery crest above the waves; slowly it reared like a ridge of golden rocks, till we discover'd two globes of crimson fire . . . ; and now we saw it was the head of Leviathan; his forehead was divided into streaks of green & purple like those on a tyger's forehead . . ." (Keynes, p. 156). Blake's descriptions are, of course, not carbon copies of Milton's, nor should one expect them to be so; they do provide an example, however, of the way in which a highly original mind works with borrowed materials.

(2) My earlier remarks on Reason of Church-Government as a possible source for Blake's philosophy of contraries were based on the discovery of a parallel passage and the realization that Blake, like Milton, unites this conception to the themes of individual freedom, spiritual perception, and apocalypse. The following remarks are intended to reinforce that argument. In Reason of Church-Government, l, vi, which immediately precedes the chapter in which Milton argues that sects and schisms "ought not to be a hindrance, but a hastening of Reformation" (Hughes, 1957, p. 661) and then proceeds to tell us that we "cannot suffer any change of one kind or quality into another without the struggle of contraries" (p. 662), Milton discusses contraries, like Blake, in terms of the marriage metaphor. Milton says that "instead of finding prelaty an impeacher of schism or faction . . . I grew into all persuasion to think rather that faction and she, as with a spousal ring, are wedded together, never to be divorced" (p. 656). Moreover, the themes of struggling contraries, individual

freedom, spiritual perception, and apocalypse figure prominently not only in Reason of Church-Government but in Of Reformation and Areopagitica as well. Blake may well have had in mind the fact that Areopagitica, like The Marriage, proclaimed urgently and emphatically that what "purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary" (p. 728) and moved unremittingly, again like The Marriage, toward a vision of apocalypse: "Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks" (p. 745). These early prose works, then, may offer a kind of paradigmatic thematic structure that Blake adopts for The Marriage.

(3) If my argument is a valid one, Plate III of The Marriage identifies not two, but three, contexts in which Blake's prose satire may be read: Swedenborg's Heaven and Hell, Isaiah xxxiv and xxxv, and Milton's early prose works. In Blake's Apocalypse, Harold Bloom brilliantly explores the implications of the former two for The Marriage; I, in turn, have tried to suggest that Milton's prose works provide an equally illuminating context for The Marriage. Various critics have emphasized, perhaps over-emphasized, Blake's audacious independence of mind and iconoclastic spirit; and in doing so they have obscured, if not altogether obliterated, William Butler Yeats' enormous perception. Yeats appropriately reminds us that while Blake may fly in the face of tradition and associate custom with error, he may best be understood as an artist, a genius, who took his place on the margin of tradition. Like Milton, Blake is a "revolutionary artist" (the phrase is Northrop Frye's); while deliberately opposing eighteenth-century poetical traditions he places himself firmly within what may be called, for convenience's sake, the Milton tradition. This realization, together with the knowledge that Miltonic echoes pervade The Marriage, may lead us toward reassessing what Blake's attitude toward Milton was; it may even cause us to redress our opinion of what Blake's attitude toward Milton was when he wrote The Marriage. The very fact that Blake borrows so much from his favorite poet (though he leaves the stamp of his genius on whatever it is that he borrows) seems to mitigate and throw into the shade his seemingly hostile criticism of Milton. It is interesting, of course, that these criticisms should be expressed by the voice of the devil. Blake's own comment on the title-page of Swedenborg's Heaven and Hell may prove instructive. Following a misquotation from A Midsummer Night's Dream (not in Blake's hand) is an annotation (in Blake's hand): "Thus Fools quote Shakespeare," he tells us; "the above is Theseus's opinion Not Shakespeare's. You might as well quote Satan's blasphemies from Milton & give them as Milton's Opinions" (Keynes, p. 939). This remark may remind us that Blake's opinions should not be confused with those of his devil, however tempting it may be to do so.

¹ See my article, "Blake's Philosophy of Contraries: A New Source," ELN, IV (December 1966), 105-110.

² See Professor Tolley's note, "Some Analogues or Sources," Blake Newsletter, 4 (March 1968), 9.

³ The passage, for instance, is written into Coleridge's Notebook; see Notebooks, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York, 1957-?), I, 609, 4.25.

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