

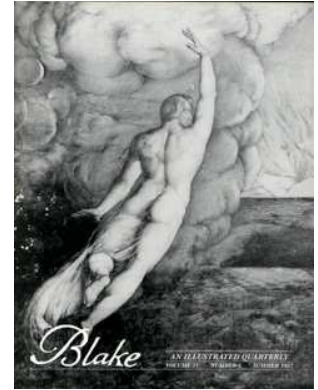
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R E V I E W

Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Romantic Body: Love and Sexuality in Keats, Wordsworth, and Blake*

Anne K. Mellor

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fourfold Eternity" (p. 128). Mellor says that I have not come to terms with the "desire, guilt and ambivalence" Blake felt toward inversions. Perhaps not, since I do not know fully what is intended by these and similar assertions. But I deal at some length with the hideousness and perversions of fallen sexuality here and also in my book on Blake as poet-painter and in my article on the story of Luvah and Vala in the Curran-Wittreich collection. In the present book I wanted to stress the ultimate optimism of Blake's total thought.

As in the case of Keats on life vs. death, I do not find my argument adequately described or confronted. "What is new here," writes Mellor, "is Hagstrum's insistence that Blake placed a greater value on the female and on Beulah than I and other feminist readers have thought." I don't think it is enough to assert in refutation that Blake did not "finally" see the female as equal to the male. We can know what Blake *finally* meant only by understanding the direction and the climaxes of his myth. I have tried hard to answer the question, Is woman present in Eden? Would Blake grant that my reviewer and I could both properly engage in mental fight? Or is Eternity for men only? "Are we Contraries, O Anne Mellor, Thou & I" (cf. *Milton* 41:35)? Or is one of us a Negation?



REVIEWS

The Romantic Body

*Love and Sexuality
in Keats, Wordsworth,
and Blake*



JEAN H. HAGSTRUM

Jean H. Hagstrum. *The Romantic Body: Love and Sexuality in Keats, Wordsworth, and Blake*. Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1985. xvi + 177 pp.; illus. \$14.95.

Reviewed by Anne K. Mellor

The Romantic Body is an eloquent and persuasive defense of what Lionel Trilling powerfully argued over twenty years ago in "The Fate of Pleasure," that Wordsworth and Keats (and, Hagstrum would add, Blake and Byron, Shelley and Coleridge) believed that "the grand elementary principle of pleasure" constitutes "the naked and native dignity of man" and is the principle by which man "knows, and feels, and lives, and moves" (as

Wordsworth put it in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*). Pleasure, here, is of course explicitly sensual or sexual pleasure, as well as the mental and poetic images which that bodily delight produces. Only in an era in which deconstructive and semiotic approaches dominate our reading of texts, in which desire and pleasure are confined to linguistic strategies, would Trilling's insight require Hagstrum's strenuous defense. But today Hagstrum's unabashed insistence that "real experience" exists outside of "fiction, rhetorical and verbal structures," that human experience is sensual experience, and that poetry expresses or communicates that experience, may be welcome to many.

Hagstrum first sketches in the cultural background of the romantic celebration of the body and sexual pleasure. He points up the overt depiction of sexuality in early nineteenth-century British art and fiction—the eroticism of Fuseli's and Barry's female figures, the identification of the sexual act with political rebellion against the ancien régime in Gothic fiction, Thomas Little's widely endorsed view that a spontaneous and mutually satisfying sexual relationship between intellectually improved women and men was both a law of nature and the basis of the highest cultural achievement, uxorial bliss.

Hagstrum then invokes Keats as the celebrant of intense adolescent sexual desire, rightly emphasizing the degree to which Keats' early poetry focuses on the snowy heaving breasts and imagined luxuries of the beloved. His insistence that "The Eve of St. Agnes" is "a masterpiece of the intensest eroticism" strikes me as persuasive—who would deny the sexual consummation so deliciously achieved by Madeline and Porphyro? But in his treatment of Keats' affirmation of physical love, Hagstrum both overstates and understates his case. On the one hand, he would eliminate from his readings of "The Eve of St. Agnes" and the Odes the powerful skepticism about the endurance and the value of sexual love that Keats surely expressed. Madeline and Porphyro experience the pinnacle of sexual delight but that delight is framed by betrayal and death; the Urn is a "cold Pastoral" because it is an "unravished" bride, but a ravished bride knows a "heart high sorrowful and cloy'd." In stressing Keats' delight in love and sexual pleasure, Hagstrum too often underplays his equally strong doubts, that "Love in a hut, with water and a crust, / Is—Love forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust; / Love in a palace is perhaps at last / More grievous torment than a hermit's fast."

On the other hand, in his effort not to read Keats too pornographically, Hagstrum overlooks several instances in which Keats' language carries a more specific sexual nuance than Hagstrum notes. I am thinking especially of the conclusion of "Ode to Psyche," which Hagstrum interprets as a domestic idyll, the husband Cupid returning to "a welcoming home and hearth."

But surely in the context of Hagstrum's insistence on the physical basis of Keatsian love and poetic delight, the "casement ope at night / To let the warm Love in" must also be read as Psyche's welcoming vagina, that same casement that encloses the colian harp, that "coy maiden" yielding to her lover, in Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp." And the force of Hagstrum's reading of Melancholy as not only a goddess "but also a palpable female being" who "reveals herself only to one of the opposite sex 'whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine'" must lead not only to the "orgasmic climax" he sees, but to a climax achieved by cunnilingus—the "strenuous tongue" is not just the Christian "moral-military metaphor" Hagstrum notes but a more active sexual instrument. There is an element of pornographic vulgarity in Keats' poetry that Hagstrum is understandably reluctant to acknowledge, the very element that caused Byron—who knew a sexual innuendo when he saw one—to call Keats' writing "*p-ss a bed* poetry," "the *Onanism* of Poetry," and Keats himself a "miserable Self-polluter of the human Mind" (*Byron's Letters and Journals* 7: 200, 217).

Hagstrum is most fully compelling in his discussion of the ways in which sexual energy infuses Wordsworth's life and poetry. Drawing on the passionate love letters Wordsworth wrote to Mary and on his openly acknowledged affair with Annette Vallon, Hagstrum convincingly argues that Wordsworth was a man of strong sexual and sensual feelings, that he saw those feelings as the origin of the poetic impulse, and that he viewed poetry itself as an act of copulatory "concordia discors," of perceiving the similitude in dissimilitude. Hagstrum's treatment of Wordsworth's relationship with Dorothy is I think definitive: an elegantly worded, sensitive, and complex analysis of the ways that intense passion can infuse a non-incestuous sibling relationship. His interpretation of *Laodamia* as a study in parental grief, rather than in sexual repression and rejection, is convincing, and I for one welcome the insight that the climactic vision on Mount Snowdon is achieved under the dominance of a powerful naked female (the Moon) who also gives birth through a breach of waters.

Hagstrum's discussion of sexuality in Blake's poetry and art is, in contrast, disappointing. Since few would completely endorse Leopold Damrosch's denial of the centrality of love and sexuality in Blake's thought, Hagstrum's detailed refutation seems labored, another instance—and the book has too many—of setting up a straw critic to refute (Joyce Carol Oates, invoked on more than one occasion, is hardly an authoritative reader of romantic poetry). Hagstrum's conclusion that "Blake never relinquished the idea that what poisoned sexuality was not the body itself, desire per se, but debilitations of mind and spirit coming from psychological and institutional tyranny" seems obvious.

What is new here is Hagstrum's insistence that Blake placed a greater value on the female and on Beulah than I and other feminist readers have thought. Hagstrum eloquently describes the power of Blake's heroines, of Oothoon, Ololon, and Jerusalem, and rightly insists that Beulah, the land of relaxation and sexual fulfillment, is necessary to the sustenance of Eden, the land of mental vision and creation. While I welcome Hagstrum's passionate defense of sexuality, of female autonomy, and of the interfusion of the sensual and mental life, I am not persuaded that Blake finally saw the female as equal in value to the male. Beulah remains *below* Eden, not beside it, as Hagstrum's geographical metaphor of "bordering lands" would suggest. And Blake consistently depicts male activities as both logically and temporally *prior* to female activities. Nonetheless, Hagstrum rightly observes that "emanation" is a two-way street, that in *Jerusalem* males emanate from females (Shiloh) just as females emanate from males. We need a more complex analysis of Blake's concept of emanation and sexuality than Hagstrum provides here, one that comes to terms with the desire, guilt, and ambivalence Blake felt toward homosexuality, toward anal and oral intercourse, and toward aggressive female sexuality, feelings which Brenda Webster has convincingly detailed in *Blake's Prophetic Psychology* (1983).

Hagstrum's brief epilogue includes an interesting reading of Hegel's *Idee* as the philosophical parallel to the Romantic poetic ideal of "esteem enlivened by desire." *The Romantic Body* will endure as an elegant and passionate affirmation of the role of sexual pleasure in life and art, an affirmation that Keats, Wordsworth, and Blake, with increasing ranges of experience and philosophical complexity, fully endorsed.

Kenneth Gross. *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, & Magic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985 [i.e., 1986]. 271 pp. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Robert F. Gleckner

In my recent *Blake and Spenser* book I strongly recommended to all Blakeans Kathleen Williams's *Spenser's World of Glass* as not only a fine study of Blake's Renaissance predecessor but, as it were, an illuminating book for the study of Blake. While my own acknowledgments extended to other fine Spenserians as well, most notably A. C. Hamilton, I must now add to my pan-

theon of "Blakean" Spenserians Kenneth Gross, whose book I wish I had been able to read before completing my own.

Gross's project is to "examine the work of a poet who both embraces and fears mythology, whose visionary quests come into conflict with a manifold skepticism of vision." His "route" to this examination is "through a study of . . . ideas about true and false gods, about their potent or empty images, and about the violence that might be worked against them" (9). While these may be recognized as at least intriguing ideas for the study of Blake, even more so is Gross's intention to show Spenser's "links to strategies of biblical writing." Such a linkage leads to Gross's characterization of Spenser's "strongly Protestant . . . stance" as at least analogous to, if not proleptic of, "the displaced, diffused, demystified, ironic, and hyperbolized Protestantism we have learned to call Romanticism." Although he acknowledges that that "likeness is far from exact," the poet he describes, he argues, is one "whom I think Blake or Keats or Ruskin could have taken seriously as a master" (10).

The book is organized into two nearly equal parts, with a "Coda" entitled "The Veil of Idolatry." Part 1 comprises two large chapters that lay the groundwork for part 2's discussion of four major episodes (or, really, episode clusters) in *The Faerie Queene*. The first chapter lays out "A Poetics of Idolatry" which has a provocative bearing on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (at least as I read that vexatious and elusive work), and hence on much else in Blake's canon, most especially on the idea of allegory and its relationship to vision and prophecy. Chapter 2, on the surface of it, would seem to have little relevance to Blake, concentrating as it does on Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*; but its central thesis, Spenser's "Mythmaking in Hibernia" (the chapter title), is remarkably relevant, for that under-read work "raises some rather radical questions about the nature of fable, imagination, ideology, and law," as well as religion.

The chapter on *A View* is far too rich to lend itself to easy summary, but let me give here two or three out-of-context examples of the sort of argument (and the kinds of conclusions) Gross's fine analysis of the prose essay yields, especially those that should engage a Blakean's attention. After quoting part of the opening dialogue between Irenius and his questioner Eudoxus, Gross points out tellingly that the verbal scheme that dominates the passage is what Puttenham calls ". . . *aporia*, or the doubtful." Crediting Alpers in his *The Poetry of The Faerie Queene* with suggesting this technique as a characteristic Spenserian mode, Gross now elevates it to "one of Spenser's master tropes," entailing not merely a piling up of discrete images and verbal formulae for descriptive and narrative purposes but a "multiplication within a discourse of such a variety