

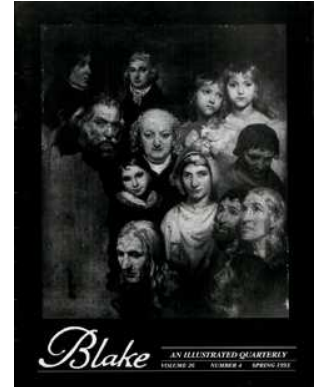
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

D I S C U S S I O N

Blake and Women: A Reply to Nelson Hilton

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 26, Issue 4, Spring 1993, p. 161



DISCUSSION

with intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought

Blake and Women: A Reply to Nelson Hilton

by Margaret Storch

I thank Nelson Hilton for his most thoughtful review of my book, *Sons and Adversaries: Women in William Blake and D. H. Lawrence*, in the spring 1992 issue of *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, and I would like to respond to some of the points that he makes. I was in Europe at the time the review first appeared, and so have not been able to reply until now.

I hoped that my book would open up a new debate about masculinist tendencies in Blake, and about male responses to women's experience in his own and other times. I also raised the question of why even the most radical of male social reformers have failed to give due emphasis to the social condition of women. Blake, an artist of striking insights into society and human relationships, and one who has influenced our thinking about both, is so often discussed in a remote and scholarly way. The challenge of his polemical views needs to be taken on more directly.

Hilton does not devote much of his review to the complexities of gender politics in Blake. In his final sentence he states that my book is "provocative indeed" in the "issues it raises and the implications these suggest," but he does not fully provide the reader with information about what these matters might be. Nor does he discuss the parallels I draw between Blake and D. H. Lawrence: the affinities between these two artists are the central focus of the book, and mine is the first full-length published study of a correspondence that has often been acknowledged but

not explored in depth. The essential point of my interpretation of the emotional patterns reflected in both Blake and Lawrence is not that they are simply antagonistic to women, but that in each there is a striking polarity in his response to women, a conflict of love and hate.

Hilton does not mention in his review some of my original, and perhaps controversial, readings of Blake, especially my interpretation of *Milton* as the working out of a masculine fantasy in which the threatening female power is reduced to a figure that is safe and compliant; and my comments on the daughters of Job as a benevolent version of the more commonly sinister motif of three women in his work. (I am not convinced by his suggestion that the three significant Catherines in Blake's life may account for the recurrent image.)

Hilton refers at some length to Edward Larrissy's 1985 book on Blake. Indeed, Larrissy and I come to some similar conclusions, but he does not take his far into the realm of gender relations. As I said in my 1988 review of his book in the *Modern Language Review*, an important manifestation of the anxiety about bounds in Blake is the "definiteness" of the tough male artist-engraver and the disturbing "indefiniteness" of females. However, Hilton does not make clear how he responds to my argument that Blake displays animosity towards women, and more specifically, how he responds to my use of Brenda Webster's point that Blake's male characters are "incapable of mature love." He suggests that the resolution of ambivalence might entail an acceptance of "limits to reality and expression" which, though mature, may not be appropriate for the very radical artist that Blake is. This seems to be a refusal to encounter the issues. If Blake is, as I believe, a radical thinker who cared deeply about the state of society, the effects of social evils on the human

spirit, and relations between women and men, then we must at some point take into account his social actuality. To do otherwise is to treat him as a sophist, while to ignore the anguish caused by anxiety about substantiality and about sexual love, whether or not we call it immature, is to retreat from the passion and tension of his poetry into, indeed, a land of spectres.

Hilton's comments about a few scholarly failings on my part are on the whole well taken although, again, I would have wished for more direct discussion of the central thesis of the book rather than of the index. And I find that the reading of "milk" that Hilton prefers over "mild" in *Milton* 21 merely substantiates my seminal interpretation of Ololon as the river in Eden.

He seriously misinterprets my purpose when he states that I privilege "the poet's early childhood experience" and that I set out to talk about Blake's relations with women, objecting that there is little historical evidence about either of these aspects of his life. Indeed there is not but, as I say in my preface and elsewhere, my interest in Blake and Lawrence is not biographical. The focus of my attention is their creative art, which is a truer reflection of the psyche than are contemporary facts and data even when, as in the case of Lawrence, we have a plethora of these.

To complement Nelson Hilton's review, readers of *Blake* might like to read also other reviews of my book, for example those by Brenda Maddox in the *Times Literary Supplement* (7 June 1991), by Leslie Tannenbaum in *The Wordsworth Circle* (autumn 1991) and by Rose Marie Burwell in *English Literature in Transition* 35, no. 2, 1992; and also to read the book itself. I hope that the debate about Blake and women, about the changing role of women in late eighteenth-century society, and about ambivalence regarding feminism on the part of male radicals, will develop and intensify.