

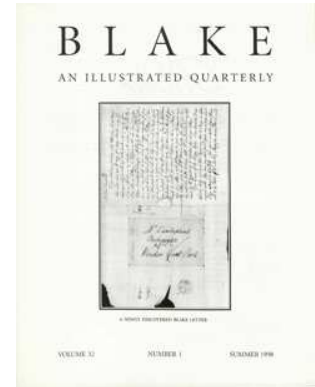
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## The Orthodoxy of Blake Footnotes

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If any readers in 1830 considered these affinities between Blake and Hogg, they may also have recalled the cryptic allusion to "W — m B — e, a great original," in the ending of Hogg's greatest novel, six years earlier.<sup>22</sup>

Yet in spite of tempting evidence, none of the reviews of Cunningham in the *Edinburgh Literary Journal* can be proved to be Hogg's. The most that may safely be claimed is that Hogg probably saw, and enjoyed, those reviews, and he probably read their comments on Blake. Like some readers of the *Journal*, he may also have noticed the similarities between himself and Blake which that passage seems to suggest.

## The Orthodoxy of Blake Footnotes

BY MICHAEL FERBER

The disheartening experience of reading the footnotes to Blake's poems in recent student anthologies has launched little theories in my head. Is it a case of *horror vacui*? Some annotators seem unable to let a proper name go by without attaching an "explanation" to it; any explanation will serve, it seems, but preferably an "etymology." "Or is it the return of the repressed? Many of these notes have been refuted or strongly questioned for many years now. Is it a medieval deference to "authority"? If so, it is a selective deference, only to those with a loud, confident manner, such as Harold Bloom. Is it mere laziness? We need a note on "northern bar" so let's see what the last couple of anthologies said about it . . . oh, yes, the *Odyssey* and the neoplatonists—that'll do. It's as if, once they get into the anthologies, the notes have a momentum of their own. They clone themselves among the petri dishes of anthologies. Whatever the reason for them, an orthodoxy of footnotes (and endnotes) has emerged and congealed. It deserves a good roar from Rintrah.

I've looked at these editions:

M. H. Abrams, et al, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Sixth Edition, Vol. 2. New York: Norton, 1993. (Hereafter "Norton.")

Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, ed. *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (Norton Critical edition). New York: Norton, 1979. (Hereafter "Johnson-Grant.") I include this edition, well-established and deservedly so, for the sake of completeness, though it is in a different category from the others.

Michael Mason, ed. *William Blake* (Oxford Poetry Library). Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. (Hereafter "Mason.")

Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. *British Literature 1780-1830*. Fort Worth, Texas, Harcourt Brace, 1996. (Hereafter "Mellor-Matlak.")

David Perkins, ed. *English Romantic Writers*, Second Edition. Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1995. (Hereafter "Perkins.")

Duncan Wu, ed. *Romanticism: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. (Hereafter "Wu-1.")

Duncan Wu, ed. *Romanticism: An Anthology*. Second Edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. (Hereafter "Wu-2.")

Among the footnotes that irritate me most (I shall call them "footnotions") are the ones that explain the supposed meaning of the name "Thel." "Thel—her name probably

<sup>22</sup> Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. D. Groves (Edinburgh, Canongate, 1991) 202. Some connections between Blake and Hogg are suggested in my articles "Blake, Thomas Boston, and the Fourfold Vision" (*Blake* 19 [1986]: 142) and "'W — m B — e, a Great Original'; William Blake, The Grave, and James Hogg's *Confessions*" (*Scottish Literary Journal*, 18 [1991]: 27-45).



derives from a Greek word for 'wish' or 'will' and suggests the timid failure of a desire to fulfill itself" (Norton 42). Thel "may be derived from a Greek word meaning 'wish' or 'will'" (Johnson-Grant 61). "In Greek this is the root element in the vocabulary of wishing and willing" (Mason 275). "Thel is derived from Greek *thelo*, will or desire" (Mellor-Matlak 284). "The name Thel is derived from a Greek root meaning 'desire'" (Perkins 100). Wu-1 has no note. Wu-2 says, "various meanings have been suggested, including 'will,' 'wish' or 'desire' (from the Greek [*thelo*])" (57).

The first to think of this Greek source seems to have been Peter Fisher: "The name 'Thel' may come from Greek *thelo*, the shortened form of *ethelo*, meaning 'will' or 'wish'" (*The Valley of Vision* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1961) 205n35). At least he says "may." Two years later Harold Bloom, with his usual breezy self-confidence (though he doesn't know Greek), cites Fisher, but drops the "may": "Thel's name is from the Greek for 'wish' or 'will'" (*Blake's Apocalypse* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1963] 48); likewise in his commentary to the Erdman edition. Wu-2 is noncommittal, while Norton retreats to "probably" and Johnson-Grant to "may," but the others (except for Wu-1) follow Bloom.

I think "Thel" has nothing to do with *thelo* and we should try to get rid of it. First of all, to say a word "comes from" or "derives from" a word or root is to use the terminology of historical linguistics. But "Thel" is not a word in a natural language with an etymology that might cast light on its meaning and form. Blake made it up. It may have a source, but it has no etymology, and yet our footnoters seem to think there is a community of people that have spoken Blakish for thousands of years.

Even if we suppose *thelo* is the source, and Blake "had it in mind" when he coined the name, what follows? I think precisely nothing. Surely after all the discussion of the "intentional fallacy" beginning in the 1940s we are not still equating source with meaning. (Even in a natural language the etymology of a word is not the same as its meaning.) The relevant question is: What, if anything, in the English culture of 1789 might "Thel" allude to or evoke? A few who knew Greek might have thought of *thelo*, but that hardly bears on the question: the Greek root has left no presence in English except very obscurely in "thelemite," which comes from Rabelais' Abbey of *Thélème*, where you could do whatever you wished.

More available in English, as scholars have noted for several decades now, is the Greek root *thel-* (with an eta rather than an epsilon), which is found in words meaning "female," "gentle," and "nipple." In English the root showed up in poems by Maddan and Cowper having to do with female ruin, not irrelevant to *Thel*, and it might have been used by physicians and others ("epithelium," used by Hartley, has this root). So anyone who knew Greek might have thought of "female" just as readily as "will." For what it's worth, however, I can testify that even after majoring in Greek I did not

think of any Greek root when I first saw "Thel." It just doesn't look Greek.<sup>1</sup>

If Blake had wanted to trigger the notion of "will" through a Greek name he would have called her Thelo. The -o is a common ending in Greek female names (not the same as the -o in the verb Fisher cites, which means "I will/wish"). If he had wanted "will" and didn't care about Greek he might have called her "Wylle" or something like it (the "Female Will"). But he didn't. He chose a name with no clear connotations in English.

For those who question my separation between source and meaning there is of course the further argument that Blake didn't know Greek in 1789.

To sum up, there is no evidence for *thelo*, there is a somewhat likelier source (more than one, actually), and it is all unnecessary: "Thel" doesn't have to have a source at all. If *thelo* is short for *ethelo*, "Thel" can be short for "Ethel," or maybe "Thelma."

What's the harm in naming a Greek root, one might ask, even if it is unlikely? Aside from it's being false, it drags the red herring of "will" and "wish" across the poem. Beginning with Fisher himself many commentators have offered not unintelligent readings on the assumption that Thel is wishful but weak, wistful but lacking will, willful but unwilling, or the like. I doubt, however, that anyone would have come up with these without the putative etymology. If Fisher had said "Thel" comes from a Greek word for "lament" or "morning" or "sleep" or "virgin" or "dew" we would have seen thoughtful essays exploiting those meanings. But "wish" and "will" just don't seem to be all that salient in the poem itself, at least not more than a dozen other themes.

Another harm is the impression given to students that the editors, and their professor, know all the answers. They've been initiated into the Blakean mysteries; they've been to Camp Golgonooza and learned the secret code. I don't need to stress the importance of getting rid of this idea.

And finally there is harm in having ruled out the possibility that the name is not an allusion at all or in any way symbolic. It is difficult, of course, for any name to come without trailing a little nimbus of meanings, but I think Blake more or less achieved just that. He was constructing a new mythology and, in many of his names, he wanted to convey

<sup>1</sup> The note in Wu-2 adds the possibility that "Thel" is from "Thalia (from [sic: *thalleiu*], "blossoming"), the Greek muse of pastoral poetry." This is lifted directly from the commentary in Eaves, Essick, and Visconti, *The Early Illuminated Books* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994) 79, where it is attributed to me (in *The Poetry of William Blake* [54-55]). I did suggest Thalia, amidst a discussion where I questioned all sources and allusions, but the rest of the Greek is a mess for which I am not responsible. There should be an "n" for the "u," it is an infinitive not a participle, and the noun "Thalia" does not come from the verb "thallein." It perfectly illustrates my point about note-cloning that Wu-2 should exactly reprint the confusions and typographical error in the Princeton volume.



the effect of primordiality or originality. Whether I am right about this allusion-free effect or not, a footnoted "explanation" makes it much harder for a student to consider it, for he or she must first try to erase an authoritative-sounding claim.

So Wu-1 has the best note on "Thel." The next best option, though it is too long for student editions, is to do what Eaves, Essick, and Visconti do in their introduction to the poem (*The Early Illuminated Books* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993] 79), which is to canvass all the possible sources so they more or less cancel each other out, though it would have been even better if they had canvassed the notion of "source" itself.

"Thel's Motto" usually comes with another footnote. "Can wisdom be put in a silver rod, / Or love in a golden bowl?" seems to allude to something, and so we get "Cf. Ecclesiastes 12:6" in Mellor-Matlak (284) and Perkins (100) and longer notes in Mason and Norton. Norton quotes part of Ecclesiastes 12.5 as well as 12.6—"fears shall be in the way . . . and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken"—and adds, "Blake presumably changes the silver cord to a rod in order to make it, with the golden bowl, a sexual symbol" (Norton 42). Johnson-Grant quotes 12.6 and adds, "The substitution of 'rod' for 'cord' brings out masculine sexual implications" (61). Wu-1 has no note, but Wu-2 cites 12.6 and adds, "a 'silver cord' and 'golden bowl' are images of mortality" (57).

Michael Tolley and I broke a rod over this supposed source in these pages over 20 years ago (*Blake Newsletter* 34 (1975) and 37 (1976), and I won't rehearse my arguments here. I will only say I think it is manifest that by the time Blake changes "cord" to "rod," so that the meaning is now "sexual," and throws in "wisdom" and "love," which are not in the biblical passage any more than sex is, there is nothing left of the original meaning. Since it is to enrich meaning that one makes allusions, this supposed allusion to Ecclesiastes entirely fails. In Ecclesiastes the cord and bowl are the two parts of an oil lamp; when the cord is loosed or the bowl broken the fire goes out; that is, one dies. There is nothing sexual about this bowl, nothing about love or wisdom, and no rod in sight. It is an emblem of dying, as the preceding verse makes clear (and as Wu-2 observes). Death, the "long home," fears and mourning—these may be relevant to *Thel*. But Blake's mysterious lines are not about death at all. They are about wisdom and love and how they cannot be contained or preserved as precious objects but must be given away, as the self-sacrificing creatures demonstrate to Thel. If Blake, then, "had in mind" the Ecclesiastes passage, but then changed it so drastically as to obliterate any semblance in meaning or symbolism, then we should not plant it in the minds of our students and leave them staring stupefied

at the Bible. Wu-1 once again wins the prize; it's too bad Wu-2 has lost his nerve.

(What, by the way, is sexual about a bowl? No doubt students enjoy Freudian symbol-hunting. But only if you believe everything concave or convex is female and everything long, hard, or pointed is male will this symbolism satisfy you.)

As for the "northern bar" (*Thel* 6:1), Mellor-Matlak has "from the *Odyssey* 13:109-12, where the cave of the Naiads has two gates, the northern one for mortals, the southern one for gods" (286). Norton has virtually the same sentence, and adds, "The neoplatonist Porphyro [sic] had allegorized it as an account of the descent of the soul into matter and then its return" (45). Mason makes the same reference and adds, "There was some tradition of interpreting this cave as an image of mortal life. Twin gates, and the 'porter' or gatekeeper, are further tenuous links with Spenser's Garden of Adonis" (276).

"Tenuous" is the word to describe this whole complex allusion. Note, first of all, that there is nothing in the Blake passage about two gates or twin gates; indeed everywhere else in Blake (except at *Milton* 26:13-22) wherever there are gates there are four of them, not two.

Secondly, the allusion to the *Odyssey* rests solely on there being a single northern bar/gate (in the *Odyssey* it is called the gate "toward Boreas"). There is nothing in the *Odyssey* about a porter, as there is in Blake. Nor does the cave of the Naiads remotely resemble what Thel encounters when she enters the gate. Only if you take your Homer with Porphyry do you get anything pertinent to *Thel*, and then you also get a layer of neoplatonic metaphysics not warranted, in my opinion, by anything else in the poem. (The relation of neoplatonism to the *Milton* passage is another matter.) On such slender threads hangs Kathleen Raine's land of Perennial Philosophy, which only distracts students from figuring out Blake. A point each to Perkins and Wu-1, who are silent at the bar. Half a point to Johnson-Grant for a long note which gives with one hand and takes away with the other: it offers many sources or parallels—Milton, Spenser, Blake's own *Milton*, and the *Odyssey* via Pope's notes (which cite the neoplatonists)—and then makes the correct claim that "There is no evidence, however, that Thel is discarnate before her descent," a claim which eliminates those pesky Naiads and their neoplatonic cave (67). And half a point to Wu-2, who offers this: "the exact meaning is unclear [Yes! Cheers from grateful undergraduates!], although many interpretations have been offered. The porter is variously identified as Pluto, god of the underworld [visiting Har for the first time], or as Death, among others" (59). This does little harm, if little good.

I'll conclude with two footnotions from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. In the "Argument," the speaker, pre-



sumably Oothoon, "hid in Leutha's vale!" and "plucked Leutha's flower." Perkins says Leutha "embodies sexual shyness" (110), while Mellor-Matlak says it "signifies female sexual desire" (294), an intriguing difference. Their common editor at Harcourt Brace should introduce them. Here Wu-1 finally weighs in with "Leutha symbolizes sex under law, or the sense of guilt or sin" (88). No note in Mason.

I don't know quite what to do with "Leutha" here, but are these comments really explanations? Even if they agreed with each other, they do not identify an allusion or even a "source." They are interpretations, perhaps helpful, perhaps not, but in either case not really the business of brief notes. Mellor-Matlak adds that the name is, coined by Blake, and that is probably all a student needs to know. Norton makes a different sort of comment: "In some poems by Blake, Leutha is represented as a female figure who is beautiful and seductive, but treacherous" (47); Johnson-Grant has a fuller version of that reference (70). It is true enough, and probably harmless. It might even set a student going into Blake's later poems, though it also seems to imply that the later poems will provide a key to the earlier ones. That question, at least, is a good one to take up in class.

Wu-2 has repented of his note in Wu-1, and now writes: "symbolic of an attempt to acquire sexual experience" (94). This seems fine by itself, but hardly necessary, since it is a commonplace since Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns that girls get plucked while plucking flowers. He goes on: "Leutha has a number of sources, including Lutha, a stream in Ossian's *Berathon*, and Leucothea, goddess of the dawn in Greek myth." He adds that "her significance is very difficult to pin down." I won't repeat my point about the misleadingness of the notion of "sources"; here the confusion is twice confounded by claiming two sources, or even more, that are all somehow simultaneously at work, yet no claim is made that these are allusions—that we are to think "Ossianic stream" and "dawn goddess" as we read "Leutha"—and thus bear on its significance. Pinning down the significance may not be the point, after all; "Leutha" may have no significance, like "Thel."

Then there are "Theotormons Eagles" whom Oothoon summons to "Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect. / The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast" (VDA 36-39). The "allusion" here, of course, is to Prometheus. The eagles are "alluding to the myth of Prometheus, who was chained to a rock and whose liver was daily devoured by eagles [sic]" (Perkins 111). "A part of Prometheus' punishment for defying Zeus was to be perpetually devoured by an eagle (or a vulture)" (Johnson-Grant 73). "The implied parallel is to Zeus's punishment of Prometheus for befriending the human race, by setting an eagle to devour his liver" (Norton 48). Here I take heart from the fact that some of the other editors are silent. Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi think the passage is "an obvious allusion to the myth of Prometheus" (276), but Mellor-Matlak, Mason, and

Wu-1 seem to disagree—or else they think it is so obvious that they can leave it to the reader. Wu-2 gives in, however, and now talks of Prometheus' liver (95).

Certainly many students will come up with the allusion themselves, so there is no way to banish it, but I don't think it should be promoted in the notes. The Prometheus myth differs so sharply and in so many particulars from the Oothoon story that to follow out the allusion is to wander perplexed in an endless maze. What they have in common is eagle(s) preying on a person, like the design on plate 13 of *America*. But Oothoon has a different sex, it is several eagles and not one (*pace* Perkins), they are preying on a different organ, they are not eating it but removing it to lay bare something inside (her pure breast or soul), she summons the eagles in the first place, they belong to her lover (not Bromion, who more resembles Zeus), she has committed no crime (though Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi ingeniously suggest that plucking a marygold is like stealing fire) and feels no guilt. It is Theotormon himself who somewhat resembles Prometheus, weeping and eating his heart out over the rape. There are many more differences, most of them obvious.

Of course one can find a few ways in which Oothoon and Prometheus resemble each other (they are both rebels, for instance), but I don't think the Prometheus myth adds anything to the meaning of Oothoon's story and, if it is taken at all seriously, it subtracts quite a lot. To take account of the differences between Oothoon and Prometheus is to see that they are not "internal" differences, not pointed contrasts, as Leopold Bloom, say, differs from Odysseus; developing them does not lead a student deeper into Blake. I don't think Blake had Prometheus "in mind" when he wrote, though I don't much care if he did. He ought to have realized that his readers would think of Prometheus, but if he had, he may have decided that to alter the passage would defeat his purposes, which were well served by this symbolic re-enactment of the rape by Bromion. Oothoon cannot get Theotormon himself to make love with her, it seems, so she calls down his eagles; the result is that she no longer bears Bromion's stamp but now reflects Theotormon (or his ideal image) in her soul. This is rather cryptic, but how does the Prometheus myth help us understand any of it?

Those are some of my nominees for the memory hole. I propose that a few of us Blake scholars form a posse, mount our chariots, and launch intellectual arrows of annihilation at the textbooks.