

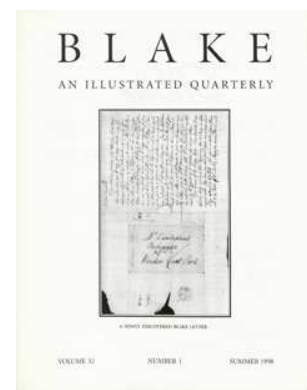
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R E V I E W

Helen P. Bruder, *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion*

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Helen P. Bruder, *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion*. London: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's, 1997. xi + 291 pp.; index; 8 ills. \$59.95.

REVIEWED BY NELSON HILTON

An at times interesting and provocative study, *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* claims to marry "a discursively sensitive historicist methodology to a politically engaged feminist critique" (22) in order to focus on some works of Blake which "engage with the unresolved questions" of years "pivotal in the history of thinking about the nature, rights and role of women" (181); the overall result however—at least to a reader whom the work accuses of having been "instrumental in the marginalizing of feminist contributions" (11)—seems likely to be a missed opportunity owing to the single-minded focus on a "partisan" (126) agenda and the pervading "combative attitude" (32) and tone which is "insistent, fervently so in places" (179).

The book opens with "A Critical Survey of Blake Studies," then considers in its ensuing four chapters and brief conclusion the results of "an attempt to attain 'particular' knowledge of just six of [Blake's] poems" (33): *Thel*, *Visions*, *Marriage*, *America* and *Europe* (the identity of the sixth particularly known text is not clear). The first chapter looks in turn "at the Blake Industry, at the tradition of left-wing scholarship on Blake and at feminist studies of his work" (8) and finds "serious deficiencies" (8) in all areas with regard to appreciating "Blake's sensitivity to issues of gender" (16); this serves to "illustrate the need for a historically sensitive feminist reading of Blake's text" (8), indeed "the quite pressing need for a work like this one" (22). The "chauvinist priorities" (9) of Blake studies, Bruder writes, have "not considered gender a topic worthy of serious consideration" (12) since "other subjects are considered of more pressing importance" (188); "it is this kind of intellectualized logic which needs to be exposed and discarded" (12)—"the kind of intellectualist and elitist imperative behind these judgements needs to be refuted not simply because of its tacit sexism, but also because it denies the social nature of language" (180).

In her only reference to Blake's wife and sister, Bruder criticizes the reluctance of Ackroyd's recent biography "to address what are for feminists the central questions. Biographically, the text has nothing new to say about Blake's wife Catherine, it has nothing at all to say about Blake's sister" (14). The author scorns those male critics who "offer feminists 'help' with our studies" (13) or who seem to be "colonizing our struggle" (18—just as they "colonized the poet" [32]) only to wonder:

Why, we might ask, hasn't Terry Eagleton (who clearly fancies himself as something of a critical cross-dresser after his brushes with the Brontës [sic] and Clarissa) developed his comments on Blake Or perhaps more to the point, why hasn't David Erdman supplemented his work in light of the revolutionary impact of feminism on both historical and literary studies? (19)

In a world of evidently obvious answers, even Diana Hume George's contention that "'Blake was as hard on women as on men for the mess that history is'" reveals, implicitly, one more "denial that patriarchy ever existed" (28).

The second chapter, "The Sins of the Fathers: Patriarchal Criticism and *The Book of Thel*" proposes to demonstrate how Blake exposes the impulse behind "the huge flood of didactic books for ladies that started to build up in the 1780s" (40, quoting William St. Clair) and how *Thel* "therefore aligns itself with those feminist writers who were arguing for more expansive and liberating opportunities for women" (34). Blake's effort thus "addresses a specific historical problem," though this, "[s]adly, Blake critics usually deny" (54). In this "luminously woman-centered poem" (54) Bruder recovers a "courageous" (51) and "determined young woman" whose skeptical enquiries "thoroughly unmask patriarchal ideology, an ideology which promised women that heterosexual romantic and maternal roles equalled heavenly fulfilment, but which *Thel* discovers amount to nothing less than death" (44). What *Thel* hears in "the land unknown" is "a biting honest account of what her life as a woman will be like in an environment where males ... invade her senses," and this, moreover, is "precisely the situation that exists in the vales of Har" (52). The footnotes—which average more than four per page through the text—here supply a variety of references from contemporary authorities such as Hannah More, James Fordyce and John Gregory to exemplify the account.

One curious aspect of Bruder's historicizing method is that the constructs of Blake's text are regarded almost as if they were historical people, complete with invocation of "Thel's biography" (55), anger over insults to "Thel's intellectual and perceptual capacities" (202n43), and anger at aspersions cast on the "sexuality" of "a young woman struggling towards a sense of identity" (39, 34, cf. 181). If one agrees with Barthes (*S/Z*, sect. xxviii) that "character" in literature is an illusion or projection fixed by a few semes passing through a name, then *Thel* and the rest are fictions more on the order of signs and figures than flesh and blood. Bruder claims to "rely heavily upon Bakhtin's view of language" and quotes from "a passage which is central to [her] work" his notion that "[c]ountless ideological threads running through all areas of social intercourse register effect in the word" (2). Hence Bruder writes that she will pay "close attention to the life of certain ideologically loaded signs" wherein "many threads of meaning coexist" (3). Are such social signs that different from ones the individual artist ap-

propriates and fashions to suture diverse textual strands? "Thel" itself can link to many signifieds, some of which, though not preoccupied with sexuality or gender, seem to have convincing relevance to the text.

Bruder's zeal to contest patriarchal criticism, however, organizes everything to her own agenda. So, for instance, to argue that the critical consensus that Thel's "main concern is with mortality and the transience of life ... simply is not correct" (45) the author turns to Thel's opening lament. "Once the torrential flow of similes begins," she suggests, "we become aware that something rather more subversive is going on." Blake is, she writes, "exploding stereotypical notions of youthful femininity by pushing them to their limits and hence revealing their absurdity" (45). Without quoting them, she states that "[t]hese lines can be read as a kind of satire on Burke's highly influential, and roughly contemporaneous notion of female beauty with its stress on smallness, delicacy and weakness" (45). She does quote five sentences from Burke's "key intertext, whose philosophy Blake exposes" (45). A reconsideration of the lines in which Thel is ostensibly "parodying stereotypical notions of female beauty" (46) may at least suggest why some readers have inferred other concerns:

Ah! Thel is like a wat'ry bow, and like a parting cloud;
Like a reflection in a glass; like shadows in the water;
Like dreams of infants, like a smile upon an infant's
face;
Like the dove's voice; like transient day; like music in
the air.

Like a Lyca, in another contemporaneous, apparently woman-centered poem, Thel's subversion seems to concern figuration as much as physical figure.

The third chapter, "Slip-Sliding Away: Some Problems with 'Crying Love' in the 1790s," pairs a discussion of "Sexual Ideology in the 1790s" with a reading of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (and nods, one supposes, to a song by Paul Simon). Building on recent scholarship such as Lynn Hunt's collection *The Invention of Pornography* (1993) which shows clearly "that the 1790s were definitive in setting modern trends in pornographic writing" (58), Bruder argues that Blake's poem attempts "to undo the reductive sexualization of women" while also trying "to redeem their desires from contemporary slurs of devouring bestiality" (66). Turning to visual art in order to make more sense than have other critics of the work's pointed graphic quotations of the "masculinist" (69) Fuseli, Bruder discusses Blake's "experimental and innovatory depictions of female and male bodies" (66) to suggest that Blake's "feminist" agenda" (57) prompts "an androgynous figure style" (72). She quotes from art historian Margaret Walters the appealing formulation that "[n]ever denying sexual difference, [Blake] sees clearly how the exaggeration of that difference by society imprisons man and woman in mutual and destructive misery" (72).

Bruder's consideration of the text proper returns to mimetic fallacy with the argument that "Oothoon rejects the idea that she should be the passive object of male desire and instead claims the right to be the subject of her own libidinous inclination: 'I loved Theotormon / And I was not ashamed'" (74). Who then shall we see through the "I" here—the inclination or its speaking subject? And if the "loved" object is *the otor mon* (*/woman*), other than what one takes it to be (as Theotormon certainly proves for Oothoon), then perhaps that "I" envisions only a "foolish puppy" of kind "love" (cf. "An Island in the Moon" ch.1). While Bruder finds my effort to ground *Visions* in the "text" of the relationship between Fuseli and Wollstonecraft to be "patronizing" and "pseudo-feminist" (229n167; 11), she sees elsewhere that "it took the sting of intimate insult to fully animate [Wollstonecraft's] feminist convictions" (109)—even so, one can hardly imagine her regarding Blake and Wollstonecraft in the light she does the poet and Swedenborg: "of course Blake isn't fair in his treatment of the Swedish seer, but why should he be?" (119).

As with the discussion of *Thel*, the fixing of some textual signs can feel rather forced: with regard to Oothoon's "seeking flowers to comfort her," Bruder argues that these are "sexual flowers" (124) and "what she finds in the plucking of the duplicitous symbol is her own potential for multiple and recurrent orgasm. This is the 'soul of sweet delight' that 'Can never pass away'" (75), for "eroticized sensual liberty ... finds its apotheosis in triumphant female orgasm" (154). The "nymph" the flower becomes discloses another "duplicitous symbol" (76) because of "other discourses" in which that word appeared—"most importantly brothel catalogues displayed their youthful wares under this sign" (76). Bruder's is a world where work long thought to be influential, even by an author personally known to Blake—and Wollstonecraft—like Thomas Taylor's edition of Porphyry's *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs*, does not exist as an other discourse for Blake (notwithstanding the approving quotation of David Aers's argument that "any attempt to understand a text should include an attempt to replace it in the web of discourses and social practice where it was made" [10]). As for the "flowers," one would have thought that a critic sensitive to the protagonist's "wildly exuberant sexual rhetoric" (56; see also 79, 88) and her struggle with "an exploitative sign system only too happy to consume 'figures' like her" (84) would include the denotation of "embellishment or ornament (of speech)" among aspects of the *flowers'* duplicity. There is in fact a teasing later eighteenth-century tradition of "plucking" such "Pierian flowers" or "wild and simple flowers of Poesy" which reaches back to Marlowe's "immortall flowers of Poesy," and the soon-to-be-famous radical John Thelwall, in his collection of poems, *The Peripatetic*, published in April of 1793,¹ also imagines a muse who "pluck'd" wild flowers.

¹My thanks to Prof. Judith Thompson of Dalhousie University for communicating this information from her forthcoming work on Thelwall.

Discussion of Blake's *Visions* raises the question of who, exactly, are the "Daughters of Albion" joined with Blake in Bruder's title. She writes, for instance, that Blake's poem "spins on an axis rather than progressing because the Daughters of Albion were not in any way on the move at the time" (87), which would seem to suggest that they are contemporary Englishwomen (though not, as noted already, any with whom Blake lived intimately). Elsewhere Bruder links "Oothoon and all the other Daughters of Albion" (105), but almost as soon observes the "great problem" of Oothoon's having "no female audience" (108). A search of the Chadwyck-Healey Literary Database finds the phrase used only three times before 1793—all in the preceding three decades and all conventional formulations, the most notable by Akenside. Curiously, Thelwall's *Peripatetic* offers a poem titled "Daughters of Albion's gay enlightened hour" which emphasizes the phrase three times. Thelwall's "Daughters" epitomize the radical's abjection and fantasy of aristocratic women who "with feeble step and mincing tone / Pretend to softness, delicacy, love!" and who are invited, at the poem's close, to "Lisp forth, to those by whom 'twill be believ'd, / Your tender feeling's exquisite excess!" However the respective 1793 dates for the two works may sort out, the closeness these Daughters bear to Blake's 37 other uses of the phrase outside of *Visions* (unnoticed here) bears consideration.

Another particular, for a text which deplores "sloppy scholarship" (18), concerns the characterization of Oithóna, "the heroine of Blake's Ossianic source poem" as one "who secretly arms herself to do battle with her rapist before dying [and so] exhibits a punative and outraged aspect which the ever sexy Oothoon wholly lacks" (79). In the argument to "Oithóna" Macpherson indeed relates how Gaul arrived on Tromáthon to rescue Oithóna from Dunrommath and urged her to retire: "She seemingly obeyed; but she secretly armed herself, rushed into the thickest of the battle, and was mortally wounded." In the text of the piece, however, Oithóna three times attempts to flee from Gaul, twice asks him why he has come, and states that she will never leave Tromáthon. She also relates how, when she was seized, she could do nothing: "My arm was weak; it could not lift the spear." Utilizing a technology Dunrommath is not shown to possess, Gaul sets out with three archers to do battle while "a troubled joy rose on [Oithóna's] mind Her soul was resolved." Gaul triumphs over Dunrommath and his warriors, and Macpherson's Ossian tells that "The arrows of Morven pursued them: ten fell on the mossy rocks." It is at this point that Gaul moves toward the cave of Oithóna and sees "a youth leaning against a rock. An arrow had pierced his side." This is, of course, Oithóna: "She had armed herself in the cave, and came in search of death." Her dying regret that her "father shall blush in his hall" seems to confirm the picture of one more victim of internalized guilt who chooses death rather than a life of imagined dishonor.²

² See James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*,

The fourth chapter, "Blake, the Rights of Man and Political Feminism in the 1790s" sounds a recurrent note of sadness as it considers Catherine Macaulay Graham, Mary Hayes, Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *America*. Paine's *Rights of Man* "represents ... a great lost opportunity" (98); in its failure "to enfranchise, and largely even to represent women," Blake's *Marriage* "is a missed opportunity as striking as Tom Paine's" (122); and while the 1790s could have been the decade when "a century's interested chatter about the woman questions burst into a firm-voiced manifesto of radical demands for women's rights," it "missed its moment" (115). That Paine could "make no mention of women is certainly a great indictment of the radical cultures of the 1790s" (98), and he is taken to task both for stressing that "Male and Female are the distinctions of nature" (97) and for his linguistic "blindness"—shared by Blake and Thomas Spence—of using the word "man" to denote both men and women (99). Regret enters also with the reader's assent to the author's reflection on "a very valid objection which could be made ... namely that my definition of feminism is too narrowly political and monolithically interested in republican partisans. That it ignores other loci of pro-woman thought, and disregards contexts which enabled female activism and self-empowerment. In some senses these charges cannot be resisted" (113). The conclusion of the chapter reveals that "what makes Blake worth studying from a feminist perspective is that the trajectory of his radical career is uneasy in its course; it is stalled, deflected, even occasionally halted by an *intermittent* awareness that other power bases exist, other forms of exploitation operate, that it isn't just 'warlike' men who engage with the political" (132; emphasis added). That his vision is not always fourfold or threefold Blake himself testifies—but to assume that even twofold vision could have such a naive view of "the political" seems rather singular.

The title of the fifth chapter, "Go Tell the Human Race that Woman's Love is Sin": Sexual Politics and History in Blake's *Europe—a Prophecy* foregrounds the "pivotal passage" and "resonant phrase" (182) which Bruder contextualizes with discussions of "British Perception of Women in Pre-Revolutionary France," "Sexual Politics and Women's Protest in Revolutionary France," "Marie Antoinette: Queen of the 'Heavens of Europe,'" "British Perceptions of Women in Revolutionary France," and "The Women in Blake's *Europe/Europe*." The interesting part of the argument here turns on the remarkable trajectory in media and popular imagination of the figure of the Queen of France, Blake's one direct reference in the *Notebook* notwithstanding. Bruder rightly rereads one of the memorable paragraphs in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* to suggest how, for Burke,

ed. Howard Gaskill, intro. Fiona Stafford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) 183-86; 469.

the revolutionary "new conquering empire of light and reason" threatens to shine on the essence of womanhood and reveal its bestiality. This may seem to be an overly polemical assessment but the word is not too strong—for though Burke worries that egalitarian levelling will reveal the king to be "but a man," a few more clauses are added to his account of the revelation of Marie Antoinette: "a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order." (166)

She then tracks the way in which, as "the leading character in the eighteenth-century's greatest patriarchal moral fable" (145), the queen came to epitomize "monstrous" female appetites (147) only to be re-revised into a female martyr with her execution in October of 1793. Bruder argues that with these later events Blake begins to see the queen "more as a scapegoat and victim than a tyrant" (163) and so to conceive his later concept of "the female will, that complex of manipulative feminine strategies developed and employed by women to obtain power in an oppressive and resisting patriarchal context" (163). Enitharmon, then, is the figure through which Blake "enters most directly into a discussion of women's roles and fate in the French Revolution" (162), and the crucial aspect of her speech, with the resonant phrase included in the chapter title, is how Blake reveals that it "isn't issued from a position of power but is a response to the position in which patriarchy places women" (170).

Appealing as these suggestions are, their practical application is not without difficulty. Of the illustration on plate 3, for instance, Bruder writes that here "Blake faces up to Marie Antoinette's execution directly: occupying most of *Europe—A Prophecy's* skyline floats an immense female figure, her hair falling down over her face as she vigorously clutches the back of her neck—preparing herself, evidently, for the inevitable blow" (163). Concerning that figure's enormous wings the author is less confident, suggesting parenthetically that with them "Blake perhaps alludes" to the queen's posthumous transformation to aristocratic angel (163)—and concerning the figure's relation to the orb, firey embryo dropped from her hair, she has nothing to say. At the end one agrees with the author that "despite all that [she's] tried to contend and convey in this chapter, *Europe* is still a problematic poem" (176).

As the book concludes, the author appears several times to comment on how her work has lacked the "benefit of genuine critical dialogue" (177) and "sustaining critical dialogue" (181). At the same time she states that her kind of work "most powerfully demonstrates that feminist readings are not simply 'another perspective' that can be neatly lined up amongst a range of alternative options (especially not within Blake studies as I perceive it). This kind of writing disrupts and refutes critical orthodoxies, and so far this iconoclastic enterprise is only in its most embryonic phase"

(181). The effect of such personal references scattered throughout is nicely captured by her own comment on another critic's "lengthy exercise in soul-baring [which] has very little impact upon the body of the text and is more likely to embarrass than illuminate the reader" (11).

N E W S L E T T E R

Books Being Reviewed for *Blake*

The following is a list from Nelson Hilton, our Review Editor, of books currently being reviewed for *Blake*.

Prints and Engraved Illustrations by and After Henry Fuseli: A Catalogue Raisonné
D. H. Weinglass (Scholar Press)

Blake Books Supplement
G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford University Press)

Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake
Nicholas M. Williams (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Blake's Altering Aesthetic
William Richey (University of Missouri Press, 1998)

Locke and Blake: A Conversation across the Eighteenth Century
Wayne Glausser (University of Florida Press, 1998)

Flexible Design: Revisionary Poetics in Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas
John B. Pierce (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998)

The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature 1789-1824
Robert M. Ryan (Cambridge University Press, 1997)

The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III
Diana Donald (Yale University Press, 1997)

The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700-1830
Clifford Siskin (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998)

Blake, Politics, and History
Eds. Disalvo, Rosso, et al. (Garland, forthcoming).