

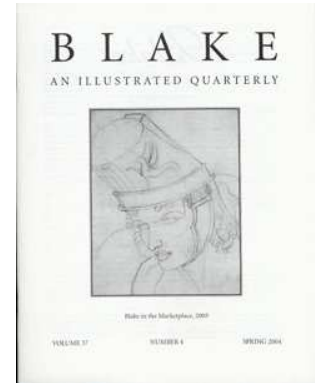
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R E V I E W

## Dee Drake, *Searing Apparent Surfaces: Infernal Females in Four Early Works of William Blake*

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Dee Drake. *Searing Apparent Surfaces: Infernal Females in Four Early Works of William Blake*. Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Stockholm Studies in English, XC. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000. 178 pp. Paperback \$59.50.

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In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake describes how the corrosives of his relief etching "melt ... apparent surfaces away, and display ... the infinite which was hid" (pl. 14). In this phrase Dee Drake finds an apt metaphor for a revolutionary female desire, a corrosive agency that seeks its fulfillment by descent beneath heavenly or domestic constraint to "infernal" sources of energy and authenticity. Beginning with three visual images of flaming women from *The Marriage*, she turns to the color print *Hecate* in its several versions and to the visual and verbal representations of women in *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Drake models her argument upon James Hillman's post-Jungian readings of archetypes as images for an active "soul-making" that creates multiple, transforming potentialities for a liberated, non-unified self. In the phrasing of Gerda Norvig, also a reader of Hillman's post-Jungian approach, she investigates a "visionary hermeneutics" of both image-making and self-making. The degree to which Blake's representations of "female desire" achieve such a non-unitary self-making, Drake proposes, is the measure of their—and Blake's—liberation. While she disarmingly says that she herself sees the chapter on the *Hecate* print as her most original contribution, containing "totally new insights," and her interpretations of *Thel* and the *Visions* as more "complementary" to ongoing feminist debates over these poems, she does not give herself enough credit. We might see her study as itself a "salutary corrosive"—one that might examine its own premises, both Blakean and feminist, more thoroughly, but one that makes her readers reexamine their own Blakean and feminist premises as well.

For her post-Jungian model raises two apparently contradictory problems for her feminist readers—and one of these problems also raises questions for Blake critics who may be less concerned about feminist issues. First, even in its post-structuralist modifications, Drake's Jungian hermeneutic slides toward the very essentialism that she and Hillman wish to avoid: woman as dark, bodily, anti-rational, infernal. This problem is also one for Blakean non-feminists, because its effect is to halt the play of dialectical contraries in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Second, this quasi-biological essentialism, while claiming desire for women, excludes reason and thus endangers women's capacity for feminist political action to



advance equality. Her advocacy of an ecstatic female sexuality both in *The Marriage* and in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is anti-volitional and, in a striking and brilliant reading of an illumination from *The Marriage*, even acephalic. Thus the post-structuralist, non-unified self of the "infernal female" seems to have no subjectivity and no agency. While this difficulty stands at the center of an ongoing debate among feminists, Drake should acknowledge the debate and especially its relevance for interpreting Thel and Oothoon.

One source for confusion in Drake's analyses of subjectivity or agency is that "soul," a term under revision by post-Jungians, was also undergoing revision in Blake's own era and in his own writing. As Drake explains, Hillman seeks to retain the term "soul" from Jung but to free it from its role as unifying *telos*. For Hillman, "the 'soul-making' operations [he consciously borrows from Keats] ... honor 'fragmentation, self-division, and animism'" (Drake 13-14). In post-Jungian analysis, the "soul's native polycentricity, the multiple archetypal powers" should emerge (Hillman, quoted by Drake 13). Such language might point to a reevaluation of the fragmenting self as "soul" in Blake's characters from *The Book of Urizen* on—largely beyond the scope of Drake's study. Problems emerge in Drake's discussion, however, when she is less attuned to Blake's own "polycentric" or at least polyvalent uses of the word "soul" in his pre-1794 verbal texts.

All the way through his career, Blake exploits his era's multiple redefinitions of this powerfully evocative term. He frequently uses "soul" to refer to a center of consciousness, what we would call the "psyche" or self. At times his uses come close to materialist explanations for the psyche such as Priestley's. Though he frequently evokes the traditional Christian definition of the soul, influenced by Platonism, as an immortal self separate from the body, in the early 1790s his evocations are most often critical or ironic. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example, the "Voice of the Devil" challenges that orthodox definition: "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul ... Energy is the only Life and is from the Body" [pl. 4]. The voice of the devil, then, speaking from Blake's fiery underworld, does not simply steal an immaterial soul from heaven to reign in hell, but proposes a monistic unity of body and eternal soul.

Unfortunately, Drake occasionally—and I think unintentionally—slips into the more orthodox usage of "soul" even at points where she needs to calibrate her own and Hillman's definitions most clearly with Blake's ironic shifts. For example, on page 37, just after speaking of a Keatsian, post-Jungian "soul-making" as analogous to Blake's "printing in the infernal method," she writes, "Both Blake's infernal method and Hillman's soul-making enact the intra-relatedness of being, whether of body and soul, of sexuality and spirituality, or of life and death." Her usages of "soul" on pages 49 and 60 are more complex but still need clarification in relation to Blake's uses. On page 49, speaking of Blake's relief etching as metaphor, she writes that "searing holes in things is seeing through

their literal, i.e. merely physical, nature to the souls they embody," though she carefully argues for a need to "expunge the distinctions between" body and soul (51). On page 60 she speaks of "the soul's in-betweening condition, between the corporeal and the spiritual." This unacknowledged slippage of a central term in her discussion is particularly important because it interferes with her analysis of Blake's liberatory, anti-dualist dialectic in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, an analysis which grounds her further arguments for Blake's feminist representations of female desire.

Drake's careful attention to the illuminations of "infernal females" in *The Marriage* is both innovative and rewarding. It counters Blake's own phallic rhetoric that in spite of his scheme of equal contraries tends to emphasize the prolific over the devouring, and it begins by universalizing the redemptive energies of sexual desire for women as well as for men. Yet each of her analyses presents problems. She argues that the fiery female at the bottom left of the title page allows her desire to be limited because she reaches toward "heaven" both in embracing the male figure emerging from the clouds on the right and in moving toward the upper "heavenly" section of the page. To me, the upper part of the page looks like a desolate wintry earth, and either hell—or heaven and hell in their contentious embrace—is needed to make that desolation bloom. In her argument, female desire seems to be unlimited only if it remains self-contained in "hell" and perhaps only if its object is itself or another like itself—that is, female.

At the top of plate 3, the female figure "is the quintessence of unrestrained desire with her open gaze, arms flung wide, ... and legs spread in welcome of the flames licking her thighs and vulva." This is an important observation, balancing what Bruder terms the omission of female sexuality in the verbal text (see Drake 56-57 and Bruder 117-19). Drake links this figure to the woman giving birth at the bottom of plate 3. Yet when she goes on to describe how the figure at the top "celebrates a relentless movement towards the primordial; towards an originary being or presence that partakes in the endless variety of soul" (54), she blocks the destabilizing play of contraries in the "marriage" by claiming a stabilized ground of being—the "primordial ... originary being."

When she analyzes the figures at the bottom of the page, again her appeal to a post-structuralist proliferation of images, energies, and identities is drawn into an archetypal pattern that may indeed be inherent in Blake's representations but that again glides toward the very essentialism she protests. At page bottom are three figures: a woman giving birth to a baby, and an adult male. Drake interprets the male as the child grown into a son-lover, as in the lunar myth associated with Aphrodite and her young male lovers. The repetitive lunar cycles deny an "ultimate apocalypse but always [suggest] the potential for the unfolding of an infinite number of soul-events, that is to say images" (56). Lunar cycles certainly affirm sexuality, but they imply a biological determinism of fertility more than an "infinite number of ... images" for the creative imagining of self.



The design on plate 14, both text and illumination, represents Drake's third example of "desire's liberational force," but it is the illumination of "the enflamed female and her corrosive activity as flying vulva that [is] most captivating" (57). This figure, seen head-on, has no face: "where her face should be there is only a very dark smudge, like a gaping black hole. ... [Her] flight is suggestive of both bestial and supernatural capacities." Drake revises the already revisionary comments of Eaves, Essick and Visconti that this design follows and yet challenges "conventional iconography of soul and body." In *William Blake: The Early Illuminated Books* these editors point out that Blake revises the traditional design of a soul hovering over and parallel to the dead body by making the hovering female "soul" perpendicular to the earthbound male "body." Drake goes further, continuing her association of soul with biological female body: "As the bizarre manifestation of excessive sensual enjoyment, the flying creature's dark gap/black hole/gaping void images the vulva—threshold to the womb-tomb of the (Dark Moon) Goddess of Death and Regeneration" (58). Replacing head, symbolic of the limiting empirical senses, with vulva, this figure

is the infernal female who materializes soul's most corrosive power. Here the prevailing mood is of deepening; for this creature's dreadful presence reveals a coincidence of the sacred, the bestial, and the human that, because it is as infinite as it is primordial, opens up to the bottomless depths of being. (60)

Just before this passage Drake proposes that the figure "displays something of the soul's in-betweening condition, between the corporeal and the spiritual"—but those "bottomless depths of being," along with the slippage of meaning in "soul" already noted, overwhelm this potentially important insight with a D. H. Lawrence-like late romanticism. Such a complaint about Drake's interpretation, however, should perhaps be directed to Blake's art itself—for her description of the image is compelling and disturbing.

Until its final section, Drake's chapter on the *Hecate* print is enlightening, if such a term is not too ironic for her pro-darkness argument. Even Gert Schiff's new alternate title, "The Night of Enitharmon's Joy," she protests, "serve[s] to reinforce the prevailing view of the color print; i.e., that it depicts the fallen world as a specifically female phenomenon" (77). Adopting the tone and method of *serio ludere* from the Florentine neo-Platonists, she argues that the central witch-like figure is redemptive of female desire and not a fallen figure of "female will." Reading from "the infernal perspective[s]... as advocate of a 'Devils party' approach to the print's imaginal world," she "look[s] at the color print *Hecate* through the visionary windows of a Puckish Blake full of the devil." This approach "opens up an array of radical alternatives to or variations on the nature of Hecate's Mysteries and the ways in which we may be initiated into them" (79). Placing the ass represented in the print in the literary context of Apulei-

us's *The Golden Ass* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she gives Hillman's "animal sensing" greater flexibility and playfulness. Because Hecate, associated by Drake with Apuleius' witch Fotis, is a classical deity and thus already connected with quasi-essentializing myths drawn from fertility rituals, Drake's claims for the value of the "infernal female" seem less distorting here than in her reading of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

She bases her interpretation on the Tate version of the print, which critics argue is the first pull, originating in 1794-95, and contrasts it with the second and third pulls, dating at least ten years later. In the Tate print, the central female figure turns her "transfixing gaze" at the strange reptile to her right. In the later pulls, the figure's eyes are downcast, in "Blake's simple but effective way of neutralizing her power" (91). For in this early version, Drake proposes, the "cave world [of the print] ... has a double function"; it is a "liminal space," the "site of entry into and return from the Underworld" (95). "In Blake's *Hecate* we see the pictorialization of the experience of soul-making's multiplicities" (96). The witch-figure's sibylline book, Drake argues, should be read positively, not negatively as a Urizenic manual of restraint. The final section of her chapter, both because it is less well worked out and because it reverses her ludic and positive evaluation of the ass in the two earlier parallels, is less successful. It equates Aeneas with "any ass" because he refuses Dido and restrains his desire, thus in Blake's terms becoming angelic. Even if Hecate as sibyl may refer to the similar figure in *The Aeneid*, Drake's witty pun on the pious hero cannot sustain this turn in her interpretation.

Drake's reading of *The Book of Thel* is richly suggestive but, again, her vocabulary slides toward essentialism even when she intends to advocate the opposite. Agreeing with a "heretical" group of feminist critics (Norris, Hutchings, den Otter, and Rajan), Drake reads Thel as a "liminal" figure who "straddles the gap between life and death by remaining in flux" (109). Thel's return to Har at the end of the poem is "an act of courage" (112), a mission to proclaim the message of "sensual enjoyment" spoken by the final "sibylline questions" voiced from the grave: "Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy? Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?" "With these words," Drake writes,

acknowledging the wisdom of her own realization ringing in her ears, the young virgin ... mounts the serpent of sexuality [referring to the female child directing the serpent in the poem's tailpiece] and (together with her son and lover) returns to the vales of Har. (136)

This apparently contradictory reading of Thel as virgin yet also as lover and mother marks Blake's "explor[ing of] a complexity of virginities, that reveal various ways in which anima works to make herself manifest" (114). Turning to Hillman's argument that alchemical processes marked by different stages of whiteness correspond to stages of psychological development, Drake posits



two basically different manifestations of virginity: ... the pristine naivete of the virgin without knowledge of or grounding in the world and its ways; and the second, ... the silvered wisdom of the virgin who having dwelt in "lunar darkness or blackened silver" has recovered a middle or intermediary ground known alchemically as the terra alba. (115)

She argues that Thel performs her own autonomous alchemical process of developing a "virginity" which might include all phases of the lunar cycle, from maiden through Aphroditean lover and mother to old woman. The links between alchemical stages of whiteness, the lunar cycle, and the triple-stage moon-goddess all come from Hillman. As Drake points out, several critics have suggested a link between the "river of Adona" in *Har* (pl. 1), and the dying-and-reviving partner of Aphrodite, Adonis (125). A more specific historicizing of this alchemical vocabulary, like Paley's use of similar material in *Energy and the Imagination*, and of Blake's sources for interpretations of the Adonis myth, would have strengthened this discussion and lessened my resistance to her reading.

I resist not so much the idea that Blake may be using a complex amalgam of alchemy and fertility myth to characterize Thel's in-between state, but Drake's conclusions that this amalgam leads to a feminist interpretation of the poem. Her first feminist conclusion is both subtle and important, as it challenges the "anatomy is destiny" premise that seems to create problems in her reading of *The Marriage*. Thel protests not the biological impediment of the hymen, the "little curtain of flesh" that certifies physical virginity in women, but society's hypocritical over-valuation of that marker, to consolidate control over women's sexual desires and sexual freedoms (113-14). This argument finds support earlier in the poem through Drake's reading of the Lilly sacrificing herself to the "cunnilinguizing Lamb" and her interpretation of the Clod of Clay who puritanically sees her worm only as a swaddled baby and not as a phallus and thus as a son-lover like Adonis (131, 124-25). Yet one problem with making the son-lover myth of Aphrodite a model for feminist readings is, again, its consolidation of a liberated female sexuality with a liberated female fertility. Further, does the "liberated" exercise of either of these involve the development of an autonomous self, as in liberal feminism or in Jungian psychology of the fully-developed individual—a goal that seems to Drake and Hillman as repressive as Urizen's "One Law"—or the dissolution of such a self into a post-structuralist, post-Jungian multiplicity that in the form presented here seems to lead back to clichés of the mindless Earth-mother? As the Clod of Clay says, "I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love" (5:6).

Drake's reading of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* presents this difficulty even more starkly. She begins from Vogler's and Hilton's observations that Bromion's name resembles Bromios, roarer or thunderer, "one of Dionysos's many titles," and from Hilton's further suggestions for Dionysian connections in the name "Leutha." She chides Vogler and Hilton, as well as other critics, however, for failing to identify the Daughters of

Albion as potential Dionysian maenads. Her suggestion that the dancing figures in the rainbow on the title page are successful maenads, and that they should be linked to the chorus of the Daughters of Albion, is a fine one. Both Vogler and Hilton, she laments, take "a typically patriarchal view of the Dionysian maenads that serves to legitimate the domestication of so-called wild female desire so that the prevailing order can be maintained." This is odd, because her reading of the poem comes all too close to the far more patriarchal reading of critics preceding Vogler and Hilton, critics who argue that Oothoon should recognize her encounter with "Bromion's thunders" as a profoundly positive initiation into the mysteries of sexuality (see Bruder 56 for a summary).

She begins this argument by pointing to the metaphorical nature both of Bromion's "thunders" and of Oothoon's "virgin mantle":

If we view Oothoon's "virgin mantle" as the ego's naive belief in its power to control the perceived world, the thunders are a manifestation from another world, wholly alien to the ego, that shatters the illusion of her ego-control

and leads to "her breakthrough into the kind of sophisticated virginity that Thel enacts" (140). Even if we read the "virgin mantle" more literally, a rape would indeed shatter the illusion of ego-control, so her point has a broad sort of validity, but she seems not to read the experience as rape. In the prefatory argument, she points out, the "terrible thunders" "are neither personified nor gendered"—and "are perhaps Leutha's" (141). Thus in Drake's argument they signal a more female celebration of desire, even if that desire seems frightening—and Bromion is the god whose worship fulfills that desire. Here Drake follows Nor Hall's suggestion that the Cadmaean myth narrates a willed initiation ceremony:

Oothoon as Semele-Ariadne would then be cast in the role of the Goddess who has been divided against herself in the classic madonna/whore antagonism used to disempower her. By rending her with his thunders Bromion-Dionysos is both reuniting as Son-Lover with the Goddess and taunting his adoptive Father, Theotormon-Zeus, with his rebellion.

The initiation, however, and the reunion with the Dionysian son-lover, fails: "Oothoon ... is both solar-bound and one-dimensional"; she "not only rejects the infernal movement towards the Underworld, but also the constellating opportunities for new (Dionysian) selves to be born." This "self-betrayal ... isolates [her] from the community of the Daughters of Albion and condemns her ... to stasis" (137).

Though the identification of Bromion with Bromios/Dionysos seems promising, as does Drake's idea that the dancing figures on the title page are an ecstatic maenadic version of the Daughters of Albion, I find several problems with her condemnation of Oothoon. First, if we were to accept Drake's argument that Bromion comes as the god of a positive, because ego-annihilating, sexuality, we might urge her to look more



closely at Oothoon's long final speech celebrating "the moment of desire"—a speech Drake ignores. For in that speech Oothoon seems to recover at least partially from the masochistic flagellation of her now sexually-experienced body, and to defend the very jouissance that Drake has been arguing for. Thus Drake might argue that Oothoon's initiation is not a total failure. One might say that the Dionysian elements in Bromion have generated a complex, multivalent self in Oothoon.

Yet—and this is my more serious objection—that speech, as well as some important lines on plate 1 and an interlinear design on plate 2, evoke two historical contexts that make it extremely difficult to read Bromion's encounter with Oothoon as initially consensual, if ego-annihilating—to see it as anything other than rape. These two contexts are the debates over the liberation of enslaved Africans and over the rights of eighteenth-century women—especially the middle-class British women Wollstonecraft addresses. Both sets of debates create enormous pressure for positing a subject autonomous enough to say "no" to oppression. On plates 1 and 2, Bromion's addresses to Oothoon and to Theotormon are spoken, as critics have long recognized, from the position of the slave-trader or slave-owner sexually exploiting his property. Oothoon's final speech on plates 7-8 voices even more directly a critique of desire that is bought and sold, and thus made fraudulent, on the marriage market. These two markets for the alienation of desire from an autonomous subject, and thus for the denial of choice, mark out partially-overlapping and partially-conflicting socio-political places for Oothoon as chattel slave and as middle-class feminist. I have even argued, elsewhere, that this conflict points toward a post-modern splitting of subjectivity by competing discourses. Why, then, am I so ready to deny Drake her version of a post-modern challenge to the enlightenment liberal subject? I do so partly on historical grounds—for both of those competing late eighteenth-century discourses aimed at freedom of choice, and such freedom, such an establishment of a liberal subject, is surely one of Blake's aims during the early nineties. Is this historical moment over? Is to argue for a moment of unenslaved choice before acting upon or entering upon a self-annihilating "moment of desire" merely a nostalgia for an earlier moment in history, for Wollstonecraft-engendered first-wave feminism? In "Woman's Time," Julia Kristeva confronts this issue by contrasting first-wave appeals for rational and political equality with her portrayal of second-wave feminists' "demanding recognition of an irreducible identity, without equal in the opposite sex ... plural, fluid ..." (194). She then proposes a complex negotiation between these two extremes, claiming that such negotiation goes on as each of us develops as subjects able to act in society. In favor of Drake's "second-wave" reading are Blake's own insistent and troubling suggestions for an ecstatic, Dionysian model—but he also proposes consciously-chosen, liberal goals. Thus we may need to pursue Drake's readings, if only in part, to incorporate precisely this difficult crux between the liberal self and a liberated, liberating desire.

Because it forces readers to ask this and similar questions, Drake's book is a significant one. Yet because she does not raise these questions clearly enough herself, her book is far weaker than it might have been.

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