

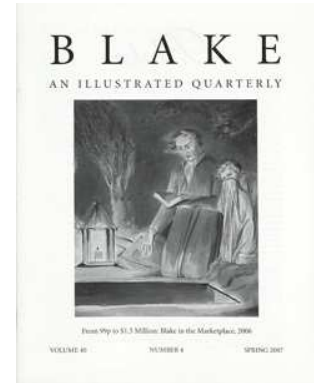
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**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Why Mrs Blake Cried:  
William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual  
Vision*

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Marsha Keith Schuchard. *Why Mrs Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision*. London: Century-Random House, 2006. xv + 448 pp., 54 illus. £18.99, hardcover.

Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

Marsha Keith Schuchard's *Why Mrs Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision* is a book which will be eagerly read and widely cited. It has many features which will attract a popular readership—sex, drugs, magic, secret societies, conspiracy, and sensational discoveries. It had instant *éclat* from before the day of publication. While it was still in page proof, the editors of Michael Beard's biography of Blake, then also in page proof, telephoned him in agitation because his book did not record the "sexual shenanigans" (53) detailed in *Why Mrs Blake Cried*. It is therefore important to evaluate it carefully.

This is a genuinely learned book, with quotations from works in English, Danish, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, and Swedish. Research for it has been remarkably diligent, with genuine discoveries in far-flung and unfamiliar collections, such as manuscripts in the Academy of the New Church (Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania), Alnwick Castle, Grand [Masonic] Lodge Library (London), Riksarkiv (Stockholm), Stiftsbibliothek (Linköping), and Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine (London). Schuchard has enviable gifts, flair, and energy.

It is impressively wide-ranging, letting Observation with extensive View Survey Phalli from China to Peru, or at least from London to Paris, Rome, Lithuania, Saxony, West Africa, India, and Tartary. It is lavishly endnoted (345-406), though often the relationship of note to text is obscure, indeed invisible to me.

It is extraordinarily eclectic, with much from animal magnetism, the Electric Celestial Bed, Kabbala, Masons, Moravians, "Perpetual Virile Potency" (chapter 18), Tantra, the Temple of Hymen, Yoga, and Yogic Yonis (chapter 22).

Because the subject matter is unfamiliar, a good deal of background is presented. There are long desert wastes of text where Blake is not even mentioned (in my reading and according to the index), except for casual references like "as we will see"; for instance, chapters 5-9 (59-121), on "Swedenborg and Kabbalistic Science," "Erotic Dreams and Ecstatic Visions," "Sacramental Sexuality," "Judaised Yoga," and "Phallic Feet and Tantric Toes," are almost entirely Blake-free. This seems odd in a book ostensibly about Blake.

The principal thesis is that when Blake proposed to introduce a concubine into his household, with exotic and sensational sexual rituals, "Mrs Blake Cried." Schuchard even proposes a candidate as concubine: "Was Elizabeth Butts [the wife of his patron] the proposed second wife who sent Catherine Blake into floods of tears?" (261). These floods of tears created marital disharmony, episodes of which are narrated with surprising precision, supported chiefly by reading Blake's poems as if they were autobiographical. "Catherine Blake often seemed baffled and frightened by her husband's sexual demands ..." (257).

The primary problem of the book is that the biographical evidence for Catherine Blake's tears is extraordinarily slight. In *Blake Records* (2nd ed.), the only reference to Catherine in tears is in the account of Blake's deathbed given by Cunningham (1830) §48. There are no "floods of tears" at all, and she neither "weeps" nor "wept." The first reference to a concubine in the Blake household appeared more than forty years after Blake's death when Swinburne, who was not born until ten years after Blake died, wrote (1868) that Blake "propose[d] to add a second wife," which elicited "tears" from Catherine, and Ellis and Yeats (1893) took this up: "Blake wished to add a concubine to his establishment ... but gave up the project when it made Mrs Blake cry" (Schuchard 3). This is a remarkably frail foundation on which to erect such a mighty superstructure.

There are a number of real discoveries here. Schuchard establishes an important alchemical connection with the discovery of the "collection of alchemical books" of Blake's friend John Augustus Tulk in Linköping, Sweden (401n5) which make it plain that Tulk "was a practising alchemist. ... John and Nancy Flaxman collaborated with him. When Nancy Flaxman gave a talk, 'On the Summary of Alchemy,' to their Attic Chest Club, she was not just theorising" (316). Schuchard quotes (328) a Moravian hymn by Count Zinzendorf called "Te Matrem" printed in 1754:

Thou didst inspire the Martyrs tongues,  
In the last gasp to raise their songs.  
Thou dost impel the four Zoa,  
Who singing rest not night nor day.

But many of her claims are unproved or implausible. She cites the practices of the Hasidim of Vilna (Lithuania) as if relevant to the Fetter Lane Moravians and Blake (49). She thinks that Blake's fellow-apprentice and partner "James Parker ... may have come from a Moravian family, for several Parkers are listed as members of the Congregation from 1745 to 1752" (161), though Parker is probably an even more common name than Blake. She speaks of Blake's "experiments in Animal Magnetism" which "were probably connected" with his "recurrent bouts of mania, depression and paranoia" (261). "Blake ... read Edward Moor's *The Hindu Pantheon* (1810)" (305), and a copy of *A Collection of Hymns: Consist-*

ing *Chiefly of Translations from the German Hymnbook of the Moravian Brethren* (London: James Hutton, Bookseller in Fetter Lane, 1749) was "apparently owned by Catherine Armitage" (351n18), merely because she quotes the hymn. The evidence for all this is very slight.

There is proliferating "evidence" in *Why Mrs Blake Cried* of influence by association—Blake's friend Richard Cosway was a sexual free-thinker, John Augustus Tulk was an alchemist, George Cumberland met Cagliostro.

Among the welter of scholarship in *Why Mrs Blake Cried*, learned footnotes, and references to arcane archives, there are just two previously unrecorded pieces of evidence related to William Blake and his family. All the rest is context—very frequently a context in which Blake's role is invisible or incredible.

The two new pieces of evidence, complete with scholarly apparatus, are (1) Blake's mother was still active in the Moravian congregation in 1753, when the Moravian Brother West "was instructed to speak to 'Sis. Arm.' about some financial matter" (126) and (2) Blake was shown the priapic sculptures in Charles Townley's collection.

The Moravian reference is surprising for several reasons. First, it occurs two years after the death of Thomas Armitage in 1751, when, according to the Moravian records, Catherine Armitage "Became a Widow & left the Congregation."<sup>1</sup> Second, it refers to her as "Sis. Arm.", though no previous known record of her in the Moravian archives abbreviates her name thus. Third, it refers to her by the name of her first husband, though she had married James Blake in 1752.

In fact, the Moravian reference is not to Blake's mother at all. What it says is: "Bro. West will care that Sis. Orm is spoken to to know her Resolution abt. Lending Bro. Rob the money he wants."<sup>2</sup> Sister Orm was a member of the Fetter Lane Moravian Church at the time; Sister Blake (formerly Armitage) probably was not.

The other new biographical fact about William Blake is that "the Priapic collectors [Sir William] Hamilton, [Charles] Townley and [Richard Payne] Knight discreetly displayed their Indian [priapic] *objets d'art* to friends—including Blake, Cumberland, Flaxman, Hayley and [General Charles] Rainsford" (295). The evidence given for this statement is "British Museum, Townley Papers: MSS. TY 7/1802, 1803, 1985; TY 8/59" (396-97n7), with no indication of what the manuscripts represent.

This was so precise that I drafted a note incorporating the priapic information to be added to the *Blake Records* (2nd ed.) addenda. In the meanwhile I obtained reproductions of these Townley papers. They consist of:

1. Moravian Church Archives: Church Catalogue C/36/51/1, 36.

2. Moravian Archives: Helpers Conference Minutes (C/36/11/6) for 20 May 1753, generously transcribed for me by the Moravian archivist Lorraine Parsons. She tells me that Keri Davies agrees with her that the name is "Orm", not "Arm."

(1) a letter from S.[?] Stevenson to Roger Wilberforce, 8 Feb. (no year) asking if "My Friend Hayley" might see books on statues "in Townley's Collection" (TY 7/1802);

(2) a letter from W. Hayley to "Dear Sir" (?Townley), 31 May 1794, asking permission to borrow books on statues via "our Friend Stevenson" (TY 7/1803);

(3) a letter from Charles Rainsford to "— Townley Esq.", 5 July 1798, thanking him briefly "for a beautiful Print of your Sarcophagus" and chatting at length about military and naval matters (TY 7/1985); and

(4) a receipt from J. Flaxman to Mr. Townley, 3 Oct. 1785, for 18 medals (one of them representing George II and his queen) at £2.10.0. (TY 8/59).

There is no reference of any kind in these mss. to Sir William Hamilton, Richard Payne Knight, William Blake, George Cumberland, or priapic "Indian *objets d'art*." This kind of discontinuity between evidence and argument is common in the sections of *Why Mrs Blake Cried* relating to William Blake.

All serious readers of Blake will wish to read *Why Mrs Blake Cried*. If they pay close attention to the evidence, they will come away enlightened, puzzled, and frustrated.

## MINUTE PARTICULAR

### "Mr. J. Blake"

BY MORTON D. PALEY

A hitherto unrecorded reference to William Blake (although with the wrong first initial) appears in the *New Monthly Magazine* for 1 January 1815 (vol. 2 [1814]: 537). Headed "Intelligence in Literature and the Arts and Sciences," it reads: "Mr. FLAXMAN has finished a series of compositions in outline from Hesiod's Works, which will be engraved by Mr. J. Blake, and printed in folio, to correspond with the outlines from Homer, by the same eminent professor."

The volume number and year appear anomalous because the first issue for 1815 was paginated as part of the volume for 1814. *The Theogony, Works and Days, and the Days of Hesiod*, with 37 plates engraved by William Blake after Flaxman's designs, was published in 1817 by Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown. The *New Monthly's* mistake about Blake's first initial may be an indication of how obscure he was in what Gilchrist called his "years of deepening neglect."