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N O T E

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AMERICA AND ATLANTIS:  
BLAKE'S AMBIVALENT MILLENNIALISM

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Eminent Blakeans like S. Foster Damon and Northrop Frye believe the Atlantean passage in *America* (10:5-10) expresses millennial hope.<sup>1</sup> In her discussion of the same passage, Kathleen Raine recalls a reference in "A Song of Liberty" to Atlantis as Orc's birthplace, defining the allusion as "paradise."<sup>2</sup> She ignores, however, the less Atlantean and more ominous aspects of Orc's birth described in *America* (5:1-5), where Blake's association of Orc with Mars, the god of war, cannot in any way be construed as optimistic or hopeful. Moreover, her emphasis on Orc's relationship to Atlantis does not conform with Orc as the "rebel form that rent the ancient / Heavens" (9:14-15).

Finally, and most importantly, she and the other critics miss the negative elements within the Atlantean passage itself--elements revealed in the imagery and allusions of the stanza's last two lines. In *America* Atlantis is a dubious achievement because of its one-sided materiality. It is "built in the forest of God / By Ariston . . . for his stolen bride" (10:9-10). The irony of Blake's reference to God, the giver of commandments causing men and women to pine "in bonds of [natural] religion" (15:23), is compounded by the image of a forest. From "the forests of the night" in "The Tyger" to the horrible oak groves and trees of mystery in *Jerusalem*, Blake's imagery of forests is symbolic of hopelessly entangled materiality, closed to light and vision. Both Raine and Frye assert that the poet's Atlantean allusions came from his familiarity with Plato's *Critias*, where Ariston is really Neptune, who settled Atlantis.<sup>3</sup> Raine adds that in the golden world Neptune became enamored with a beautiful woman, Cleito, and stole her by isolating her with his shores (just as Orc hopes to isolate America as an Atlantis through his sexual assault). These critics also realize that Blake's use of the name Ariston came from Herodotus' history, wherein Ariston, the king of Sparta, stole a bride as Neptune did. But Frye and Raine have little explanation for Blake mixing his allusions to Herodotus and *Critias*. As Raine writes, "Why Blake has changed the name of Neptune for that of Ariston it is impossible to say . . . the relevance of the story to the myth of Atlantis passes my comprehension."<sup>4</sup>

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Substituting Ariston's name for Neptune's was, however, Blake's way of connecting Atlantean sensualism (via Orc and the hidden allusion to Neptune) with the springs of endless political struggle (via the allusion to Ariston), for in Herodotus' history Ariston's stolen bride gave birth to a son, Demaratus, and the latter was denied his kingdom by Cleomenes, his rival, because he was mistakenly thought to be the son of the stolen bride's former husband, Agetus.<sup>5</sup> Such machinations led to all the evils Blake detested, most of all to the corruption of religion by politics, since Cleomenes bribed a prophetess of the Delphic Oracle to declare that Demaratus was not Ariston's son. Orc's sexual aggression in *America* resembles Ariston's desire to possess Agetus' wife, the most beautiful woman in Sparta, that she might bear him a son because his other wives failed to do so. The king's passion was destructive, for, in gratifying it in order to keep Sparta's rule, as the story implies, in his own household, he discharged his latest wife, alienated his friend, Agetus, and began a series of conflicts and intrigues that upset Sparta for many months.<sup>6</sup> Hidden in the beautiful Atlantean symbolism of *America* is Blake's fear of revolution's potential for violence and instability. The poet's doubts are subtly reflected in Orc's questionable heritage and in the imagery and allusions of the poem's millennial passage.

1 *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1947), p. 336; *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 126. In *Blake's Apocalypse* (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 132, Harold Bloom, who like Frye is aware of much irony in *America*, says that the reference to Atlantis reveals the poet's reluctance "to assign the American Revolution, symbolically more essential to him than the French, merely to the organic world of cyclic energy's reaction to repression."

2 *Blake and Tradition* (New York: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), I, 339-40.

3 Raine, I, 424, n. 19; Frye, p. 126.

4 Raine, I, 424, n. 19. Frye, p. 440, n. 27, simply says that Blake's allusions to Herodotus and Plato suggest a reversed form of the Menelaus story, expressing "Blake's belief in the derivative nature of Greek culture."

5 *The History of Herodotus*, trans. A. D. Godley (1922; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1950), III, Bk. VI, pp. 207-35. *The History* is quite clear about the reason for Cleomenes' eventual insanity and death: ". . . it was for what he did to Demaratus that he was punished thus" (p. 235).

6 Blake alluded to Ariston only two other times in his career, once in *The Song of Los*, where the king "shudder" at the prophet's work (3:4), and another time in a fragment (141:763) of *The Four Zoas*, where man's fallen condition is described, according to John Beer (*Blake's Visionary Universe* [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969], p. 101). Ariston's fallen passion seems to be suggested by Beer (p. 102) when he equates Ariston to the "genitals" of the Eternal Man, whose faculties separated with the loss of vision.

1 An illustration by Blake to *Robinson Crusoe*. Pen and India-ink wash over pencil, about 31 x 43 cm. Reproduction by permission of the City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, England.