



## R E V I E W

Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, eds. *Queer Blake*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xii + 264 pp. £64.00/\$105.00, hardcover (also available as an e-book).

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1 THE central critical object of this essay collection is an interesting one. The authors gathered here undertake to consider how Blake's commitment to sexual liberation can be extended to include queer sexualities (defined, perhaps needless to say, not simply as homosexual but more broadly in the terms of post-structuralist theory). They are

also considering, in many cases, how a "queered" Blake intersects with the history of Blake's period and the history of Blake studies. In the introduction, for example, the volume's editors make the salient point that the critical investment in Blake's working-class political radicalism may have resulted in a bias against reading for homosexual or homosocial references in his work or his biography, because both were frequently coded as aristocratic "vices" (5-6).

- 2 The editors have brought together the work of an impressive selection of scholars. The idea of a "queer" Blake is fascinating, and the place where Blake meets the discourses of critical theory has always seemed to me especially rich terrain. There are some excellent chapters in this collection—and there are parts of many more chapters that are compelling. Reading some of the more sweeping claims in *Queer Blake*, however, I occasionally found the voice of my inner skeptic growing more and more insistent. About some of the larger claims, I was often not persuaded.
- 3 *Queer Blake* as a collection is consistently engaged in a post-structuralist approach to Blake studies. This is for me one of the least persuasive aspects of the larger argument. Not every chapter engages theoretical paradigms explicitly, but the vast majority of chapters do. Richard Sha writes on Blake and queering the idea of *jouissance*, for example, to argue that Blake's oeuvre pressurizes certain concepts in modern queer theory. Elizabeth Effinger's essay on "anal" Blake opens with an invocation of Geoffrey Hartman and ends with Bakhtin's carnival. Martin Myrone's chapter on Blake's watercolor *The Blasphemer* (1800) and Christopher Hobson's on same-sex relationships and subjectivity both reference Foucault. This is, in itself, entirely natural: it's a collection of essays, after all, on notions of "queer" identities that have largely been articulated in post-structuralist terms.
- 4 At the same time, showing that the work of Blake can be seen to support the theories of Foucault or Lacan, for example, doesn't in itself persuade me that Blake is, therefore, queer or engaged in discourses of queering. There are moments where the theoretical argument of individual chapters feels vaguely circular: Foucault draws on the tradition of western literature to formulate his theory about constructions of subjectivities; evidence in western literature of Foucault's theoretical constructions shows that his definitions of subjectivity can be naturalized. There are, of course, exceptions, but overall the theoretical paradigms weren't especially illuminating, and the working definition of "queer" in the collection remained somewhat inchoate. At times, "queer" seemed to include everything that was not the missionary position with the lights out, and a more definitive account of how (and to what interpretive ends) "queer" is being mobilized as a rubric would have been welcome.

- 5 Reading the book, I wanted to be convinced in one of two ways that a queer Blake “existed”: either by biographical evidence that Blake was queer/was interested in what we would now call queer/was plausibly influenced by people or events or contemporary ideas that we would now call queer; or by evidence from his oeuvre that, biography aside, Blake’s work engaged in ideas of queerness in sustained ways that don’t solely depend upon contemporary theoretical paradigms. Sometimes I encountered here new arguments and information—the strongest chapters of the book. Other times I didn’t find enough evidence to back up claims, especially the more sweeping and least historically grounded ones.
- 6 I was not persuaded by the suggestions, for example—passim, but especially in the introduction—that Blake may have been bisexual or experimented with gay sex personally. That may or may not have been the case. I have no horse in that race, as it were, and if that were the case it would be fascinating information. But I am a skeptical critic by nature: the suggestion that “where Blake commands [Catherine] to kneel before his brother” might be about submission and whipping or that “the twin portraits of William and Robert in ecstatic poses” might have morphed into incestuous “eroticism” or that “the adolescent, Michelangelo-adoring Blake” might have “experiment[ed] (perhaps with the other boys at Pars’s or Basire’s)” (10) would need historical or textual support for me to be persuaded that this is firm ground to build a reading upon.
- 7 The essays do function remarkably well together as groupings. Several discuss Blake’s patron William Hayley, and those essays form for me the strongest core of this book. Helen Bruder’s chapter touches upon Blake’s relationship with Ann Flaxman (an extension of her earlier work on Blake and women) and includes some provocative contemporary details on Hayley’s perceived effeminacy. Keri Davies’s chapter on (among other things) Hayley’s *Essay on Old Maids* (1785) is a wonderful point of entry into a discussion of the various spinsters whom Blake knew and of the women who lived together as couples in his circle. Davies’s discussion extends the published work of Bruder, and his fruitful observation that one of the earliest owners of Blake’s work was the spinster Rebekah Bliss, who lived for forty years with Ann Whitaker, and that her name may be relevant for reading puns on “Bliss” in Blake’s work, also builds upon earlier arguments.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Mark Crosby’s chapter on Blake’s interest in a young male actor circa 1805,

1. See Davies, “Mrs. Bliss: A Blake Collector of 1794,” *Blake in the Nineties*, ed. Steve Clark and David Worrall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 212–30, and “Rebekah Bliss: Collector of William Blake and Oriental Books,” *The Reception of Blake in the Orient*, ed. Steve Clark and Masashi Suzuki (London: Continuum, 2006) 38–62.

along with further details from contemporary accounts of Hayley (including the possibility of unconsummated marriages and a sexual interest in adolescents) and details on Blake’s Greek lessons at Felpham, is an excellent piece of work in all regards. Susan Matthews’s chapter goes on to develop a quite wonderful reading of the early *An Island in the Moon* and the figure of “Mr. Femality” that makes it another standout in the collection. (The discussion about the identity of “Mr. Femality” references prior work by Hobson, another of the volume’s contributors [209].) The cross-fertilization here is productive, and I was thoroughly persuaded by this constellation of essays that Blake’s relationship with Hayley and his relationships with the “minor” figures of his acquaintance are worth considering more fully and that they are essential to establishing a context for thinking about a “queer” Blake studies.

- 8 There are also a number of excellent chapters that consider how Blake’s work might have engaged ideas of queerness. Several focus on themes of transvestitism and transgendered figures, in particular, and they form a second constellation in the collection. Here, the claims are often thought-provoking but sometimes less convincing. David Fallon sees Blake’s engagement with gender and power and the troubling nature of “transgender figures” through the prism of Judith Butler and contemporary “dominant political vocabulary” (187). In a piece on Della Cruscan verse of the 1780s and Pope’s *Eloisa to Abelard* and *The Four Zoas*, Steve Clark rereads Blake’s Notebook and the Pickering Manuscript “in the context of the performative strategies emerging out of” Della Cruscan verse (177). In an excellent work, Bethan Stevens reads the “libidized” rhetoric of female abolitionist poetry of the 1780s and 1790s in relation to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Less persuasive to me than the part of her chapter on Ann Flaxman and Hayley or her interesting analysis of examples of sexual sadism in Blake’s verse, however, is Bruder’s rubric of “textual transvestitism” and her claim that “the throwaway remarks of some critical grandees, like Morton Paley, who comments that the ‘leopard’ is a garment ‘familiar to us from many ... Blake designs’ ... and Robert Essick, who speaks of ‘Blake’s predilection for tight-fitting (partly see-through) jumpsuits’ ..., should be taken for what they are: evidence of pervasive transvestite passions” (114). In fact, part of what gives me pause about assuming that Blake’s use of strategically placed garments signals a “pervasive transvestite passion” is Peter Otto’s essay here. Otto reads one of the graphic pencil illustrations to *The Four Zoas*, primarily through the historical lens of Swedenborg, and notes that “although parts of this sexually-explicit drawing have been erased, probably by one of its more prudish readers, most of its main features can still be discerned” (56). I wonder whether Blake’s use of transparent or tight-fitting garments at moments in his designs might have a simpler explanation.

tion—a concession to audience, perhaps, rather than a passion for cross-dressing? After all, as Davies notes in his chapter, no fewer than seven women—five of them spinners—owned copies of his illuminated works during his lifetime (226). Gilchrist also observes in his biography that, after the poet's death, Catherine Blake was faced with selling the remaining stock, and she both colored and, on occasion, finished designs on some copies of the illuminated works.<sup>2</sup>

- 9 A third subset of essays in the collection evaluates how Blake's work has impacted contemporary queer theory or contemporary queer artists. In addition to Sha's essay on how Blake complicates particular queer-theory paradigms, Jason Whittaker considers "Blake's influence on post-war artists in Britain and North America," and Tristanne Connolly's essay considers Blake in relation to contemporary poetry and lyrics. As genealogies of Blake's lasting impact, these are significant contributions.
- 10 On the whole, *Queer Blake* is a provocative and often informative collection of essays that considers the spectrum of genders and gendering in Blake's work and life and in Blake criticism. That Blake has a bawdy sense of humor, cracks dirty jokes more frequently than is often recognized, and understands sexuality as a matter of both perception and performance suggests that queering Blake has the critical potential the editors identify in their introduction. Perhaps like any collection, some pieces are stronger than others and more persuasive. Overall, the quality is high. Where *Queer Blake* is at its best, to my mind, is in those chapters where the essays are both historical and theoretical—where the writers explore both the center and the circumference of Blake's representations of disparate sexualities.

2. *Life of William Blake* (London: Macmillan, 1880) 1: 410-11.