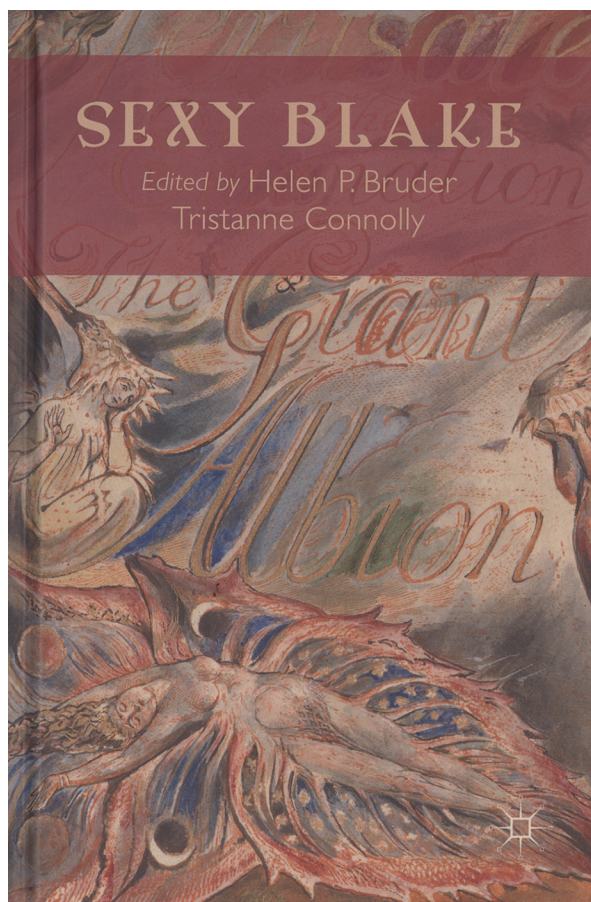


Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, eds. *Sexy Blake*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xii + 260 pp. £58.00/\$100.00, hardcover; £55.00/\$95.00, softcover; £45.99/\$79.99, e-book.

Reviewed by G. A. Rosso

G. A. Rosso (rossogal@gmail.com) has written and coedited a number of books and essays on Blake, including most recently *The Religion of Empire: Political Theology in Blake's Prophetic Symbolism* (2016), a study of Blake's three long poems, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*.

- 1 WITH this volume, Helen Bruder and Tristanne Connolly now rival the dynamic duo of Steve Clark and David Worrall in collaborative contributions to Blake studies, having previously coedited *Queer Blake* (2010) and *Blake, Gender and Culture* (2012), the latter being the first of two collections of papers from the "Sexy Blake" conference held in Oxford in 2010. While this second volume has the miscellaneous and uneven quality of most conference anthologies, several thematic groupings and strong individual essays justify the hope expressed on the back cover that it will "re-animate the lively sexual debates which once characterized Blake Studies."
- 2 The editors provide an incisive, polemical introduction to the book's treatment of sex and gender in Blake's work and its reception history. They present the volume as uninhibited by "the restraint of historicism" that marks *Blake, Gender and Culture*, though they ask, "Is it beneath formal critical discourse to notice that rigour can be quite pleasurable?" (12). The question speaks to the twofold aim of the book "to combine the scholar's and enthusiast's perspectives," an aim based on their sense that the "real Sexy Blake has always been popular Blake," the transgressive figure celebrated by "proud reprobates like Allen Ginsberg, Jim Morrison and Patti Smith." In terms of scholarship, the editors laud the work of Susan Matthews, whose *Blake, Sexuality and Bourgeois Politeness* (2011) celebrates a pro-sex Blake in the context of "reclaiming sexuality for feminism," and Christopher Z. Hobson, whose book *Blake and Homosexuality* (2000) earned him pride of place at the Sexy Blake conference and who serves as "an apt presiding spirit" over the volume (2 [quoting Matthews], 17). But they do not



hold back in calling a bevy of recent scholars to task for work in which "pertinent and related sexy questions are repeatedly dissipated or ducked" (4). The editors disclaim having a politically correct agenda, reserving this term for their polemical target, the "post-feminist ideologies" that regard the pressing questions and problems of sex and gender as largely surmounted in our time (5). They further decry the "creeping depoliticization of historicist methodologies" in recent Blake anthologies and call for a balance between historical and interpretive approaches, a balance that must retain a sense of the oddity and otherness in the sexual thinking of Blake and his contemporaries (6-8). The essays in the collection largely accomplish this important goal.

- 3 The book is organized into three main sections, with a "Coda" comprising two texts by Hobson. Part 1 presents "the darker side" of Blake and sexuality, with essays "re-interrogating" the prevalence of violence and domination in his work. Section 2 offers more positive readings of Blake's sexual images and themes, focusing on the contraries of desire and chastity and their relation to his goals of visionary redemption. Section 3 offers a heady mix of topics and methods—a fictional response to Blake's "A Poison Tree," an

essay relating Blake to the modern conceptual artist Stelarc, and two standout essays, one by Angus Whitehead and Joel Gwynne on Catherine Blake's sexual life and the other by Philippa Simpson on Blake and pornography.

- 4 Section 1 opens with Lucy Cogan's insightful paper "Subjectivity, Mutuality and Masochism: Ahania in *The Book of Ahania* and *The Four Zoas*," which works well in the leadoff spot as it serves the editors' goal of combating asexual feminist approaches to Blake. The essay presents a complex psychosexual reading of the character Ahania that allows Cogan to trace the development of Blake's sexual thought from the Urizen books to *The Four Zoas*. In *The Book of Ahania*, the titular heroine is Blake's vehicle for exposing and parodying Urizen's repression of sexuality in an effort to contain the unruly male desire of Orc/Fuzon. Her memory of a lost paradise of sexual mutuality is complicated, however, by a lack of awareness that her own "compliant femininity" is correlated with Urizen's "hyper-masculine behaviour" (26). This strategy of "rhetorical mirroring" is repeated in Night III of *The Four Zoas*, where Ahania undergoes a significant process of individuation, but only via awareness of Urizen's "fragile sense of maleness," which renders her the "masochistic other" to Urizen's sadism (30-33). Cogan praises Blake for seeing that while Ahania grasps the fundamentally "intersubjective" nature of existence, she is unable to individuate fully because of her belief that "submission is the only route to subjection" (34).
- 5 The three essays that follow also explore the sexual complexities of *The Four Zoas* and trace connections to Blake's earlier work, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* in particular. Ayako Wada offers an insightful analysis of the "love triangle" of Los, Enitharmon, and Orc in *The Four Zoas*, relating it to the bound figures in *Visions* and, more compellingly, to the Joseph-Mary-Jesus story in *Jerusalem*. Yoko Ima-Izumi echoes both Cogan's and Wada's critique of Urizen's sadism and misogyny, but unlike Wada she criticizes Los for dominating Enitharmon. Ima-Izumi contrasts Enitharmon's "sexual" birth as a "globe of blood" with Eve's birth from Adam's rib in Genesis and *Paradise Lost*, drawing intriguing parallels between Blake's "sexualized blood" imagery and similar motifs in Japanese films by Yukio Mishima and Hayao Miyazaki. The section ends with Michelle Leigh Gompf's "Ripped from Complacency: Violence and Feminist Moments in Blake," which includes a challenging reading of Oothoon's rape and self-immolation in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Gompf redirects focus from sexual issues to the more prevalent theme of violence, arguing that its corrosive effects may lead not to trauma or victimhood but to an expanded vision of the interlocking networks that constrain and oppress women. Though she underplays the experience of trauma in Oothoon's prophetic response to her rape, Gompf contends that "violence and physical transformation" function as a "political chemotherapy" (in Tracy Bealer's phrase) for the patriarchal ideology to which Oothoon initially succumbs. Such a view clearly is debatable, but readers might contrast the more traditional feminist reading by Ima-Izumi to get a sense of the volume's range, with tensions and contradictions not unlike those in Blake's own works.
- 6 Section 2, "Chastity, Redemption and Feminine Desire," contains the most thematically coherent set of essays in the volume, each dealing in some fashion with Blake's presentation of female desire and its relation to his idea of redemption. However, since chastity is a topic with extensive treatment in Blake scholarship, the lack of engagement with this rich critical history exposes a weakness in the volume, one partly but not entirely attributable to the conference-paper format. Magnus Ankarsjö's piece on Blake's Notebook poems is perhaps excusable in this respect because he deals with a group of relatively neglected lyrics, and he takes an unusual approach in arguing that Blake defends chastity (or abstinence) as a necessary contrary to affirmations of free love in these texts. Sean David Nelson's essay on lesbianism and chastity in *Jerusalem* also affirms the value of chastity, particularly by contrasting Blake and Mary Wollstonecraft on the subject, though he recognizes that Blake's treatment of "sapphism ... as a means of critiquing chastity is unique in its depth of thought" (83). Nelson praises Blake for challenging patriarchy in ways that neither Wollstonecraft nor other contemporary writers expressed, especially for opposing the view that chastity can aid women's educational advancement and enable them to render men more virtuous. However, he makes the astute point that Blake fails to appreciate Wollstonecraft's argument that chastity can enable women to avoid the "biological burden" (94) of unwanted pregnancies and the problems of neglected children. For Nelson, Wollstonecraft's pragmatic defense of chastity exposes the impracticality of Blake's political approach to sex-gender relations. He attributes this flaw to Blake's "inability to bring about utopia without recourse to the apocalyptic mode," a mode he defines as inherently ahistorical (94-95). This reductive view of Blake's apocalypse, and of the genre itself, undercuts Nelson's otherwise insightful and well-argued essay. A similarly engaged and intelligent piece by David Shakespeare on the relation of sexuality and vision in *Milton* also suffers from an insufficient understanding of Blake's treatment of apocalypse. Against the grain of the volume's explicit agenda, his essay also leans on older feminist approaches that critique the limited, subordinate role of Blake's female characters, citing Brenda Webster's comment that in Blake "the female should cease even to exist independently" (115), a view no longer held by many feminist scholars. But Shakespeare affirms the value of Blake's androgynous ideal, in which "the feminine remains subor-

dinate, but makes a tangible contribution” (113), “tangible” referring not only to the empirical world identified with the female body but also to the incarnation of vision in the human body, where the imaginative and empirical aspects of vision converge and interact. He is most insightful in discussing Ololon as the unique expression of this convergence; she is able to “see” the final confrontation between Milton and Satan because she contains both male and female elements. If he neglects the momentous identification of Ololon with Jesus, especially as she/they embody his apocalyptic return on the clouds of the Son of Man—here given inclusive gender characteristics—Shakespeare articulates succinctly Ololon’s merger of transcendent and immanent or immediate vision in *Milton*.

7 Unlike the more critical treatments by Nelson and Shakespeare, the succeeding essays by Susanne Sklar and Kathryn Sullivan Kruger offer positive readings of Blake’s feminine characters, though they tend to underestimate tensions and ambiguities in Blake’s sexual attitudes. Building on recent studies of Blake’s affinity with the “erotic spirituality” of Swedenborgian and Moravian thought, Sklar opposes both non-sexual readings and Steven Goldsmith’s “pornographic” interpretation of Blake’s *Last Judgment* (Petworth House, 1808). With Goldsmith, she sees the shape of a vulva in the central space of the design: the enthroned Christ above and the Babylon Harlot below are “positioned at two ends of a vulva” (125, quoting Goldsmith). But she reads the image as redemptive rather than sexist, arguing that if viewers “befriend” the harlot and reject the accusatory impulse, “judgement need not entail condemnation” (125). This reading is based on Sklar’s insight that the harlot serves as “a fulcrum” in the design, for the figures on her left side move downward while those on her right ascend, spiritually transformed (131). This befriending approach can be pushed too far, as when Sklar claims that the angel on the harlot’s right is “setting her free” and “about to caress her,” against Blake’s own comment that she is “siezed & bound” (134). Also questionable is Sklar’s comparison of the harlot with the figure of Vala/Rahab in *Jerusalem*, for she asserts that both are redeemed because Blake’s doctrine of forgiveness is available to all “and ultimately irresistible” (131). This assertion, however, underplays Vala’s accountability for much of the suffering and violence (especially sexual violence) in *Jerusalem*, and it too easily assumes that all is harmonized in the apocalyptic finale—despite Enitharmon’s refusal to reconcile with Los in their final exchange, showing that she remains under Vala/Rahab’s power. Similarly problematic is Kruger’s otherwise stimulating essay “Blake’s Bowers of Bliss: The *Gitagovinda*, *The Four Zoas*, and Two Illustrations for *L’Allegro*,” which situates Blake’s erotic spirituality within the context of Indian art revealed by William Jones’s *Asiatic Researches* (established 1788) and Edward Moor’s *Hindu*

Pantheon (1810). Kruger insightfully compares the central myth in *The Four Zoas* with Jones’s translation of the *Gitagovinda*, which narrates the separation and reunion of the soul with God, figuring unity in the act of sexual love and duality as jealousy and division (143–44). She also finds analogues in Indian statuary to Blake’s *L’Allegro* illustrations, comparing *Mirth* and *A Sunshine Holiday* with the “sensuously curved” female forms associated with prosperity and fertility. This comparison is questionable, however, insofar as it ignores Blake’s vehement critique of fertility religion in his long poems, a critique related to the antinomian political theology described in David Weir’s *Brahma in the West* (2003), a text that Kruger’s analysis would benefit from engaging.

8 The final section is the least thematically coherent of the volume, gathered under the loose rubric “Conceptual Sex, Conceptual Art.” The closest essays in theme are “The Sexual Life of Catherine B.” by Whitehead and Gwynne and “Blake and Porn” by Simpson, former Blake curator at Tate Britain. Both essays make signal contributions to the field and present clearly organized, well-written arguments. Whitehead and Gwynne build on the recent upsurge of biographical and fictional interest in Catherine Blake, showing that she was a “lifelong, proactive partner and collaborator” in Blake’s life and art (194). They draw on “extant historical evidence” to assess Catherine “as both desired object and desiring subject,” arguing that her sexuality may have been “marginalized in the past due to a resistance among Blake scholars in locating Catherine’s possible complicity in her husband’s transgressive, and often violent, sexual imagination” (196). Along with Simpson, Whitehead and Gwynne develop recent “sex-positive” or “third-wave” feminist arguments that assert the potential value of pornography, sadomasochism, and other non-conventional practices for women’s sexual agency and expression. Focusing on pornographic images in Blake’s art, Simpson acknowledges that he struggles with the power of violence both to liberate and to oppress; but, she argues, he challenges the standard views of pornography as “inherently violent” and as “produced with a fixed male spectator in mind” (213). In the libidinous drawing on page 41 of *The Four Zoas*, which depicts a truncated torso and penis being stimulated by a supine woman with semen dropping on her face, Simpson does not find degradation but female agency and pleasure alongside “sexy amputation” (214–15). In such scenes, she concludes, we see the political potential of Blake’s porn, which does not derive from a Sade-like desire to shock and assault the viewer but from “a negation of conventional viewing structures, a refusal to conform to accepted visual frameworks” (216). In tandem, these two essays most fully achieve the volume’s aim to broaden debate beyond previous approaches to Blakean sexuality.

- 9 The final essay, by Chris Hobson, “Normalizing Perversity: Blake and Homosexuality in 2013,” matches the quality of these two essays but has a different purpose, which is to assess the state of queer studies in Blake scholarship since the appearance of his *Blake and Homosexuality* in 2000. Much has been accomplished: Connolly’s *William Blake and the Body* (2002), essays in Bruder’s anthology *Women Reading William Blake* (2007), Richard Sha’s *Perverse Romanticism* (2009), Matthews’s *Blake, Sexuality and Bourgeois Politeness* (2011), and essays in *Queer Blake* (2010) and *Blake, Gender and Culture* (2012). All of these texts deal with the transgressive nature of Blake’s sexual vision. Despite this acceptance, Hobson argues that work remains to be done to move beyond the heteronormal assumptions of most Blake scholars, who ignore or downplay “same-sex images and scenes in Blake.” He thus calls on those who see a queer Blake “to establish the range of questions associated with homosexuality in Blake as inescapable in critical discussion” (224). Hobson suggests two ways to further this aim: “by incorporating now readily available archival material on eighteenth century homosexual life” into readings of Blake and by dealing openly with “Blake’s presentation of the multiform perverseness of human sexuality” (221). Both strategies can help “normalize perversity” as a “broadly human category” (231, 233), a view based on the mutualistic ethic that Blake’s later work espouses. Hobson is aware that Blake expresses homophobic and sexist views but counters that such contradictions do not negate the value of his positive depictions and explorations of same-sex experience. Emphasizing the prominence of forgiveness and the collective body of Jesus in Blake’s mature vision, Hobson concludes: “We are all in this boat together” (229).
- 10 This inclusive perspective is evident throughout the volume, though several limitations should be noted. While the editors and several authors say that earlier feminist critiques lack nuance or fail to grasp Blake’s complexity, these critiques might be more dialectically engaged. Also, the charge that recent scholarly works avoid or neglect sexual issues in Blake might be reconsidered in light of the inclusive agenda articulated by the Divine Body: “For whoever is not against you is for you.” A related and more important issue is the contextual narrowness of the many essays here that focus exclusively on sexual issues, often at the expense of relevant political, theological, and artistic themes. And especially in respect to Blake’s long poems, many essays do not adequately relate their specific interests to the larger narrative or structural designs of the poems or images in which they engage particulars. Nonetheless, the book remains essential reading for those interested in Blake’s representations of women and gender in his poetry and art. It shows in a definitive way that Blake’s value for sexual theory and practice both in his day and ours depends ultimately on the intellect and outlook that readers bring to his work.