

Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, eds., *Sexy Blake*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 260. £58 (hb). £45.99 (ebook). ISBN 9781137332837.

Bruder and Connolly (along with Steve Clark and Jason Whittaker) have made a major contribution to Blake studies with a succession of edited volumes that expand the boundaries of Blake scholarship. Precursor volumes to this collection are *Women Reading William Blake* (2006) and *Queer Blake* (2010), building on Bruder's *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* (1997) and Connolly's *William Blake and the Body* (2002). *Sexy Blake* is one of two progeny of the 2010 Oxford conference of the same name. Whereas *Blake, Gender and Culture* (Pickering and Chatto 2012) offers richly historicized essays, this volume provides an argumentative and diverse set of meditations on the darker sides of Blakean sex. As Bruder and Connolly make clear, the word 'sexy' is a coinage of the end of the nineteenth century. But this anachronism allows the reader to enter just those territories of dirty, confusing, bodily sexual attraction that readers and critics (with the exception of W.J.T. Mitchell's 1982 'Dangerous Blake') have mostly fought shy of.

The presiding genius of this volume is Christopher Hobson, whose *Blake and Homosexuality* (2002) began the task he outlines in his contribution to this volume, of 'overcoming the heteronormativity that remains characteristic of Blake studies' (221). Here Hobson looks back in commemoration of John Newball Hepburn and Thomas White, the 'Vere Street monsters' executed for sodomy in 1810 (235-237), to remind us that sexual ideology is a matter of life and death and sets future scholars the task of drawing on the 'now readily available archival material on eighteenth century homosexual life' (221). Thus Sean David Nelson's study of 'Sapphism and Chastity in Blake's *Jerusalem*' (83-97) can see the ways in which Blake challenges the 'mores of the emerging middle-class' (92) by making explicit Wollstonecraft's hints at the sexual nature of female friendship in *Mary*. The volume is equally committed to challenging assumptions about the representation of female sexuality including Susan Fox's 1977 claim that 'Females presented positively are passive [...] Active females are pernicious'. Susanne Sklar illuminates the spiritual role of vaginal imagery in Blake's *Last Judgement*' (125-140) in a convincing reading that notes that the figures who fly up to heaven are 'predominantly women and children' (131).

Elsewhere this model can assume a story of progress – one that is admittedly explicit in Blake's poetry: 'Children of the future age,/ Reading this indignant page,/ Know that in a former time/ Love, sweet love, was thought a crime'. Thus Michelle Leigh Gompf's study of 'Violence and Feminist Moments in Blake' (65-80) argues for violence in Blake's poetry as "radical chemotherapy" (80, quoting Bealer): Blake is implicitly read via an American culture of medicalized intervention. Paige Morgan sets up a comparison between Blake's sense of the limits of the body and the performance artist Stelarc whose theatrics of pain (suspending his own body via metal hooks) 'produces objects and performances that echo Blakean principles in a world where technology has vastly expanded the limits of potentiality' (178). Typically modern categories seep into David Shakespeare's 'Sexual Vision and Obscurity in Blake's Milton' (113-124) where Ololon's 'transgendered qualities' enable 'visionary perception [...] possible through her various guises' (121). In 'Helyos and Ceylen [A Poison Tree]', Tommy Maybery (161-176) (ironically) translates Blake into a series of contemporary clichés.

Hobson enjoins critics to come 'to grips with Blake's presentation of the multiform perverseness of human sexuality' (221). It is the pencil marginalia of the *Four Zoas* manuscript rather than the beautifully androgynous bodies of the illuminated books that take central stage. Opening a section on 'Violence and Domination', Lucy Cogan's 'Subjectivity, Mutuality and Masochism' (21-34) can recognize that the *Book of Ahania* offers a vision of

maternal bliss but is more interested in the exploration of female masochism. Ayako Wada (35-46) traces Blake's presentation of adulterous birth in *The Four Zoas* within the promising context of Britain's assertion of moral superiority over France in wartime. Yoko Ima-Izumi's 'Blood in Blake's Poetry of Gender Struggle' (47-63) morphs into a tantalizing examination of the role of sexualized blood in Japanese culture inflected by an engagement with Romanticism.

For some contributors it is Blake the man, as well as the work, that is 'sexy' (or not). Magnus Ankarsjö's account of the Notebook verses (99-112) leads him to lament: 'one cannot help but wish for a more extensive knowledge of Blake's personal life at this time' (105). Angus Whitehead and Joel Gwynne's 'The Sexual Life of Catherine B' (193-210) traces the sexual fantasies of the female biographer (with a title allusion to Catherine Millet's 2003 *The Sexual Life of Catherine M*, an explicit account of the libertine adventures of a female academic). Yet what emerges, of course, is the critic's fantasy: 'How might an albeit strong-willed Catherine's recorded awe, obedience, and reverence of "Mr Blake" alongside her pity for him, or indeed Blake's repeated fascination with torture and rape, have shaped the couple's relations?' (208). How indeed, if Blake *was* fascinated with torture and rape. As Kipling realised in his account of the Janeites, a search for the author tells us a lot about the critical present. Philippa Simpson's stunning 'Blake and Porn' (211-220) foregrounds this assumption and makes it part of a complex argument about how a limiting definition of 'art' has constrained our ability to see the closeness of Blake to pornography. In Simpson's essay – as in the best of these essays – the critical freedom offered by anachronism allows the present to talk to the past and thus to see beyond the familiar boundaries of Blakean scholarship to uncover a new Blake.

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