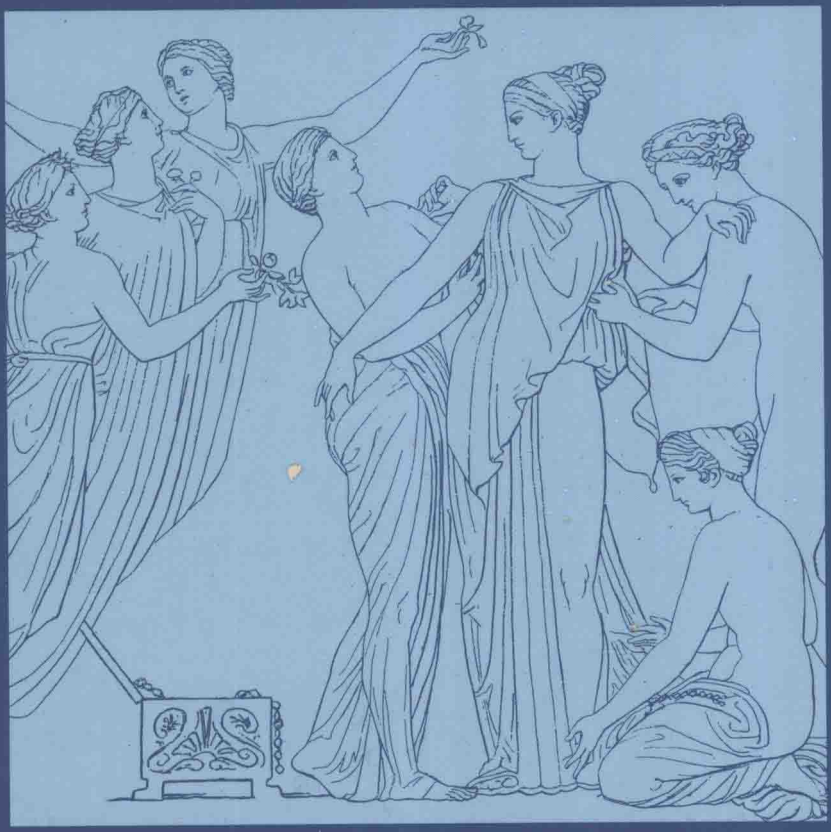
Featuring contributions from Germaine Greer and Tracy Chevalier

*Edited by* Helen P. Bruder



# WOMEN READING WILLIAM BLAKE

# Women Reading William Blake

Edited by

Helen P. Bruder

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# List of Abbreviations

Unless otherwise noted, references to the works of Blake come from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, newly revised edition (Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1988). References in form (E) refer to page numbers in that volume.

*FZ* *The Four Zoas*
*M* *Milton a Poem in 2 Books*
*J* *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion*

Much of Blake's visual art can be viewed, free of charge, at the Blake Archive website: www.blakearchive.org. References to works consulted there are referenced (BA), where relevant followed by plate/line reference.

*BQ* *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*

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**Germaine Greer**, renowned academic, writer, broadcaster. Professor Greer's many scintillating publications include *The Female Eunuch* (1970), *The Obstacle Race* (1979), *Slip-shod Sibyls* (1995), *The Whole Woman* (1999) and *The Boy* (2003).



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**Julia M. Wright**, Canada Research Chair in European Studies, Dalhousie University, is the author or editor of several volumes, including *Ireland, India and Nationalism in Nineteenth-century Literature* (forthcoming).

# Introductory Note: 'look over the events of your own life . . .' (E 617)

*Helen P. Bruder*

It seems to me that readers are entitled to discover from an Introduction not only what a book is about but also why it was produced. This note, briefly, answers that question. I mused over which design to use for this collection's cover in the dark peace of Duke Humfrey's Library in Oxford. Though my family have lived in the city for years we're definitely town not gown, so when, in 1987, I scraped into Oxford Poly's English course I hardly knew such spiritual interiors existed. I'd not dreamt I'd inhabit them and I had never heard of William Blake. Finding him and beginning those studies was a miraculous stroke of good fortune, and this abounded as our liaison unfurled. I was blessed with a pair of wonderful Blake teachers, Paul O'Flinn and Colin Pedley, who shared their different passions for his art and together gave me a love of history and historical detail. The times themselves were also auspicious. UK campus life in the 1980s was marked by truculence and rebelliousness; which nursed my girlish fantasy that feminism was academically essential and universally desired. More modestly, timing was lucky in other ways too. The polytechnic began to offer higher degrees and I was among the first batch of eager postgraduate students. Better still, I was fortunate enough to receive a British Academy grant to fund my research. I was actually given money to sit and think. Imagine that. I am unashamed to say that studying Blake utterly changed my life, and though I have no wish to generalise about how *Women* are or should be *Reading William Blake* it's certainly true that acknowledging, explicitly, the unusually passionate response he tends to provoke is a striking feature of this volume (indeed his influence can be emotionally incendiary – hence the need for one contributor to appear anonymously).

The joyful recognition that I felt on reading Blake was, sadly, not often experienced during the hours I spent yawning over Blake criticism – much of which I found alienating and tiresome. The work itself was not a problem. I knew the value of graft and sometimes even invented feats for myself – such as copying out his epics, in full, by hand, in a physical attempt to absorb something of their meaning. Indeed in twenty years of study I've never minded labouring over Blake, because I've always felt that his works

are hard because what he is trying to say is hard, and moreover that he communicates as lucidly as the content's complexity (especially when sexual) will allow. This was not the case – I suspected – with many of his esteemed critics, who did not seem to *want* to be understood, at least not by outsiders. It wasn't just their assumptions of prior knowledge. Having received almost no literary education in the 'too dim for "O" levels' class of a segregated comprehensive (a half-hour film about Macbeth was the sum total of our schooling in Shakespeare, for instance) I did find the more densely allusive studies rather intimidating. But on the other hand my upbringing among Bible-believing Christians meant that (for good and ill) Blake's most beloved sourcebook was almost as deep in my blood as in his. So the problem wasn't just blithe, 'educated', assumptions – offputting as they could be. It was something less precise, but more pernicious. A pervasive sense that Blake's art was tricky and special stuff, suitable only for a special (clearly elite) audience. This idea, that Blake rightly belongs to a select coterie of distinguished initiates, has a long lineage (see Chapter 5) but it struck me then (as now) as complete anathema. Experience, Blake's touchstone, convinced. After all, I wasn't part of a cultured clique, yet I'd been able to 'get' something of what he was saying – and what's more, I'd been tempted to turn interpreter precisely because of Blake's brazen egalitarianism. His inclusive 'every's flew off the page: 'every human bosom . . . soul . . . perfection . . . heart' (E 338, 350, 147, 114), 'every species . . . beast . . . herb . . . flower . . . plant' (E 392, 14, 189, 495, 319), 'Every scatterd Atom . . . every thing that breathes . . . every Generated Body . . . Every Divine Member' (E 121, 375, 123, 153), 'every Nation of the Earth . . . every Earth in the wide universe' (E 159, 403), 'Every child . . . female . . . man' (E 7, 220, 13), 'every face . . . voice . . . tongue' (E 26, 27, 487), 'every thing that lives is holy!' (E 51). Wow! My feeling then (which teaching deepened) was that what Blake creates – with his cast of weirdly-named characters, his topsy-turvy cosmic geography, his logic defying syntax (and so on and so on and so on) – is a democracy of confusion. *Every*one is baffled, at the beginning, and beyond, and it's heartening to note that Blake himself didn't shilly-shally over who'd 'crack' him: 'I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals . . . can Elucidate My Visions' (Letter to Trusler, E 703). His would-be patron the 'Revd Dr' Trusler felt himself uniquely qualified to pronounce, but Blake would have none of it. Why? Because, 'There is a vast Majority on the side of Imagination' (E 703). I still remember the thrill I felt when Paul showed us these indignantly democratic letters (16/23 August 1799 E 701–3). Equally memorable is the birth of my belief that the least Blake's expositors should do is to write in ways accessible to that 'vast Majority'. Usually, of course, we don't, and it's one of *Women Reading William Blake*'s two structuring aims to make amends. Blake's 250th birthday (2007) will provoke much curiosity, and it's

a dear wish that the intrigued will find writing here which is not only illuminating but (rarer still) enjoyable. Various aspects of the book's composition engender optimism. All the articles are concise, which enables the inclusion of a uniquely wide range of voices. Many of the writers come from outside Blake studies, and the cast is international and spans generations. There's also little pretence of academic anonymity (see especially chapters 7, 8, 11, 21, 22, 26–30). The collection is peppered, too, with new insights into Blake's biography (especially chapters 1, 2, 5, 10, 15, 23, 26) and visual art (especially chapters 9, 10, 12, 17, 18). We're also blessed with fascinating contributions from two authors who command the interest of millions, Tracy Chevalier and Germaine Greer. So, at the very least, *not* just another exclusive academic compendium.

The other miraculously sustaining context for my study of Blake took shape in the early 1990s, when I found myself working with a bevy of female colleagues. We were different ages, with very different specialisms, interests and dispositions but shared an enthusiastic commitment to feminism and feminist research. It was a uniquely sustaining environment in which to study and write (not to mention relax and be gay) and, perhaps even more incredibly, most of our institutionally secure male colleagues had sufficient integrity and dispassion to realise that our agendas were not quirky fads but, rather, evidence of a paradigm shift too profound (or as we then thought, inexorable) to be ignored. Coming from that mileu it was inevitable that I would find the elitism, gender bias and sometimes outright sexism endemic to Blake studies very, very alarming. Later in the 1990s I wrote an angry book about the interpretative consequences of such conservative attitudes (1997) and though much had – thankfully – changed when I returned to review the rich vein of gender studies now in print (2006)[1] it remains sadly the case that when collections, surveys and guides – which aim to chart the critical terrain and tell us who Blake was and where Blake studies are going – are published women's judgements are universally underrepresented. Over the last twenty years around a dozen collected volumes have appeared. Women scarcely make up a quarter of the writers included – often less than 20 per cent – with the only book approaching sexual equity being the single work which has a woman amongst its editors.[2] In the 1980s there were, perhaps, some practical reasons for this imbalance but to find it replicated in overviews published this century is shocking: from that undergraduate staple *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* (2003), which finds space for only three women among its 14 contributors and none for chapters on queer or gender scholarship, to the loftier reaches aimed at by a *Studies in Romanticism* twentieth anniversary Blake special (2002), which felt it achieved a 'manifesto-like' critical quality by (again) including only the thoughts of male seers (it remains a moot point whether the admission of a young woman, to elicit their

prophetic insights, represents much progress).[3] Obviously, this book's other governing aim is to overturn such prejudices. It isn't a feminist collection, in the sense of there being a prescribed political agenda, and we all know (often from bitter experience) that the equation female = feminist does not add up. Further, it's possible that some contributors would reject the label, though others – famously – would not. What clearly *is* a feminist gesture is my bringing together of generations of female writers on Blake, with the aim of restoring and celebrating an important but neglected critical heritage. It has been a privilege to work with the women whose writings provoked and inspired me, and this collection's other unequivocally feminist intention is to fiercely rebut the common caricature which suggests that female scholars' regard for and gravititation toward gender issues necessarily involves a narrowing of intellectual focus and a reduction of academic merit. This richly diverse compendium shows quite the reverse, and though it is too early to chart trends (and I'd frankly prefer others to discern for themselves) quickly tracing some significant contours is a useful way to conclude. There is a keen interest in Blake's female literary contemporaries, in that other Romanticism (chapters 1, 4, 14, 15, 30). There's also a fascination with exploring spiritual traditions – 'Hindoo' (13), Norse (20), Moravian (23), Kabbalistic (24) – as well as in looking again at Christian iconography (12). The collection's historical enthusiasm is deepened by other, varied, contextualising work: informed by the Napleonic wars writers re-view patriotism (25) and the sea (17). Neglected women workers are also brought into focus (16). It is interesting too to see how many women have found that Blake inspires their own creativity. It is wonderful to hear the thoughts of internationally acclaimed writers – fictional (2) and poetic (21) – and of other creators too (7, 8, 13, 27, 28). Of course that knottiest of questions is addressed, from many perspectives, as well: for Blake's sexual politics see especially chapters 3, 8, 16, 22, 26, 28, 29. There's also an attempt to get beyond the usual North American/UK dominance, with contributions which look at European (6), Japanese (11) and South African (7) contexts for Blake and Blake studies. And no book is complete without a fresh look at his popular *Songs* (19).

These are some of the shapes I see, and it seems safe to risk a bald assertion too – namely that it's fascinating how different Blake (like all men) looks in the company of women – critical and contemporary. Many of the cherished myths about him carry a whiff of testosterone – hot radical, flinty outsider, strong poet, penetrating visionary – and while there's some truth here, we might remember that he was also a man who worked at home, with his wife, who exhibited his works in very modest, family settings and who – while producing the luminously great art we love – was mindful that, 'the light is better in our kitchen'.[4] What might be termed the domestic Blake – interested in 'every pot & vessel & garment' (E 157) – hasn't been beaten into the mix much of late, and this collection reminds us why he

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should be. I'll venture another assertion too. These writings show, unambiguously, that the scale of Blake's worries about sexual identity, creativity, power, fantasy, violence, relationships, spirituality (and on and on) dictates that these subjects cannot be shut in a 'gender studies box'. They are inescapable and inflect every significant aspect of his work. They are, in fact, the grit in Blake's oyster, and though it's debatable whether a pearl appears, their abrasive dominance is not. Any collection which fails to acknowledge this fails its subject, miserably.

I would, though, hate to conclude on a negative note, and my opening quotation explains why: 'look over the events of your own life & if you do not find that you have both done . . . miracles & lived by such you do not see as I do' (E 617). More than anything it's an intimation of the miraculous which Blake brought alive for me, and this book only exists because of miracles, of so many kinds.

Most particularly, miracles of generosity from all the contributors – with especial thanks to Sibylle Erle and Jean Freed for stimulating conversation, Irene Tayler for appraising my barbaric (or not!) prose, Janet Warner and Kathryn Kruger for sharing their creative work, Susan Wolfson for chasing details, and to many others as well for their kindness during my recent illness. Above all I want to thank Tristanne Connolly, who ensured this book's safe delivery. A heroic indexer, saintly IT consultant, sage scholar, tireless enthusiast and – despite all the work – a barrel of laughs. Thank you, truly. Thanks, too, to Barbara Slater, Paula Kennedy and Helen Craine at Palgrave, who smoothed our path considerably. My gratitude also to the generous collector Susanne Sklar.

My friends, as ever, pitched in wonderfully. Sara Mattingley was a word processing star. Siân Gaines and Paula Booth (so) generously took care of much essential business. Ann Ross encouraged me throughout, and Jennie Cockram provided an invaluable delivery service! Cheers to you all.

I also want to thank the healers who got me back on my feet again, and thinking. Appreciation – beyond words, really – to Jo Hanstead, Lin Paris, Kate O'Donovan of course ('Unseen descending, weigh my light wings' (E 5), I won't forget) – and an ocean of gratitude to Seka Nikolic.

My family, too, crafted their own brand of miracles, 'the bricks, well wrought affections . . . And well contrived words, firm fixing, never forgotten' (E 155).

## Notes

1. *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); *Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies*, ed. Nicholas M. Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 132–66.

2. *Blake, Politics, History*, ed. Jackie Di Salvo et al. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).
3. *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *Studies in Romanticism* 41, 2 (Summer 2002), 143–348, xxi. Also *Palgrave Advances*, two out of 13 contributors.
4. Letter to Henry Banes, 25/11/1825, in *BQ* 39, 1 (Summer 2005) cover.

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# 1

# 'The Bread of sweet Thought & the Wine of Delight': Gender, Aesthetics and Blake's 'dear Friend Mrs Anna Flaxman' (E 709)

*Helen P. Bruder*

Just before the Blakes left London, on their only significant trip together, they took the unusual step of collaboratively producing a letter to Ann Flaxman. Catherine provided the prose,[1] William the verse (a flavour of which is given above). It's a noteworthy epistle, not least because Catherine emerges from it as an image-maker in her own right – conjuring a picture of London as 'the terrible desart' (sic) and encapsulating their journey as an airy 'migration the Swallows call us fleeting past our window' (E 708). It is unique, too, because it contains Catherine's only textual account of a companionable moment from the Blakes' long life together, 'O how we delight in talking of the pleasure we shall have in preparing you a summer bower' (E 708). William Blake happily discussing holiday laundry with his wife: it's not an image of the artist we're used to considering these days, but it will be my argument that just as Catherine's homely vignette revealed for Ann the currently neglected domestic Blake, so the artistic gems William produced for Ann's enjoyment reveal the ease he felt with aesthetic forms which (like bedmaking) have habitually been gendered feminine. Obviously the clearest evidence for this potentially far-reaching argument are those 116 exquisite watercolour 'Drawings' (Spring.1) – designed, in the words of their original recipient, to illuminate the poems of Thomas Gray, which despite their sublime themes are extraordinarily beautiful – and the verses for Ann with which Blake enwrapped them.[2]

These designs are arguably the most delightful of all Blake's works and those unfamiliar with his symbols, preoccupations and contexts can readily enjoy them. Initially it seemed that critics too might be enthusiastic: when the first widely available facsimile appeared Geoffrey Keynes (1971) hailed it as the Blake Trust's 'most important publication' (viii). The designs were proudly shown to the public in both the UK (Tate) and USA (Yale). Those who subsequently devoted themselves to consolidating Blake's canonical and institutional status, however, had little time for his *Gray* and it's my



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