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978-0-521-51357-9 - Blake, Sexuality and Bourgeois Politeness

Susan Matthews

Excerpt

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The aim of this book is to trace Blake's relationship to a pro-sex culture that seemed under threat at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Although I expect 'Blake and sexuality' to seem a familiar topic, 'Blake and bourgeois politeness' may appear to some readers to be either counter-intuitive or plain misguided. If this is so, it is the result of decades of powerful and convincing scholarship that have established both the extent to which Blake draws on antinomian, enthusiastic and other subcultural movements and the ways in which these cultures are fascinated by sexual freedom.

Yet while Blake has stood for a prophet of sexual freedom in popular culture in the latter part of the twentieth century (and for some before this), his verbal and (to a lesser extent) visual representations of both women and sexuality have long been seen as characterised by ambiguity at best, ambivalence, contradiction and even misogyny at worst. In the wake of a decade of feminist critique, the only consensus that Robert Essick could report was that 'Blake was deeply ambivalent about female sexuality'. Not only did 'attitudes that we now tend to label feminist and anti-feminist jostle together disconcertingly in his writings' but in the later work, Essick concluded, 'the evidence for misogyny increases'.<sup>1</sup> Blake is typically seen not only as turning against women but as moving towards a mythic system in which 'sexuality' must ultimately be discarded. Since Blake's invented land of 'Beulah', the 'married land' of Isaiah 52, is a place where the sexes are separate, S. Foster Damon assumed that this land was also the place of 'sexual pleasure'.<sup>2</sup> Eternity, where 'Humanity is far above sexual organization' (E236), is a place which transcends sex. Blake's underlying model is easily read as a version of epic myth in which a male world of energetic conflict, of 'War & Hunting' (E135), is ultimately superior to a feminine pastoral idyll that offers the hero not only a vacation but also the dangerous distraction of a slide into sensual pleasure (a version of the familiar story of Dido and Aeneas). 'In Eternity they

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neither marry nor are given in marriage' (E176), Albion tells Vala in *Jerusalem*, and this is no surprise to readers familiar with an idea of an asexual Christian heaven. After all, this line, which Wollstonecraft also echoes, comes from the New Testament: in Matthew we are told 'For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.' Blake's eternity, we assume, is a place without sex, a place to which we must all (with whatever regrets) aspire as we give up the pleasures of the body.

Such a reading is a perfectly understandable extrapolation of the evidence. Blake's poem *Milton*, inspired and dictated by the 'Daughters of Beulah', records

the journey of immortal Milton thro' your Realms  
Of terror & mild moony lustre, in soft sexual delusions  
Of varied beauty, to delight the wanderer and repose  
His burning thirst & freezing hunger! (E96)

Here is Milton the epic hero, travelling through a delusive sexual land. In the land of Beulah, 'the Three Classes of Men take their Sexual texture Woven/ The Sexual is Threefold: the Human is Fourfold' (E97). In the crucial confrontation at the end of the poem, Milton sternly warns the virgin Ololon of a fundamental change. In order that 'the Children of Jerusalem may be saved from slavery' she/they/the nation/the world must cast off 'the Sexual Garments, the Abomination of Desolation/ Hiding the Human lineaments as with an Ark & Curtains' (E142). The stark choice is between the 'sexual' and the 'human', a choice that terrifies Ololon, who admits that 'Altho' our Human Power can sustain the severe contentions/ Of Friendship, our Sexual cannot' (E143). The apocalyptic change that ends the poem follows swiftly as the lark mounts and the smell of the wild thyme rises from Wimbledon's 'green & impurpled Hills' (E143). It is not coincidental that my short paragraph not only quotes every one of the five uses of the word 'sexual' in *Milton* but that it also constructs a brief narrative which leads the reader through one of Blake's most complex and rich poems.

If the rejection of the 'sexual' is the key to the transformation that Blake's prophecy urgently imagines, the difficulty of aligning Milton's clarion call with Oothoon's cry 'Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!' (E50) is a central problem for the reader of Blake's work, a problem that can be solved through chronology (Blake changes, Blake gets older) or the favourite devices of the academic critic, ambiguity (for the new critic), ambivalence (for those with psychoanalytic

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preferences) or their more sophisticated children (aporia, multiplying meanings, complexity) to produce a playful, troubled or conflicted Blake. The production of such complexity is the professional expertise of the critic. My study will propose that such devices are themselves the tools of Beulah, the intellectual means to quiet conflict, to reduce art to a safe form of play. The complexity of Blake's work lies, I suggest, instead in the fierceness of its argument and the way it engages with hostile contexts. I aim to show that Blake's work presents a surprisingly consistent and coherent view of what we call sexuality, the 'quality of being sexual or possessing sex', a meaning that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) shows as being used for the first time in 1797 in a reference to the Linnaean system and the 'sexuality of plants'.

The key to my argument lies in the newness of the word 'sexuality' in Blake's time. This word occurs only once in Blake's writing and the fact that he uses the word in *Milton* is probably a product of his contact with circles for whom Erasmus Darwin and Cowper (one of the first to use the word 'sexuality') were the key writers of the period. In Blake's surviving writing, the word 'sexual' appears exclusively in *Milton*, *Jerusalem* and 'For The Sexes/ THE GATES OF PARADISE', a late reissue of the 1793 emblem book originally called 'For Children'. The change of title, according to Erdman, is certainly later than 1806.<sup>3</sup> It seems safe to conclude, therefore, that 'sexes', 'sexual' and 'sexuality' are words that Blake uses only after the three years from 1800 to 1803 he spent in Felpham, the small village in Sussex where he lived close to, and worked with, the popular poet William Hayley, a friend both of Erasmus Darwin and William Cowper. This period was the only one in which Blake lived outside London and it brought him into close and sustained contact with a significantly different culture from that which he is likely to have known in London.

At its appearance at the end of the eighteenth century, the word 'sexuality' is still strongly marked by an older meaning of 'sex' (closer to our modern sense of gender) to mean 'either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and many other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions', a sense which the OED dates from Wycliff and which continues to the present day. In the eighteenth century the 'sex' is also the female sex. The word 'sex' refers to a category (closer but not identical to our understanding of gender) rather than to bodily 'acts'. The first use of the word 'sex' to refer to 'Physical contact between individuals involving sexual stimulation; sexual activity or behaviour, spec. sexual intercourse, copulation' is listed by the

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current OED in 1900. Typical of the shift in the meaning of 'sex' and cognate words is the difficulty that modern readers experience in understanding the title of Polwhele's 1798 poem, *The Unsex'd Females*. Attacking Wollstonecraft in the wake of the scandal caused by Godwin's memoir, Polwhele is of course not complaining that Wollstonecraft was insufficiently sexy, or even (in anticipation of Cora Kaplan's influential argument) that her writing produced a desexualised version of femininity. For Polwhele, to be 'Unsex'd' is for a woman (specifically) to fail to conform to the requirements of 'the sex', so to behave like a man and thus to demonstrate the kind of specifically masculine sexual drive that is inappropriate to a women. Polwhele's poem is the product of a view of gender which assumes that women *should be* unsexual (a view on its way in at the end of the eighteenth century) but uses 'sex'd' in a way that would be more familiar in the earlier period to describe a gendered category. The sharpest discussion of this issue is Katherine Binhammer's 2002 essay, 'Thinking gender with sexuality in 1790s' feminist thought', which quotes Claudia Johnson to explicate Polwhele's title: 'For Polwhele, "unsexed" women are "oversexed."... What being an unsexed female entails ... is indulging in unbounded heterosexual activity without the heterosexual sentiment.'<sup>4</sup>

For Cowper too, the word 'sexuality' carries a sense of behaviour appropriate to the sexes. His use of the word in 1800 is in a reference to Erasmus Darwin for whom, whether or not one female flower dallies with four males, sexuality is necessarily driven by contact between the opposite sexes. 'Sexuality', for Darwin, is inextricably associated with 'the instinct to propagate the species'; it is inevitably heterosexual. Blake's characteristically negative use of the word 'sexual' and cognates derives both from Polwhele's (and Wollstonecraft's) assumption that the sexual is that which represents the proprieties of a particular (female) gender, and from Darwin's account of sexuality as the patterned behaviour that leads to generation. To be 'Mortal & Vegetable in Sexuality' (E135) is to be assigned to a fixed category.

An early twenty-first-century academic book with the word 'sexuality' in its title necessarily sets up a different set of assumptions in the reader. In 2000 Bruce R. Smith calculated that the Modern Language Association online bibliography contained over three thousand items containing the word 'sexuality' written since 1981, of which 'at least ten per cent' were 'concerned with texts written before 1800'.<sup>5</sup> The boom in titles containing the word 'sexuality' derives from Foucault's claim that sexuality has a history that begins in the early nineteenth century. But Darwin's (and

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Cowper's) use of the word 'sexuality' is very different from our modern (post-Freudian) understanding that sexuality refers to a complex cluster of psychological and behavioural meanings. Writers now tend to distinguish between writing on sex and writing on sexuality. Thus Gail Bederman in 2008: "Sexuality" refers to the ways that acts, pleasures, beliefs, and moralities are constructed in particular times or places. "Sex" refers to specific bodily acts, regardless of culture or context."<sup>6</sup> Bederman's Foucauldian understanding of 'sexuality' is not Cowper's, or Darwin's, or Blake's.

The necessarily binary structure within the word 'sexuality' as used around 1800 rules out the possibility that 'sexuality' can describe homo-sexual desire. This is not to claim, as Foucault does, that same-sex desire or subjectivity could not exist in the early nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> It is to claim that the words 'sexual' and 'sexuality' for Blake exclude the possibility of same-sex desire. It is no accident that much of the finest recent writing on Blake and sexuality derives from critics who use ideas of camp and queer theory: Helen Bruder, Christopher Hobson and Andrew Elfenbein are among those who have demonstrated that Blake offers positive images of same-sex desire, particularly in writing after 1803.<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hobson was also instrumental in making possible a reading of the end of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* which side-steps a generation of compulsory condemnation.<sup>9</sup> As Katherine Binhammer points out, queer studies has become 'the institutional and methodological location for both the history and theory of sexuality' reflecting 'the desire of some lesbian theorists to break away from a particular strain of Second Wave Feminism'.<sup>10</sup> In this study I hope to contribute to the project of reclaiming sexuality for feminism, a project with many important predecessors.

Criticism that derived from Second Wave feminism in Britain and America has often been critical of Blake's representations of gender and sexuality. In 1998 Anne Mellor attacked the tendency of Blake's readers to see him 'as he might have liked to be seen: as an artist deeply at odds with his culture and times', insisting on the recognition that he was 'complicit in the racist and sexist ideologies of his culture'.<sup>11</sup> Mellor's trajectory is indicative of Blake's changing reception among feminist readers: whereas her first academic book in 1974 was *Blake's Human Form Divine*, her major work of 2000, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780–1820*, celebrates the influence of the evangelical writer Hannah More. Whereas Blake's standing has slipped for many feminist scholars, work on bluestocking culture and other women writers has

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reshaped our understanding of the Romantic period, demonstrating the cultural power of women within the public sphere.

My study argues that Blake's work demonstrates a remarkable consistency in its defence of female sexuality, a defence that draws on a specific pro-sex discourse within the bourgeois world with which he had most contact, deriving from Milton's view of Protestant sexuality.<sup>12</sup> (In order to accommodate the reader of an isolated chapter, I will use the words sex and sexuality in a modern sense unless clearly signalled.) In the view of friends and contacts like Cumberland, Fuseli and Hayley, female sexuality was under attack from an attempt to redraw public culture, and this attack on the sexualisation of culture was believed to threaten the vigour of culture and the arts. If the 'sexual' in Blake's use after 1800 derives both from the now obsolete sense of the 'sex' to mean 'feminine' and from a focus on that which is appropriate to each gender, it can carry a meaning almost diametrically opposed to the modern 'sexual'. The OED cites Wollstonecraft's claim from the 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that '[a] mistaken education, a narrow uncultivated mind, and many sexual prejudices, tend to make women more constant than men'. 'Sexual prejudices', in other words, limit women within a gendered idea of constancy.<sup>13</sup> Read in this sense, some crucial passages in Blake's work look different. If the 'soft sexual delusions' offered by the Daughters of Beulah in the opening of *Milton* use 'sexual' in the same way as Wollstonecraft to mean 'feminine', then Blake's Beulah becomes an account of contemporary constructions of gender rather than (what we call) sexuality. Rather than describing the delusive power of the erotic, 'sexual delusions' are 'soft' because they are the product of polite bourgeois codes of gender which use passivity manipulatively.

Second Wave feminism is in some ways a product of the new model of sexual difference that was the product of Blake's lifetime. The end of the eighteenth century witnessed the consolidation of a model of sexual difference in which women were no longer lesser or imperfect men but came instead to be seen as complementary to but essentially different from men. In the process, this two-sex model separated the word 'man' from the word 'human' turning it into a gender specific category. As Binhammer argues, it was this new idea of sexual difference that created the idea of 'Woman, in all her particularities and essential specificities . . . as a separate and proper object of study'.<sup>14</sup> Plate 3 of *Milton* signals Blake's concern with the new two-sex model of gender difference in its image of two figures, male and female, splitting outwards from the same root; as a poem about Beulah, *Milton* is necessarily concerned with the separation of

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male from female which is fundamental to the period. To the dismay of many recent readers, Blake's eternity does not include 'woman' as a gender-specific entity. There has been much discussion of what is seen as the limitations of androgyny in Blake's utopian vision of Eternity. According to Tristanne Connolly, 'the vision in question is not really androgynous' because 'the gender-neutral word "Humanity" disappears and the nominal character of this concession is revealed as Los goes on to bewail not being able to "be united as Man with Man" and enjoy the mingling and joining of souls "thro all the Fibres of Brotherhood"'.<sup>15</sup> A central project of feminist criticism at the end of the twentieth century was to separate 'man' from 'human' to show how 'man' could never be gender neutral and could not include 'woman'. To a modern reader, educated within a modern two-sex system, the word 'human' is a delusive slip, replicated by Los, for the gendered 'man'. Identity politics are unthinkable without the categories that Dror Wahrman sees as under construction at the end of the eighteenth century, but for Blake these categories themselves are deeply flawed.

Much of the most productive recent criticism has investigated Blake via the categories of gender and sexuality that postdate his period. But at times the labour that Blake's critics experience in sexing his figures (rather like sexing kittens) may point to the possibility that we are asking the wrong questions.<sup>16</sup> Moving, as Nicholas Williams has argued, between ideology and utopia, Blake's language is unstable and there are contexts in which strategic considerations are paramount.<sup>17</sup> This is particularly the case, I will argue, in some annotations and notebook entries. Confronted by a language which is not his own, Blake's strategy is shifting and often hard to read. Frequently Blake adopts and then subverts the categories of discourses that he rejects. In place of categories of class, gender, sexuality, race that have become established since the end of the eighteenth century I assume in this study that culture is the result of a system of minute (but cumulatively significant) differences.

The philosopher Alain Badiou offers an attack on the categories of cultural criticism as 'a tourist's fascination for the diversity of morals, customs and beliefs. And in particular, for the irreducible medley of imaginary formations (religions, sexual representations, incarnations of authority...)'.<sup>18</sup> Badiou's model is surprisingly like that of Blake's first engraved work, *All Religions are One*, which states: 'As all men are alike in outward form, So (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius' (E1). The crucial question in this statement is the relationship between being 'alike' and 'infinite variety'. The discourse of identity



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born in Blake's lifetime claims to protect the individuality of the subject. Blake's language seems at times to deny that individuality. His work shows little interest in character or in the integrity of individual identity. Nevertheless, Blake suggests that his time sets up categories of identity such as 'the female' which reduce 'infinite variety' under the banner of a binomial system founded on an idea of the 'other'. From the male point of view, the female is one example of the 'other', yet some forms of feminism merely invert this pattern to turn the 'male' into another example of the other. If my study seems to give too much time to the voices of writers such as Madan or Hayley this is because I am interested in the potential for utopian thought in many different positions.

Both Saree Makdisi and Jon Mee cite Blake's 1827 letter to Cumberland which claims that the bourgeois concept of the individual masks a rejection of 'infinite variety':

For a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivision[s] Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else Such is Job but since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree. (E783)<sup>19</sup>

Setting up a false model of individuality, Blake suggests, masks a reduction to categories of gender, race or nation. My focus, then, is on the 'infinite variety' which marks those with whom Blake comes into contact. As a reader and viewer I also wish to be free of the constraints of an approved 'female' eroticism.

Blake's focus on the 'Female' can be read (as Nicholas Williams has suggested) in relation to Wollstonecraft's attack on the ideology of femininity.<sup>20</sup> Blake writes at a historical moment in which ideas of the female and of a specifically female form of sexuality were under construction and debate. In this debate Richardson played a key role, creating a powerful image (in E. J. Clery's words) of 'the category of woman ... abstracted from biological sex' and it is for this reason that I discuss how Blake read Richardson.<sup>21</sup> Richardson's idealisation of a non-biological femininity prepares for what Thomas Laqueur sees as a fundamental shift in the understanding of the place of sexual pleasure in conception. Whereas female orgasm was seen as necessary to conception in the mid-eighteenth century, according to Laqueur by the early nineteenth century it came to be seen as a functionless accident.<sup>22</sup> Since pleasure (to some degree) is necessarily part of the male role in conception, the way is opened for the



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belief that the sexes experience sex differently. Under the heading ‘Some Questions Answered’, a verse in Blake’s notebook rejects the idea that female desire is essentially different from male:

What is it men in women do require  
The lineaments of Gratified Desire  
What is it women do in men require  
The lineaments of Gratified Desire. (E474–5)

The near parallel between lines one and three (only the verb ‘do’ alters the pattern) and the repetition of the answer in lines two and four assert that men and women desire the same thing, that is, the sight of their partner’s pleasure. Sexuality, here, is defined in terms of visual pleasure as ‘lineaments’ that can be seen, and is an experience which is assumed to be the same for each sex.

It is because the new definition of ‘sexuality’ emerges first in writing by and about Erasmus Darwin and William Cowper that this study places Blake within what can only be described as a bourgeois world. To do so challenges some of the key beliefs and discoveries of the best recent work on Blake. In the work of E. P. Thompson, David Worrall and Saree Makdisi, Blake emerges from a variety of radical underground cultures which provided a vehicle for counter-hegemonic traditions surviving through the eighteenth century from the civil war period.<sup>23</sup> In Makdisi’s words, Blake’s work allows access to ‘the language of radical antinomian enthusiasm, which he, like others, inherited from older currents of thought and modified for the exigencies of his own time’.<sup>24</sup> In recent work by David Worrall, Marsha Keith Schuchard and Keri Davies, Blake is shown to draw on the cultures of spiritualised sexuality preserved among Swedenborgians, Moravians and other religious groups. Marsha Keith Schuchard in particular has described the radical sexual experimentation of the Moravian ‘sifting time’ of 1743–53 as one example of secret sexual cultures that may have influenced the Blake family culture and been transmitted to William by his mother.<sup>25</sup> The contribution to our modern understanding of Blake’s work by these scholars is immeasurable.

Nevertheless, I differ in my understanding of the implications of their extraordinary research, particularly in so far as I use their discoveries to understand Blake’s verbal and visual texts. Whereas Worrall, Davies and Schuchard believe that Blake’s works are written for particular faith communities and identify Blake as seeking out patrons with affiliations to Swedenborgian and Moravian groups, I suggest that Blake’s work is addressed to ‘the Public’, even where he does not succeed in communicating

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in any effective way with his intended audience. Blake repeatedly addresses the 'Public': in a 1793 prospectus offering his illuminated books for sale in October 1793 (E692–693), in the *Descriptive Catalogue* written to accompany his 1809 exhibition and in the defaced plate 3 of *Jerusalem*. As Jon Mee points out, it cannot be assumed that the limited circulation of the illuminated books 'was Blake's desired goal merely because it was what he finally achieved'.<sup>26</sup> Nor do I assume that the illuminated books are the centrepiece of Blake's *oeuvre*. Blake critics are disappointed by work that does not discuss *enough* of Blake's large and difficult corpus, whereas the non-Blakean critic is often put off by the density of reference assumed by writing on Blake. Nevertheless, Blake criticism often observes a set of unspoken boundaries, placing the illuminated books at the centre of a corpus which need not acknowledge Blake's commercial work as an engraver or his illustrations to the work of other writers. Art historians have often been more willing than literary critics to see Blake as an aspiring, if ultimately failed, member of the public sphere.<sup>27</sup> Not only do I reject the assumption that Blake's work addresses an exclusive or even dispersed subculture but I also argue that the subject of Blake's work is the culture of the nation and even the world.

Marsha Keith Schuchard's research into Moravian and Swedenborgian traditions of spiritualised sexuality shows that Blake or his family were in contact with groups for whom sexuality was part of a regulated private spiritual practice, a route to vision.<sup>28</sup> But Schuchard's account of sexual secrets, handed down through closed religious communities, reads oddly in relation to Blake's attacks on secrecy, mystery and ritual. Her account of a phallic religion whose sexual techniques demand a wearying compliance from Catherine Blake seems at odds with the images of ecstatic females that decorate many of the 1790s' illuminated books. As Peter Otto argues, the phallus is associated with Urizen as a figure of authority, as 'the paradoxical symbol and product of Urizen's disavowal of the flesh'.<sup>29</sup> Blake's work, I suggest, critiques not only the dominant culture of his time but also its subcultures.

In this study I trace Blake's critique of dominant cultural forms, ideological constructions which Blake, I believe, often identifies with some astuteness. Northrop Frye saw Blake as a product of 'the age, in poetry, of Collins, Percy, Gray, Cowper, Smart, Chatterton, Burns, Ossian and the Wartons', authors whom Blake knew and in some cases illustrated. Nevertheless Frye was puzzled by Blake's association with William Hayley and considered the time in Felpham 'an ordeal by fire, a temptation in a wilderness of fashionable smugness'.<sup>30</sup> William Hayley