

Book Reviews

Susan Matthews, *Blake, Sexuality and Bourgeois Politeness* (Cambridge Studies in Romanticism No. 88). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 286 pp., 24 b/w illustrations. ISBN-13: 9780521513579

Luisa Calè

'In an age of luxury woman aspires to the function of man and man slides into the offices of woman. The epoch of eunuchs was ever the epoch of viragos': Henry Fuseli's association of female power, sexuality, and luxury crystallises eighteenth-century anxieties about the feminisation of culture. The alternative possibilities and utopian energy of eighteenth-century sexuality are at the centre of Susan Matthews's *Blake, Sexuality, and Bourgeois Politeness*. The tension between 'sexuality' and 'bourgeois politeness' gains strength from the historical semantics of the word 'sex' as a term indicating the behavioural codes that define the difference between the genders. Matthews observes that Blake first uses the words 'sexes', 'sexual' and 'sexuality' after his period in Felpham working for William Hayley (3): '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' (6). While art historians have focused on Blake as 'an aspiring if ultimately failed, member of the public sphere', following the debates generated by the translation of Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 historians and literary scholars have traced Blake's connections with radical artisan and millenarian subcultures and counter-publics. Matthews's work recentres Blake's address 'to the Public': 'Blake's work ... critiques not only the dominant culture of his time but also its subcultures' (10). The book is structured around 'a triangular relationship between Blake, a figure more fully assimilated into the polite world, and discourses of sexuality' (13): Henry Fuseli, William Hayley, William Cowper, Mary Wollstonecraft, but also the 1790s inflections of Hogarth and Richardson. These dialogues rearticulate known and lesser-known Romantic networks and circles: 'Blake's bourgeois friends and contacts form a surprisingly cohesive group which is distinct from that of the Johnson circle even as it touches upon it' (11). These connections shed light on Blake's sociability in relation to the limits and invisible boundaries of public culture highlighted in response to Habermas's notion of the bourgeois public sphere. Matthews questions the extent to which 'Blake really belonged within the circles to which he gave or sold his work' (11). At the same time, 'Blake's marginality, his location at the limit of what his culture found acceptable, helps to identify the gaps and the exclusions of a cultural movement that has been celebrated in recent scholarship' (14).

The first chapter explores the relationship between visual enthusiasm and national culture in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). Oothon's eyes 'fix'd / in happy copulation' practise an embodied kind of looking that comes into clearer relief in the phrase 'lovely copulation'. The emerging technical sense of the word to define bodily contact is modified by 'joining a technical word with adjectives of affect' (17). The identification of looking with carnal pleasure challenges attempts to decouple the aesthetic from bodily sensation. Building on Jonathan Lamb's work on sympathy, Matthews compares the 'horrid sympathy' across species that Satan experiences in *Paradise Lost* to the metamorphic power of viewing as a form of 'happy copulation', which dissolves the boundaries between self and other. If the limitations of the five senses are defined by an egotistical ratio that turns the objects of vision into mirrors of the viewer, Blake's seeing involves acts of metamorphosis in which the beholder 'became what he beheld' (*Milton*, plate 3). 'Oothon's "happy" and "lovely copulation" cross the boundaries set up by polite visual culture and revive issues that still preoccupied the 1790s' (21). Such viewing is set against William Hogarth's 1760 'Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism', published in 1798 under the title 'Enthusiasm Delineated' by John Boydell in John Ireland's *Hogarth Illustrated*, with an extensive apparatus that connected Methodist preaching and Moravian devotional practices to the ecstasies of catholic visual culture: 'While the sentimental culture modelled by Adam Smith attempts to regulate the enthusiastic viewing associated with the Female viewer, keeping Oothon out of the galleries, visual culture is seen by many as needing the bodily fantasies of Hogarth's satire' (29).

'Fuseli and the "Female Dream" of Europe', chapter 2, develops this analysis into a joint reading of Fuseli's 'The Nightmare' and the 'female dream' of 'eighteen hundred years' at the heart of Blake's continental prophecy *Europe* (1794). Fuseli claimed that 'one of the most unexplored regions of art is dreams and what may be called the personification of sentiments.' The figure of the recumbent female dreamer was a well established *pathos* formula dating back to Giulio Romano's 'Dream of Hecuba' in the Iliad Room at the Ducal Palace in Mantua, which was imitated by Sir Joshua Reynolds's 'The Death of Dido', the most immediate source for Fuseli's 'The Nightmare'. The libertine empiricism at the heart of

Fuseli's and Blake's female dreams works against the 'frigid ecstasies of German criticism', as Fuseli said of Winckelmann, to reclaim the sexual energy of visual enthusiasm from attempts to regulate the body and establish an aesthetic of detachment. Matthews's chapter moves between writing and painting, exploring Fuseli's 'The Nightmare' as a visual subtext for Blake's dream of Europe and using Blake's dream as an ekphrasis of Fuseli's 'Titania and Bottom' from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was on display at the Shakespeare Gallery in the 1790s (43). Fuseli's painting shows the enervating potential of feminine power capable of reducing the heroic male nude to hand-held miniature. By contrast, for Matthews the lack of hierarchical scale in Blake's own depiction of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggests that 'Blake may also associate the binding of revolutionary energy with the confinement of possibility associated with the commercial galleries' (49). In this reading the tension between different scales of being in Fuseli's painting can be read as a form of containment of the fairy world in line with the bourgeois requirements of the 'cold gallery of fashion', which Blake contrasts to the more enabling potential of Thomas Butts's 'green house' (41). Scale, however, is always reversible: 'Fuseli's small figures are alive although miniaturised, re-animated by the imagination of the artist or the viewer' (50). Fuseli's and Blake's sexualised imagination participates in a debate over the role of 'sexual passion as the antithesis of the luxury of the commercial world' (54). In Blake's *Milton* 'Some Sons of Los surround the Passions with porches of iron & silver [...] Giving to airy nothing a name and a habitation'. Quoting Shakespeare's definition of the painter's work of imagination from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Blake presents art as a form of containment, creating 'a place of safety', which can 'frame extremes of passion, creating beauty by means of limitation of range' (55).

Chapters 3 and 4 illuminate Blake's relationship with William Hayley through a discussion of Hayley's role in the production of a feminine public sphere. 'A History of Softness' reclaims the word 'soft' from the negative connotations of the gendered division of labour memorably crystallized in Milton's dyptic portrait of Adam and Eve: 'For contemplation he and valor formed, / For softness she and sweet attractive grace' (*PL*, IV, 296-97). Blake's relationship with Hayley marks a turning point in the connotations of the word 'soft'. Used positively to describe a feminine natural work in *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, softness is also associated with the delusions of sensibility. Witness Blake's invocation to the muses at the beginning of *Milton*: 'Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspire the Poets Song, Record the journey of immortal Milton thro' your Realms Of terror & mild moony lustre, in soft sexual delusions Of varied beauty' (1811, plate 3). Blake's epic invocation rewrites the opening of Hayley's poem *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781): 'Daughters of Beauty, who the song inspire, / to your enchanting notes I attune my lyre'. The juxtaposition of the two openings invites the reader to think of Blake's epic in counterpoint with Hayley's text, which 'channel[s] fears and hopes about the redemptive role of bourgeois women', 'providing the connective tissue in the social world by maintaining the "gentle qualities of the heart"' (61). Matthews's subtle reading shows the changing relational meanings of enthusiasm as a social category: 'Hayley places Blake within a sentimental category that understands enthusiasm as a bourgeois affective mode' (59). Situating Blake and Hayley within a wider debate involving Hannah More, Richard Polwhele and others, Matthews tracks the shifting associations of softness from sympathy to indolence and luxury in the problematic negotiation of the place of women in public culture: 'by the end of the century, softness is more easily associated with the natural world than with women. As the links between softness and sexuality and between women and sexuality become less acceptable ... the word is increasingly associated with an attempt to split culture along the dividing lines of gender, politics and class' (78).

Chapter 4 revolves around Hayley's *Essay on Old Maids* (1785), the debate about virginity and the regulation of pleasure in the context of a libertine literature that goes from John Wilkes's *Essay on Woman* to Martin Madan's *Thelyphthora* (1780) in denouncing the 'stagnation both in heart and soul' (84) that damages the individual and national body with its 'negative circulation of polluted sexuality' (85). Hayley's 'search for an "antediluvian Old Maid"' develops Madan's attempt to reclaim Old Testament stories 'to authorise alternative forms of sexual regulation' (89). Hayley's antediluvian chronology of pleasure and its neo-testamentarian regulation shed new light on the chronology of Blake's dream of eighteen hundred years in *Europe*. In this context we can see the potentially positive inflection of the 'loose Bible' of *The Song of Los* and make sense of the seemingly paradoxical characterisation of 'Moral Virtue the cruel Virgin Babylon' and 'Virgin Babylon Mother of Whoredoms' in *Milton*, which for Matthews is centred on 'the cultural meaning of virginity' (107).

The following two chapters articulate two alternative takes on Madan's and Hayley's discussions of

virginity, pleasure, and sexuality. 'Cowper's Fear: Nature, Population, Apocalypse' revolves around Cowper's fear of the sexuality of nature in the second book of *The Task*, written in response to Sir William Hamilton's account of the 1783 earthquakes in southern Italy. Cowper's fear seems to resonate in Blake's point that 'The Earthquakes at Lisbon &c were the Natural result of Sin' (121), yet Matthews's reading of their dialogue shows the alternative apocalyptic charge of nature's fertility in Blake's work. From the volcanic energy of the title page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to 'The Fertilization of the Nile' (1791) Blake celebrates the force of nature and attributes its negative energy to the rejection and repression of Sin. 'Unseen, unbodied, unknown', Sin becomes 'the mother of all Pestilence' in *The Book of Ahania* because of Urizen's 'refusal to recognize his own lustful thoughts' (132): 'Whereas Cowper fears the opening of the earthly grave at the moment of apocalypse at which he may be thrown into eternal damnation, Blake imagines the Last Judgment in equally sexual terms as the ecstatic female grave of the *Song of Los*' (121). The sexual energy couched in Cowper's *Task* is also unlocked in the history of illustration with which Matthews's chapter concludes.

Through a brilliant reading of the libertine potential of *Clarissa* as an anthological text Matthews presents Blake as a 'satanic reader of *Clarissa* who exploits the openness of the epistolary text to extract a libertine defence of free love' (145). The fragmenting agency of anthological practices opens up the possibility to reclaim sexual pleasure from the narrative pressure of the text, in which rape is often taken as a transparent signifier of male aggression and the woman confirmed as 'victim of sensibility, whether Cowper's Crazy Kate or Richardson's Clarissa' (149). Freed from the urge to read for the plot and the linear continuities that work towards such narrative closure, Blake's Oothoon emerges as a libertine version of *Clarissa*: 'the "happy copulation" and the "lovely copulation" of which she speaks at the end of the poem evade the meanings produced by the narrative with which the poem opens' (148).

In 'A "blank in Nature": Blake and Cultures of Mourning' Matthews turns to Blake's miniature versions of Michelangelo's 'Last Judgement', including his illustrations to Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1808) and 'A Vision of the Last Judgement'. Reducing the scale of the apocalypse to fit the hand-held format of the book, the Michelangelesque idiom of a physical afterlife articulates private languages of mourning in the wake of Blake's loss of his brother, Hayley's loss of his son, and Benjamin Heath Malkin's *A Father's Memoirs of his Child* (1806). The survival of personal identity and the corporeality of Heaven take 'the visual language shared by polite pornography, by satires of religious enthusiasm and by classical art' (180). In 'The Reunion of the Soul and the Body' Matthews detects 'the conventions of polite erotica', which explain the negative reception of Blake's fleshly depictions of spiritual and invisible worlds in reviews of *The Grave*. Reading Fuseli's comparison between Michelangelo and Raphael illuminates Blake's eclectic treatment of the Last Judgment, a composition that looks to Raphael 'as a painter of sympathy and of private affection', and thus closer to 'the privatised character of modern society' (184). Blake's inclusion of families and children in 'A Vision of the Last Judgement' satisfies the mourner's desire for communication and conjunction after death. Matthews's brilliant analysis situates Blake's painting in the context of women's embodied engagement with the after-life, shedding light on the kinds of sympathy, rapture, and 'hyperbolic enthusiasm' that animate Charlotte Malkin's notebook and the world of Mrs Wyndham, the Countess of Egremont: 'while Blake would have associated Lord Egremont with the classical imagery of commemorative sculpture, *A Vision of the Last Judgment* offers a "blank in Nature" that disrupts the colonisation of the afterlife by bourgeois mores' (183). Women's genitalia and women's reproductive power were often used to denounce the physical limits and excesses of women's prophetic visions, but in this Revelation for a female spectator the sexual organ is placed at the centre of the painting as an apocalyptic portal to the resurrection of the body.