AN ENGLISH MAJOR, KELLY KENNEDY PROVIDES HER READERS WITH A FINE OVERVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP ON WILLIAM BLAKE'S USE OF WOMEN. RECOGNIZING THE SCOPE OF BLAKE CRITICISM, KENNEDY'S REVIEW POINTS OUT THE MAJOR VIEWS OF THE TREATMENT OF THE FEMALE IN BLAKE, CONCLUDING THAT A CONSENSUS OR COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF BLAKE'S PLANS WILL REMAIN OUT OF REACH. HOWEVER, AS KENNEDY POINTS OUT, BLAKE'S WORK WILL CONTINUE TO DRAW OUR INTEREST SINCE BLAKE HIMSELF WILL "CONTINUE TO BREATHE 'CONTRARIETY' INTO HIS OWN SCHOLARSHIP."

Attraction and Repulsion

Review of Criticism on
The Treatment of the Female in William Blake
From 1977 to 1995

If William Blake was, as Northrop Frye described him in his prominent book Fearful Symmetry, "a mystic enraptured with incommunicable visions, standing apart, a lonely and isolated figure, out of touch with his own age and without influence on the following one" (3), time has proved to be the visionary's most celebrated ally, making him one of the most frequently written about poets of the English language. William Blake has become, in a sense, an institution.

"Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human Existence," wrote Blake in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Perhaps his most famous line, these words are the connecting thread through all of Blake's work, from The Songs of Innocence and Experience to Jerusalem. But what those words mean has been a point of contention throughout the years. What does that mean for the Male and the Female who are at the center of his work? If they are Contraries, then what does the Female in Blake's work represent? Just what did Blake mean? And from where did his ideas and perceptions spring?

In 1977 Susan Fox addressed these questions in her well-renowned essay "The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry." As the first literary critic to comment on Blake's inconsistencies in his treatment of the Female, Fox explores the progression of the extended metaphor throughout the course of his career. She explains that Blake's vision of the Contraries became more clear to him as time went on; therefore, the contradiction lies in his earlier views of the Female, identified with weakness and failure, and his later attempt to rescue the Female element of the Contraries from this taint. Fox's early essay creates a sense of continuity of criticism; her essay seems to be the most frequently referred to in essays and articles pertaining to the same topic.
In his essay "Blake: Sex, Society, and Ideology," David Aers follows Fox’s thread that Blake’s attitude toward the Female shifts, but explains that "the case is far more complicated than a matter of authorial incoherence or change of mind" (33). Aers offers a psychologically-based exploration of Blake’s treatment of the Female and the conventional views of women in the society of which he was a part and concludes that Blake could not escape the popular male supremacist tradition. In opposition to this approach, Mary Lynn Johnson, in her essay “Feminist Approaches to Teaching” argues that “in a century when no one . . . fully escaped the fourfold grip of father, priest, king, and God, Blake stands out as one of the few writers who understood the pervasiveness of this patriarchal power alignment and resisted its influence” (58). Another critic who discusses the shift in Blake’s treatment of the Female is Brenda Webster, whose article “Blake, Women, and Sexuality” considers Blake’s shift in his treatment of the Female a result of his “increasingly negative attitude toward sexuality” (209). Webster explores Blake’s fear of the “Female Will,” and how it affects his images of women.

Dealing with the subject of the shift in the treatment of the Female, yet from a different angle, in his article “William Blake’s ‘Female Will’ and its Biographical Context,” Robert N. Essick notes that the shifting treatment of the Female in Blake’s work was a result of interaction with women the poet knew; this, Essick contends, influenced Blake’s treatment of women in general. Blake’s wife, Catherine, the wives of Hayley and Butts, as well as Mary Wollstonecraft were used as models for the women in his work. In his piece “An original Story,” Nelson Hilton examines the parallels between the life and work of Mary Wollstonecraft and Blake’s Visions of the Daughters of Albion.

Focusing more on the treatment of the Blakean Female than on the shift in Blake’s thought pertaining to the Female, Alicia Ostriker suggests that “Blake’s vision goes beyond proposing an ideal of dominance-submission or priority-inferiority between genders” in her essay “Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality.” Ostriker goes on to explain that Blake often wishfully imagines that the female can be re-absorbed by the male, be contained within him, and exist” (163). Margaret Storch points out that Blake is “not simply antagonistic to women” but that in his work there is “a striking polarity in his response” (xiii) to them in her book Sons and Adversaries: Women in William Blake and D. H. Lawrence. Blake, she contends, in his words as well as in his engravings, showed a certain fear of the Female Will; to eliminate that threat, “female figures are assimilated to the point of absorption: they are no longer threatening because they no longer have independent existence” (96).

Commentary dealing with the treatment of the Female in particular works of Blake includes Camille Paglia’s book Sexual Personae, in which she examines the Female in Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience and decides
that, metaphorically, the Blakean Female is nature personified; K. D. Everest's "Thel's Dilemma," in which three readings of Blake's Book of Thel are examined; Gerda S. Norvig's feminist interpretation of the Thel character in her article "Female Subjectivity and the Desire of Reading in(to) Blake's Book of Thel; Brian Wilkie's book Thel and Oothoon; and Eugenie Freed's book A Portrait of His Life: William Blake's Miltonic Vision of Women, in which she disagrees with the earlier feminist perspectives on Blake's treatment of the Female. Freed feels that Blake was extremely revolutionary for his time in his concept of gender and his sensitivity to the Female. According to Freed, "the male in Blake's apocalyptic consummations also ceases to exist independently," and that "male as well as female sexuality is dispensed with when the dynamically opposed contrary forces... unite" (123).

Demonstrating a perpetual fascination with the treatment of the Female, sexuality, and gender in Blake's work is the plethora of dissertations written in the last ten years on this subject. In Frances Marilyn Bohnsack's dissertation "William Blake and the Social Construct of Female Metaphors," the author examines Blake's use of male and female metaphors as social commentary as well as his own conflicts, attitudes, and observations as they are demonstrated and illustrated in his mythology. Peter Georgelos discusses the split-metaphor of the female in his dissertation "Mother Outline: A Critique of Gender in Blake's Aesthetics and 'The Four Zoas.'" B. K. Founce looks at Blake's treatment of the divine marriage "a sacred union of (male) self and (female) other" in his dissertation "Shadows of Desire: Feminine Discourse in William Blake." Gerald Webster Chapman, Jr. examines the ways William Blake, James Joyce, and Thomas Pynchon responded to the feminism of their times in his dissertation "Anxious Appropriations: Feminism and Male Identity in the Writings of Blake, Joyce, and Pynchon." His discussion includes the previously discussed connection between Blake's Visions of the Daughters of Albion and the feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft. Marc Kaplan, whose dissertation advisor was the highly-acclaimed feminist literary critic Anne Mellor, discusses sexism in the work of Blake in his dissertation "Weeping Woman/Weaving Woman: Gender Roles in Blake's Mythology." "My contention," the author explains in his dissertation abstract, "is that sexism is not incidental to Blake's system, but fundamental: the poet anchors his mythological universe in a hierarchical, male-supremacist notion of gender." Glen Brewster takes popular perspectives of gender roles and "analyzes Blake's relationship to his historical context and the discursive traditions about gender roles that he inherited" in order to explain what he calls "the vision of possibility for reformed social relationships" that Blake examined during his career, in his dissertation "Severe Contentions of Friendship: Gender Roles and Reconfigurations in Poetry of William Blake."

As demonstrated, there is a superabundance of Blake criticism, and Blake himself has become a sort of institution. The treatment of the Female in Blake’s work, why it’s there and what it means, will be resolved as soon as Blake becomes less complex, or rather, never. His personality and beliefs are still an enigma and his work still dense and ambiguous; thus regardless of dissections and examinations, Blake will continue to breathe “Contrariety” into his own scholarship.

Works Cited


