

WILLIAM BLAKE'S MILTON AND THE RENAISSANCE MYTH OF HERMAPHRODITUS

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In the latest decades, William Blake's hermaphrodite symbolism has raised much debate in the field of gender studies. In the wake of Norman O. Brown's psycho-literary analysis of *Laocoon*, scholars have been inclined to overemphasize Blake's visions of sexual identity as a self-fashioning process, grounded on cultural choices and behaviours rather than on biological drives: «Man Makes Himself, his own body; his image of the Body» (Brown, 1966, p. 127). Blake's major prophetic poems, and particularly *Milton*, have been described as passage rites from persecution to toleration, which suggest «an alternative to Satanic masculinity» (Hobson, 2000, p. 112) since their protagonists challenge Mose's cruel injunctions against female adultery and homoerotic practices, and seem to indulge in «polymorphous perverse sexuality» (Haynes, 2004, p. 141), which would restore their bodies back to their edenic state of androgyny.

At the same time, however, some post-feminist readings have kept pointing out that the Romantic poet's valorization of free love enacts narcissistic «fantasies of total gratification» (Webster, 1987, pp. 223-224), which do not wipe out any prejudicial difference between manliness and womanliness. Without mentioning a stack of evidences, which have been supplied in the 1970s to corroborate how Blake's most transgressive lines both burlesque and tame Mary Wollstonecraft's emancipatory arguments, it seems to me that all his (re)creationist sagas of human bodies are imbued with an ill-concealed resentment. His enchantment for the androgyne plays «a vital role in the creative process» (Billigheimer, 2000, p. 114) in so far as women are drastically led to personify novel traits of male sensibility, if not traditionally demoted to wombs where «the subject must go» to be reborn. (Beal, 2000, p. 88). Although Blake's metaphors of woman as a male emanation do not necessarily turn «a visionary poet into a chauvinistic creep» (Elfenbein, 1999, p. 151), a various Renaissance tradition of inquiries about the hermaphrodite is recycled by Blake to demonize female body.

John Donne's poem *To Mr Tilman* encourages a recalcitrant addressee to welcome his priestly vocation and seems therefore to promote only the intercessor's role between deity and church-goers:

And so the heav'ns which beget all things here,
And th'earth, our mother, which these things doth bear,
Both these in thee are in thy calling knit,
And make thee now a blest hermaphrodite.

But Donne hints, too, at a prevailing Renaissance imagery of the double-sexed body to sanction the pleasures of coupling within the confines of marriage. While recording his friend's eagerness to live a fashionable world of «dressing, mistressing, and compliment», the poet presses him to find comfort in the company of a wife: «What bring'st thou home with thee?», and remarks that his body is made of «the same materials as before», snubbing vows of chastity to which catholic priests stick:

Why doth the foolish world scorn that profession
Whose joys pass speech? Why do they think unfit
That gentry should join families with it?

(Carey, ed., 1990, pp. 286-288)

This does not imply that Renaissance literates are unaware of Ambroise Pare's copious portrayals of supposed freaks of nature; rather, the influential doctor's survey shows how his classifying eye expunges any bisexual desire on the strength of the marriage institution and purposes of social reproduction. He finds «the perfect man» in a body which «can impregnate», even if supplemented at the perineum with «a hole in the form of a vulva, which nonetheless does not penetrate to the inside»; quite symmetrically, he evulses a woman from another set of privates, verifying that her unerectile male member has «no vestige of scrotum or testicles» (Pallister, ed., 1982, pp. 26-27).

This kind of legitimation is an integral part of a common-law judgement, which allows «an hermaphrodite (which is also called an *Androgynus*) » to inherit possessions on the understanding that s/he will be christened «according to the kind of the sexe which doth prevaile», and educated to establish one of his/her possible gender relations; indeed, looking at the child, the jurist adds that «deformity in any part of his body» does not prevent him from being «brought forth within marriage» (Coke, 1832, p. ccxlix). The image of the sexual monster is translated and employed to disseminate even conflicting apologies of the bridal room; in a detailed reading of *Genesis 1, 26-27* which John Milton published in his tracts on marriage, Adam's sexes cannot be imagined «as if man at first had been created hermaphrodite»; they mark a longing for the creation of Eve and imply therefore a «metaphorical union of two bodies» (Griswold, ed., 1845, p. 289, p. 362).¹

Milton's view of «one flesh» develops a new conjugal morality, where the partners' common viewpoints and well-matched tempers are valorized as decisive sources of erotic happiness: «where the mind and person pleases aptly, there some unaccomplishment of the body's delight may be better born with» [PWM, 203]. He puts the emphasis on their shared family management: «they may be pious Christians together, they may be loving and friendly, they may be helpful to each other», even if their duties become «cold performances of civil and common respects» in lack of their intimacy: «they cannot couple; that shall divorce them, though either party would not». Milton goes so far as to see procreation «as being but a secondary end in dignity» without a fulfilling and mutual intercourse: «For if he find no contentment from the other, how can he return it from himself?» (PWM, p. 294, p. 310, p. 294, p. 193, p. 306).

The act of copulation is politicized mainly as a result of a great number of Puritan conduct books and sermons, which canvass for «companionate household relations» (Hausknecht, 84). John Cleveland mimics their biblical exegesis showing how Adam's «Sexes thus ingrostr» do not imply that «Man 'bout Wedlock troat»; his portrayal of the heavenly couple as «one right / Canonical Hermaphrodite» reacts against the Puritan downgrading of male leadership, and blames the husband for his bending so much to his wife's will to unman himself:

Sir, or Madam, choose you whether,
Nature twists you both together,
And makes thy Soul two garbs confess,

¹ Rufus Wilmot Griswold (ed.), *The Prose Works of John Milton*, Philadelphia, Herman, 1845, Vol.I. All following quotations of «Tetrachordon», «Colasterion» and «The Doctrine & Discipline of Divorce» are from this edition; hereafter abbreviated PWM and cited by page number.

Both Petticoat and Breeches Dress!

(Morris, Withington, eds, 1967, p. 10)

Adam's lot is located within one of the tragic metamorphoses narrated by Ovid, during which a young man, Hermaphroditus, is fooled by «the cooler Nymph» Salmacis and forced to «concorporate» (*ibidem*, p. 10). The rape here implied is a widespread Renaissance belief thanks also to Francis Beaumont's poetic adjustment, which adds to the myth some discriminating scenes to show why he merits a punishment. Indeed, his adolescent heat is vainly soothed in «cleare watry springs» and labelled as a spoiled drive, which leads him to «unto coasts unknown» without enjoying «regions far beyond his own»; arriving at «the bright river» of which Salmacis is tutelary spirit, he is painfully solicited. She regrets that «men become so slow» in courtship, threatens «a manly boldnesse», and dives in the waters to reach him:

“Struggle thou maiest, but never get away;
So grant, just gods, that never day may see
The separation 'twixt this boy and me”.

Beaumont's adjuncts disambiguate the mythic epilogue, warning that the young man, being unable to check a female desire, will be at her mercy in a shaming and eternal embrace:

The gods did heare her prayer, and feele her woe,
And in one body they began to grow:
She felt his youthfull bloud in every veine,
And he felt hers warm his cold breast againe;
And ever since was woman's love so blest,
That it will draw bloud from the strongest breast.
Nor man, nor maid, now could they be esteem'd,
Neither and either might they well be deem'd.

(Chalmers, ed., 1810, pp. 214-221)

Blake draws on these parodial images of a dominating woman and an ephobic man; seemingly, the poem which he writes during his stay at Felpham is set among «Double-sexed», who display their privates in «all their beauty to entice Milton». The Puritan bard hopes the disturbing prodigies undergo a cutting: «The Female-male & the Male-female, self-dividing stood / Before him». But, despite their high rate of unreadability, the lines do not deal with Adam's bisexuality, as is well shown by the blacksmith Los, who strives unceasingly against the biblical hermaphrodite to take out of its flesh a clean-cut man:

He wept over it, he cherish'd it
In deadly sickening pain: till separated into a Female pale
As the cloud that brings the snow: all the while from his Back
A blue fluid exuded in Sineus hardening in the Abyss
Till it separated into a Male Form

(Erdman, ed, 1969, p. 245).²

The Romantic poem satirizes Milton's «bright pilgrimage of sixty years» telling that he is tossed through an «unexampled deed», which makes him «unhappy tho in

² All quotations of Blake's poems are from Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *William Blake Complete Writings*, London, Oxford U.P., 1969; hereafter abbreviated CW and cited by plate number.

heav'n» and pushes him to travel in the fabulous land of Beulah. Milton's track leads him to «a Fountain in a rock/ Of crystal flowing», which lies "beyond the Mundane Shell» and can be reached through a pun on «the Wild Thyme», whose clockwise route is furtherly upset by the narcotic «morning odours» of the herb. Undoubtedly, Ovid's myth is fragmented and translated into epiphanies: Milton crosses «a sweet River, of milk & liquid pearl, / Namd Ololon», though Ololon is also the naiad who sits «beside this Fountain on the Rock» and sings «melting cadences» to allure him «down / the River». Besides, Ololon celebrates her mating season with deviously lyrical words:

[...] he kissed me, and wished me health.
And I became One Man with him arising in my strength:
Twas too late now to recede.

(CW, pl. 15, pl. 2, pl. 34, pl. 21)

She expropriates the male body before Milton looks at himself in the water and is turned into half a man, groaning with pain:

Then on the verge of Beulah he beheld his own Shadow;
A mournful form double; hermaphroditic: male & female
In one wonderful body.

(CW, pl. 14)

The caricature of Milton's dislike of sex is possibly grounded on the disturbed relationship with Mary Powell, which he records with episodic references to «an abject and servile yoke» obliging him «to the most intimate and incorporating duties of love and embracement». Milton ascribes, for instance, his failed marriage to a lack of earlier experiences: «it is not strange though many who have spent their youth chastly, are in some things not so quick-sighted», and seems to envy his peers, who give free rein to «their wild affections» before proving themselves «most successfull in their matches». He has no hesitation in writing his self-portrait as a novice lover in order to better promote a parliamentary campaign against the prohibition of divorce: «the agrieved person shall doe more manly, to be extraordinary and singular in claiming the due right whereof he is frustrated», though his idea of manliness can be stressed when he refuses to bypass his disappointment «by visiting the Stews» or stepping in his «neighbours bed» (PWM, p. 307, pp. 203-204).

But Blake contrives his puritanical version, linking it repeatedly with one of Milton's juvenile metrical exercises, where he seems to fear Salmacis' pool so far as to take vows of chastity:

Abstain, as manhood you esteem,
From Salmacis' pernicious stream;
If but one moment there you stay,
Too dear you'll for your bathing pay.----
Depart nor man, nor woman, but a sight
Disgracing both, a loath'd Hermaphrodite.

(Mitford, 1863, p. 153)

Ololon is represented as «A Female hidden in a Male», a threatening virago who subverts the traditional hierarchy of roles in order to draw Milton's over-reaction: «Obey thou the Words of the Inspired Man». Blake discloses his ironical argument pointing obliquely to «sexual delusions», which women inflict on «immortal Milton». Indeed, Beulah is a land of «a mild & pleasant Rest», a sort of brothel provided with «Couches soft», where «Sweet Female forms, winged or floating» yield willingly to

immortals, who commute between Eden and the women: «every Man returnd & went still going forward». As joyfully sung in one of the female choruses, males don't run any risk of losing their immortality with them: «we shall consume / But you O our Fathers & Brothers, remain in Eternity» (CW, pl. 40, pl. 34, pl. 30). Blake's astounding view implies that, whereas other immortals «fall into Error» of spending a temporary «repose», Milton misconceives his intercourse with Ololon, assessing it on the basis of an implausible marriage right:

When I first Married you, I gave you all my whole Soul
I thought that you would love my loves & joy in my delights
Seeking for pleasures in my pleasures.

(ibidem, pl. 33)

The lines erase Milton's championship of a well-suited couple, stressing how his misfire is grounded on a misogynic selfishness, as he will grant at the end of the poem:

This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal
Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated always

(ibidem, pl. 40)

Quite ironically, however, Milton will step «beyond the outline of Identity», when his supposed wife allows him to have an extramarital affair:

She shall begin to give
Her maidens to her husband: delighting in his delight
And then & then alone begins the happy Female joy
As it is done in Beulah.

(ibidem, pl. 33)

Milton rejects the proposal «intirely abstracting himself from Female loves», and leaves Beulah cursing Ololon for her free sexual behaviours, as she confides to Blake himself:

Knowest thou of Milton who descended
Driven from Eternity; him I seek! terrified at my Act
In Great Eternity which thou knowest! I come him to seek

(ibidem, pl. 36)

The Romantic poet indulges his narcissistic fancy, pretending to personify through Milton's eyes a wife's act of adultery as a sin, which derives «from the head of Satan». She will defraud her husband's pride to the extent to call forth his insane craving for men:

Like sweet perfumes I stupified the masculine perceptions
And kept only the feminine awake, hence rose his soft
Delusory love.

(ibidem, pl. 23]

Blake triumphs too easily over Milton's morality, being of the opinion that «Pity and Love are too venerable for the imputation / Of Guilt», and ignoring that the seventeenth-century libelist ascribes to husbands' patriarchal cast of mind their fate of being cuckolded: «It may no less be for our disobedience, our unfaithfulness, and other sins against God, that wives become adulterous to the bed», and the tragic circumstance does not necessarily prevent a couple from being renewed: «adultery does not exclude her

other fitness, her other pleasingness; she may be otherwise both loving and prevalent» (PWM, p. 290, p. 334). Instead, Ololon is even urged to enter Blake's cottage to solve his conjugal crisis with Catherine:

Virgin of Providence fear not to enter into my Cottage
 What is thy message to thy friend: What am I now to do
 Is it again to plunge into deeper affliction? behold me
 Ready to obey, but pity thou my Shadow of Delight
 Enter my Cottage, comfort her, for she is sick with fatigue.

(CW, pl. 36)

Open-minded readers will sympathize with his wife's mood, if they take a further glance at his outmoded idea of sexuality as «a pulsation of the artery», a clumsy image which prescribes copulation if «rightly placed» and warns males to stick to their practice of coitus interruptus. Indeed, «Fairies, Nymphs» and other female creatures «know only of Generation» and do not hesitate to retaliate, seizing male privates to extort their need of «maternal care»; at Beulah, a traveller «whose Gates are open in those Regions of his Body», and explicitly «the Loins and Seminal Vessels», will see very soon that women spin from their bowels «a vast Polypus / Of living fibres down into the Sea of Time & Space growing». (CW, pl. 28, pl. 31, pl. 34). The metaphor of a stillbirth, or a «human Death», is sufficiently staggering to tell us that Blake's males are panicked in his warnings against women's reproductive endowment: «you become Mortal and Vegetable in Sexuality» (CW, pl. 35).

The very root of his hermaphrodite symbolism lies in this ancestral insecurity. In *The Four Zoas*, Satan's impotence is derided thanks to an allusion to the Ovidian myth; precisely because of his flop with «a Female counterpart», the devil will retract his pudenda within the body, or see himself in the mirror and realize he has been transexualized by a growing tit:

Heavd like an Earthquake labring with convulsive groans
 Intolerable at length an awful wonder burst
 From the Hermaphroditic bosom.

(CW, pl. 8)

In a similarly humorous vein, the eunuch is the one and only character in *Milton*, who will welcome the latitude whereby women exchange men, if readers see how Blake cautions them against the risk of emasculation, and prods them into limiting female adultery to the imaginary space of Beulah:

The nature of a Female Space is this: it shrinks the Organs
 Of Life till they become Finite & Itself seems Infinite.
 And Satan vibrated in the immensity of the Space! Limited
 To those without but Infinite to those within.

(CW, pl. 10)

But *Jerusalem* is the poem which better explains his typical fear of women; here, «Generation» presides over family life, compelling husbands to endorse a «Hermaphroditic Satanic World»; the fertility goddess harps on about Albion's inhibition, reminding him that her menstrual cycle necessitates and regulates the roles he plays in a wearing and routine manner:

She cries: The Human is but a Worm, & thou O Male: Thou art
 Thyself Female, a Male: a breeder of Seed: a Son & Husband.

(CW, pl. 64)

It is not an accident that the goddess' name, Vala, echoes well-known lines from *The Faerie Queene*, where heathen priests use to wrap their idol «with a vele», lest people stare at a disturbing castration complex, and learn how a woman may rob men of their reproductive organs to arrogate the primacy in creation:

But sooth it was not sure for womanish shame,
Nor any blemish, which the worke mote blame;
But for, they say, she hath both kinds in one,
Both male and female, both vnder one name;
She syre and mother is her selfe alone,
Begets and eke conceiues, ne needeth other none.

(Hamilton, ed., 2001, p. 488).

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