

William Blake: The Arch Myth-Maker

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Abstract: This article seeks to explain some of the intersections between Blake's visionary ideas and mythological systems that were current in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The value of considering this subject lies in revealing some fresh insight into Blake's aesthetic theory and to respond to the thesis that either writing or art begins with the effacement of mythology or art equates with mythology. The article reveals that Blake's approach to mythology is such that myths become subsumed within myths, and that from a desire to critique the art of the mythographers from his period, Blake was able to deepen his own enquiry into his aesthetic theorization. Thus, by the time he had started composing his long poem, *Jerusalem*, he was aware that in order to develop a new creative system it was necessary to clear away the classical mythological remnants of the past and challenge some of the more ancient systems of belief such as Druidism, which predated most forms. As a consequence, Blake demonstrates a need to eradicate the possibility of mythical ossification at every stage of his myth.

The ossification of mythology is my specific interest and I aim to explore Blake's aesthetic practices helped him to maintain the freshness of his vision over a long time period and how he learned to adjust his own perspective in opposition to the theoretical, philosophical and psychological opinions of his day. As my thesis consists in researching Jungian psychology and Blake's ideas about medical knowledge and forms of mental disturbance, I am particularly interested in the study of archetypes inherent in a variety of mythological research and stories in both Blake's day and other historical periods.

This paper will argue that William Blake acted as a conscious interpreter of mythologies in order to explore the nature of the Poetic Genius¹ of, 'the prophet [as] a *vates* or seer...and the teacher of higher truths than reason knows'.² William Blake's mythology has been explained in diverse ways, due to the complexity of its sources and Blake's tendency to absorb mythical stories into his narrative and transform them within the context of his own mythical system. Previous scholarship has tended to accept this without explaining the rationale behind Blake's absorption

¹ In *All Religions are One*, Blake describes this as a universal imaginative capability and man's essential being.

² Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p.169

of such mythological ideas. As a result, in this paper I wish to explore one aspect of this subject, arguing that for this process of absorption to occur and to avoid contamination by what Blake perceived to be failed mythologies, the poet needed to establish an original mode of creativity. I intend to focus mainly on those mythologies that were of contemporary interest to Blake and an overview of Blake's relationship to myth will at first be necessary to clarify the issues involved.

Blake's 'Great Task'

The Blakean scholar Jason Whittaker has investigated the revival of interest in aspects of British mythology in the eighteenth century and the way in which Blake interpreted these myths and absorbed ancient stories into his descriptions of historical events in his own period.³ Blake's attempts to appropriate aspects of ancient rituals, such as those of the Druids and ideas of sacrifice, in order to demonstrate the connections between them and the Napoleonic Wars or 'the Terror' of the French Revolution, reveal a strong interest in utilising ancient myth to reinterpret historical events. Blake had a fascination for ancient stories that were retold in his period, most famously by Jacob Bryant in *A New System or Analysis of Antient Mythology* (1774-76). Blake, as both artist and poet, had a hand in engraving Bryant's book and was familiar with the references to Egyptian, Grecian, and Druidic mythologies outlined in this compendious three-volume work.⁴ In describing a painting entitled, 'The Ancient Britons' in his *Descriptive Catalogue* of his only public art exhibition in 1809, Blake argues that, 'The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing as Jacob

³ Jason Whittaker, *William Blake and the Myths of Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999)

⁴ It is worth noting that in *Fearful Symmetry*, Northrop Frye is of the opinion that Jacob Bryant's work on a single world culture is strewn with 'misinformation' (p.173) and that Blake had not read it. Frye argues that another work with an alternative thesis, Edward Davies' *Celtic Researches* and William Stukeley's work may have influenced Blake's *Jerusalem* in terms of, 'identifying the original world culture with Druidism' (p.174)

Bryant and all antiquaries have proved...All had originally one language, and one religion, this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel. Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus'.⁵ Just as Bryant had argued that an original Old Testament Monotheism had degenerated into pagan sects, Blake believed that the heroes of British Mythology, such as King Arthur, were representative of 'an ancient glory' that would revive again and act as an inspiration to artists.⁶

Blake also helped to engrave Richard Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain*, Part 1 (1786) and exhibited an interest in Ossian's works that had been revived in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In his annotations to Wordsworth's poetry Blake states, 'I own myself an admirer of Ossian equally with any other Poet whatever, Rowley & Chatterton also'.⁷ Further sources for Blake include Pierre Henri Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* (1770), which purports to describe the customs of the ancient Danes and explains the origins of references in Blake's *Milton, a Poem* and his longer epic poem, *Jerusalem, the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1820) to the Scandinavian sacrificial ceremony of 'The Wicker Man'.⁸ References to Stonehenge also abound in this major work, one possible source material for which is William Stukeley's *A*

⁵ 'The Ancient Britons' is a painting that is now lost. Blake's description of the painting refers to three escapees from the last battle of King Arthur, represented in three classes of men, known as the Strong, the Beautiful and the Ugly. Blake insists that these classes of men live 'age after age', and this idea also arises in Blake's poem, *Milton, a Poem* (1803), in which 'the Reprobates', 'the Elect' and 'the Redeemd' appear to provide parallels, albeit with reference to Calvinism, to the Ugly, the Beautiful and the Strong man. In another description from the *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake explains that his painting of Chaucer's Pilgrims depicts psychological types that endure from 'age to age'. It is noteworthy that Blake cites an ancient source for these classes of men, and as revealed in *The Ancient Britons*, Blake enfolds these types into his own mythology of Albion, the Ancient man of British Mythology, who is composed of different typologies or powers, known as Zoas, '[the classes] were originally one man, who was fourfold...and the form of the fourth was like the son of God'. David Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), p.543.

⁶ Blake considered the stories of Arthur to be 'the acts of [the Universal Man], Albion, applied to a Prince of the fifth century' Erdman, p.543.

⁷ William Blake, *Annotations to William Wordsworth's 'Poems'* 365; Erdman, p.666

⁸ See *Milton, a Poem in 2 Books* plate 37. 11; Erdman, p.137 and *Jerusalem* 47. 7; Erdman, p.196. In the second of these, Blake refers to 'blood', of sacrificial rites 'Animating the Dragon Temples', which describes the temples of the Druids and this is replaced by 'The Wicker Man of Scandinavia', a large wicker construction in the form of a man that was traditionally set alight with the sacrificial victims inside. Jason Whittaker argues that Blake's reference to the consumption of the 'Saxons' on the, 'enormous altars in the terrible north' of 'Woden and Thor and Friga' that takes place 'From Irelands rocks to Scandinavia Persia and Tartary' (Erdman, p.21) has as its source the 'eastern homelands' of the Norsemen referred to in Mallet's work (Whittaker, p.28).

Temple Restor'd to the British Druids (1740), a text that argues that an ancient patriarchal religion once dominated as a single influence and fell into idolatrous practices, 'divine redemption by sacrifice...this the most ancient nations had a knowledge of, from patriarchal tradition. When they laps'd into idolatry, they applied these good notions to their new idolatry...sacrificing the ram...beating the ram...burying him in a sacred urn: all most evidently pointing out the notions they had...of the suffering statue of the Messiah'.⁹ This notion accords with Blake's theology of Jesus that he considered to be explicated in ancient mythical sources and, as the human imagination is associated with Christ in Blake's works, he makes a case for the poets as those who, 'animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses'.¹⁰ The poets possessed a 'Poetic Genius [that] was the first / principle and all the others merely derivative'.¹¹ For Blake, the degeneration of this original poetic imagination is represented in the growth of the church 'attempting to realize or abstract / the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood. / Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales'.¹² In the eighteenth century, there was a resurgence in the writing of religious poetry and an attempt to view the poet as divinely inspired. In this climate, Blake's agenda to reinstate the poetic imagination in defiance of the Moral Law took shape and required a reinvestigation of mythological origins. As a result, Blake promoted his mythology of Albion, the Ancient Man of British Mythology as an original embodiment of later myths and a representative of the 'Golden Age'.

Artist as Myth-maker

⁹ William Stukeley, *A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* (London: W. Innys & R. Maney, 1740), p.112

¹⁰ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 11; Erdman, p.38

¹¹ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 12; Erdman, p.39

¹² William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 11; Erdman, p.38

In 1810, Blake clearly stated his agenda as an artist, ‘The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative it is an Endeavour to Restore [what the Ancients calld] the Golden Age’.¹³ This announcement, as part of the artist’s additional commentary for the first public exhibition of his paintings, reveals three facts about William Blake’s aesthetic beliefs. Firstly, he regarded his visual and verbal art as imaginative and understood the nature of the ‘Visionary’ in these terms. Secondly, he considered ‘Visionary’ art to be a possible conduit for what he regarded as ‘eternal’ and uncorrupt. Thirdly, it reflects the fact that Blake’s main artistic agenda was to recover the ‘eternal’ through the completion of his visionary art. Blake specifically defines the ‘world of Imagination’ as that ‘into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body’, which implies that the objective of imaginative striving is synonymous with the experience of an after-life.¹⁴ For Blake then, true imaginative endeavour has no connection with corporeality, but it is possible to achieve a state of vision that can produce perfection in a work of art or literature. The redefining of imagery, beliefs, geography, and history is common in Blake’s art, and to this list should be added the fact that Blake comments upon his own visionary experience and life experience. Myth itself becomes a fluid, unsystematic set of images in Blake’s artistic imagination and, in placing elements of aesthetic, cultural and social life in his dynamic ever-shifting mental landscape, Blake is consciously redefining mythical traditions that structure his visionary system.

Blake’s aesthetic principles suggest a belief in the timeless quality of significant artworks, and this is encapsulated in his notion of a ‘Last Judgment’, which he states as being ‘not Fable or Allegory but Vision’.¹⁵ The ‘Last Judgment’ refers to a moment of imaginative clarity which a poet or an artist might experience. Blake’s critique of ‘Fable or Allegory’ is that

¹³ William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*; Erdman, p.555

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*; Erdman, p.554

it is dependent on 'Memory', and thus belongs to the corporeal realm and is inferior to Blake's sense of 'Inspiration' that is required for a truly imaginative act to occur.¹⁶ Blake permits the idea that 'Fable or Allegory' can contain 'Vision' and yet refutes the possibility that this can be placed in the same category as truly imaginative art.¹⁷ One conclusion to which this leads is that certain forms of art, mythology and literature, did not herald a 'Golden Age' for Blake, and he is specific about what he regards as 'perfect': 'Milton, Shakspeare, Michael Angelo, Rafael, the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting, and Architecture, Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo and Egyptian, are the extent of the Human mind'.¹⁸ To this list Blake added a number of artists and writers, and in particular, the Biblical prophets who were admired for their, 'sublime & Divine Images'.¹⁹ Other writers, such as Ovid, are regarded as producers of fables that, 'contain Vision in a Sublime degree being derived from real Vision in more Ancient Writings'.²⁰ Evidently, the essence of 'Visionary' art is regarded as transferable from one artist or writer to another, in the sense that it is inspirational. Blake considers mythology and art to be differentiated according to their purity of vision and the medium of mythology known as fables and allegory is therefore only valued if it is the result of a visionary tradition.

Albion: Primal Mythical Man

Blake's description of art serves as a basis for his conception of the nature of mythology, as he regarded different mythologies and belief systems as surrendering to the corruptions of their age. As myth might be regarded as a set of organising images that are used to make sense of both the

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, 46; Erdman, p.544

¹⁹ William Blake, *Vision of the Last Judgment*, N69 [b]; Erdman, p.555

²⁰ William Blake, *Vision of the Last Judgment*, N79; Erdman, p.556

inner and outer chaos of existence, what is considered to be mythological, from Blake's perspective, might be questioned in the same way as art. Blake's Albion, the primal, 'Universal Man' is presented as the predecessor of all later mythologies, and when Blake describes this spiritual fall and redemption, the former of which occurs when Christ is rejected, the subjects of mythographers (such as Stukeley's Druidic mythology) are depicted as expressions of this fall. The reason for this is Blake's belief that there are different expressions of an original universal mythology. Albion, as the progenitor of all men, is to be seen as the 'true Man', who was faithful to the 'Poetic Genius', as are Blake's favoured artists, such as Michael Angelo, Rafael, or Albrecht Dürer.²¹ However, there are corruptions of the original ancient mythology, found in the sacrificial rites of the Danes or the Druids. In Blake's poem *Jerusalem*, there are many references to the Druidic mythology reflecting their stone circles and oaks as reminiscent of a corruption across Albion's land: 'O God of Albion descend! deliver Jerusalem from the Oaken Groves!'²² Albion's sons and daughters become forces of evil within Blake's mythology, and represent despised figures from Blake's life and characters from ancient British mythology. Significantly, they are associated with what Blake views as Druidic corruption, 'the senses of men shrink together under the Knife of flint, / In the hands of Albions Daughters, among the Druid Temples'.²³

Albion is represented throughout history, just as Sublime art is discovered in the 'Works of modern Genius' as in the works of the ancients.²⁴ For example, in his *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake cites Arthur as a figure whose actions and experiences resemble those of Albion. This suggests that Blake had a notion of archetypal recurrence, and applied similar, if not identical,

²¹ William Blake, *All Religions are One*, prin7; Erdman, p.2

²² William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 38.11; Erdman, p.184

²³ William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 66.84; Erdman, p.219

²⁴ William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, 46; Erdman, p.544

principles to his conceptions of mythology as he did to art. He states that ‘The giant Albion, was Patriarch of the Atlantic, he is the Atlas of the Greeks, one of those the Greeks called Titans. The stories of Arthur are the acts of Albion, applied to a Prince of the fifth century’.²⁵ This reflects Mark Schorer’s view that, ‘great literature is impossible without a previous imaginative consent to a ruling mythology which makes intelligible and unitive the whole of that experience from which particular fables spring and from which they, in turn, take their meaning’.²⁶ The figure of Albion, from this critical perspective, can be viewed as a binding mythological force in the universe, whose wholeness is realized when the ‘Last Judgment’ takes place. However, prior to the ‘Last Judgment’ and with the blight of Albion’s errors, all mythology is corrupted and acts as a corrupting force: ‘Of Albions Spectre the Patriarch Druid! where are all his Human Sacrifices / For Sin in War & in the Druid Temples of the Accuser of Sin’.²⁷ It is only at the end of *Jerusalem*, with Blake’s one hundredth engraved plate that Blake’s Zoas, the powers of Albion, set about the task of renovating the cosmos, which consists of stars and a Druidic ‘Serpent Temple’ in the background. Los is carrying the sun, Urthona is holding a callipers and a large blacksmith’s hammer and Enitharmon is hanging a veil or curtain across the starry backdrop in order to accomplish this task. This suggests that Blake’s own mythological figures are those that are fit to reconfigure the universe and other mythologies, such as the Druidic one, have been unsatisfactory and thus corrupting.²⁸ The emblems of druidic sacrifice, as representative of human error, are dispensed with by the harmonious work of the archetypal forms that have been in opposition to each other for the majority of the narrative.

²⁵ William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, 42; Erdman, p.543

²⁶ Mark Schorer, ‘Mythology (For the Study of William Blake)’ in *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 4, No.3 (Autumn 1942), p.368

²⁷ William Blake, *Jerusalem* 98.48; Erdman, p.258

²⁸ Noah Heringman, *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2004) is a study of the significance of rocks in the Romantic period, which extends this view in citing Blake as a competing mythological revisionist, ‘building Jerusalem farther West even than Ireland’ (p.128)

Two Competing Forms

The latter point is crucial in representing Blake's consciousness as a mythical rebuilder, as the Druid culture in Blake's period was viewed as being the most ancient, and as Northrop Frye argues, 'the word "Druid" would be practically synonymous with "inspired bard"'.²⁹ The decline of civilization since what Blake interpreted as 'a Golden Age', traceable to the Giant Albion, heralds a decline of Vision, art and literature, as a result of a loss of imagination, summarized in the figure of Christ. This corruption of the Visionary insight is explained with reference to other cultures, such as the Roman and the Grecian, whereby the inspiration behind mythological storytelling, such as in Homer, is contaminated by a culture devoted to war. In his short prose piece, *On Homers Poetry*, Blake states, 'The Classics, it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars',³⁰ a sentiment that is extended in another prose work, *On Virgil*, in which the, 'Gothic is Living Form' and the 'Grecian [and Roman] is Mathematic Form'.³¹ Here, art, culture and mythology are considered to be inseparable from each other, and as Michael Farrell argues, 'Blake's poetic may be said to be radical in the sense that it challenges and subverts the ideologies and conventions of classical and neo-classical aesthetic paradigms [expressing] Living Form [that] inheres in the internal unity of the parts as opposed to an externally and imposed order'.³² 'Mathematical Form' is conceived of as what is most restricting

²⁹ Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p.175

³⁰ William Blake, *On Homers Poetry-prose* 21; Erdman, p.270

³¹ William Blake, *On Virgil-prose* 14; Erdman, p.270

³² Michael Farrell, *William Blake: Reading and Writing the Law* <Url:<http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/archive/03/farrell> > accessed 30 July 2010

in art, life and mythology, as represented in the Druidic temples, which are associated with ‘Vengeance [that] cannot be healed’ and the violence of Greek and Roman culture.³³

Vision as Myth

Blake incorporates familiar mythical structures in the form of frequently negative symbolic referents within his later writing, such as *Milton*, *The Four Zoas*, and *Jerusalem*. Biblical and mythical names are placed alongside Blake’s less familiar mythical creations of the Zoas, the four powers that constitute the original man, Albion. In Blake’s *Jerusalem*, place names, or locations are decontextualized so that geography itself becomes a visionary landscape in which places and figures of the Holy land are removed to London: ‘To Islington & Paddington & the Book of Albions River / We builded Jerusalem as a City & a Temple; from Lambeth / We began our Foundations; lovely Lambeth!’ Names of Hebraic origin are placed within Blake’s own mythology and are thus transmuted into an aspect of an alien, private mythology, which does not allow the Biblical myth the luxury of remaining as a defined untouched monolith of meaning. This is but one example of a consistent urge in Blake to reshape history by re-contextualizing mythical or historical personages or places. This involves a vision of the human psyche that includes the rebranding and reshaping of the artistic persona and, in doing so, places the myth-maker at the heart of his myth. On one hand, Blake’s myth can seem to take on a life of its own, free from the constraints of other myths, but the artist also feels an incessant need to reinvent his mythical figures. In this regard, Arianna Antonielli has noted that, ‘Blake’s quest towards a mystical vision of reality reveals his constant attempt to overcome the material world and, by

³³ William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 25.5; Erdman, p.170

means of his spiritual existence, to reach and observe the immanence of the Eternal One'.³⁴ Such a striving accounts for Blake's constant need to reject or revise the mythical systems popular in the eighteenth century and any aspect of his own mythology that remains enslaved by the circumstances of history.

Conclusion

In order to establish a new system of mythology which might avoid the possibility of being 'enslav'd by another Mans', Blake needed to investigate the aesthetic, philosophical, and mythological traditions that informed his period.³⁵ His 'Gothic' artwork attempts to efface rationalistic systems such as Classicism and to replace them, but at the same time remains in a debate with these diverse mythologies. Blake struggles to escape from the constraining influences of philosophical, mythical, and aesthetic systems that arise from historical conflict, arguing that where culture is devalued by acts of violence, pecuniary practices and thoughts of vengeance, no sense of 'Last Judgment' or a visionary 'Pulsation of the Artery' can be discovered.³⁶ Thus, in attempting to reshape myth, Blake asserts that no organizing set of images used to make sense of culture can develop into an aesthetically pleasing system until the 'Golden Age' returns. In his poem, *Milton*, Blake asserts that the world of artistic Vision lies within what he refers to as the 'Vegetative' World, and in terms of the present discussion, that which is corporeal and Mathematical is denuded of its significance within the flux of history, acting as a

³⁴ Arianna Antonielli, 'William Butler Yeats's 'The Symbolic System' of William Blake' in *Estudios Irlandeses*, 3 (2008), 1-28 (p. 13).

³⁵ William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 10.20; Erdman, p.153

³⁶ William Blake, *Milton* 29.3; Erdman, p.127

passive symbol and reduced to its most basic form.³⁷ Thus, the ‘Druidic Temples’ are used for cruel sacrifice rather than a bardic symbol, Classicism is affiliated with war rather than art, and mythical fables are devoid of vision. In arguing thus, Blake defies the classical, mythological and symbolic inheritance of the eighteenth century and establishes himself as an arch myth-maker.

³⁷ Blake features in *Milton* as a poet-prophet who is invaded through his left toe by the spirit of the poet Milton. He describes his garden in Felpham within the narrative and in this garden the land of vision becomes welded with factual geography of the poet’s home and the surrounding area. This is self-mythologization to an extreme degree but it indicates Blake’s commitment to the idea that the world of vision is an aspect of the ‘Vegetative’ world. This is so much the case that Blake imagines that the, ‘Vegetable World appear on my left Foot, / As a bright sandal formd immortal of precious stones & gold’ and the poet stoops down, ‘to bound it on to walk forward thro’ Eternity’ (*Milton* 21.12-14; Erdman, p.115).