I do not want to *make* you any thing: I want to know what Nature has made you, and to perfect you on her plan.

Dr John Gregory

I complain, and no one hears my voice.

*(Thel, 3:4; E.4)*¹

Of all the partial readings of Blake’s works available to students of his poetry, the most censurable appear in the now bulky corpus of criticism concerned with *The Book of Thel* (1789). Taking Blake’s dictum ‘Severity of judgment is a great virtue’ (Lav, 36; E.585) as my guiding principle I will, by looking at the criticism en­snaring the poem, demonstrate that patriarchal critics have got away with numerous unchastised interpretative transgressions, whilst simultaneously working to reveal the historically specific proto-feminist aspects of the poem suppressed by this patriar­chal orthodoxy. *Thel* may seem a rather diminutive work but it is in fact an immensely important poem,² being the first illuminated nar­rative Blake produced and one he continued to offer for sale through­out his life. Blake’s evident commitment to the work, however, was not shared by those men who worked for his canonization; they found it an embarrassing poem and strove, through critical assessments of extravagant condescension, to marginalize it. Northrop Frye blushed even to comment on such a fragile work merely wishing us to note how deft Blake was at avoiding the ‘namby-pamby’; David Erdman was similarly uninterested in a work written before the ardour of Orc had arisen and waved

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the poem aside as 'a sort of mystery play for adolescents', and Damon completed the trinity with his patronizing declaration that this was merely an aberration, Thel being 'far too nice a girl to fit in amongst Blake's furious elementals'.

What is interesting is that though such stances do have a legacy in the constant assertion that Thel is the softest, simplest and most accessible of Blake's longer poems (for example, Brian Wilkie recently spoke of 'the pastel Disneyland Thel seems to live in') these three respected patriarchs of Blake studies were, for once, not at all prophetic. Once the metaphysicians had been displaced (Peter Ackroyd's comments about Thel's 'trembling young soul' are woefully outdated) and the poem's protagonist was acknowledged to be an inquisitive and slightly truculent young woman there was a veritable eruption of works impelled by moral imperatives.

The first blast of this particular trumpet was issued by Robert F. Gleckner who, at the end of the 1950s, savaged Thel's behaviour with great ferocity. Not only is she a selfish and vain spiritual failure whose 'real self' is 'ugly, cold, mean' and 'dark' but she is also a despot, bearing 'no distant resemblance' to Urizen who presides over the Vales of Har as its Queen, wearing 'the crown of luxury, pride, material comfort' and 'power'. Moreover, Gleckner maintained this judgemental stance for three decades: in the mid-1980s he continued his critique by designating Thel 'an incipient Vala whose cruelties swarm through all the prophetic books' and completed his assassination of her character by casting aspersions on Thel's sexuality through the contention that she is an 'autoerotic Petrarchan mistress'. Gleckner ended his initial orations with the definitive statement 'in Blake's eyes Thel is obviously a sinner'. If space permitted, it would be fascinating to trace in detail the manifold ways in which critics following him have demanded her repentance. In this chapter I will simply show how in Thel/Thel criticism, prescriptiveness and didacticism reign to an extent unprecedented in Blake studies.

Of course there are a few critics who have eschewed this authoritarian stance, but they step in to defend Thel only after denying the significance, or indeed the existence, of her gender. W.J.T Mitchell, for instance, argues that she is a 'surrogate for the reader' and contends that Blake is confronting us 'with a human dilemma that eludes any fixed moral stance'; Steven Cox is equally universalizing in his claim that 'love' troubles Thel and that 'is everyone’s problem'; A.G. den Otter offers the ingenious idea