

The Voice of the Ancient Bard.

Youth of delight come hither.
 And see the opening morn.
 Image of truth new born.
 Doubt is fled & clouds of reason
 Dark disputes & artful teasing.
 Folly is an endless maze.
 Tangled roots perplex her ways.
 How many have fallen there!
 They stumble all night over bones of the dead.
 And feel they know not what but care;
 And wish to lead others when they should be led.





William Blake (1794)

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William Blake in the Age of AI Deepfakes: A Warning That We Might Fail to Hear

William Blake's *The Voice of the Ancient Bard* (1794) is one of the shortest poems in *Songs of Experience* (only 75 words) and it is one of the easiest to overlook. It sits as the last poem in his collection, written and published in the late eighteenth century, during Britain's Industrial Revolution.

The poem contains no detailed story and no obvious historical reference points. Instead, the 'Bard' speaks with a warning - not to a specific generation or about any particular technology, but to anyone living at a moment when truth, perception and authority begin to drift apart.

Read today, in an age of AI-generated images, deepfake videos, synthetic voices and algorithm-driven social media, the poem feels disturbingly modern. Blake is not predicting future technology, AI or deepfakes. Rather, he is diagnosing a *recurring human failure mode*: what happens when systems overwhelm our ability to see clearly, and when people lose trust in both authority *and* their very own senses?

What follows is a short, line-by-line reading of this beautifully precise, prophetic poem, seen through the lens of AI deepfake confusion which has crept up on our modern society.

A Line-by-Line Reading in the Age of AI Illusion

"Youth of delight, come hither."

The Bard specifically addresses those most open, curious, innocent and vulnerable to influence - the youth of the day. Today, this includes anyone growing up immersed in digital media with access to phones, tablets, internet, social media and AI software. The call here is urgent: *pay attention* before confusion hardens into habit.

"And see the opening morn, / Image of truth new born."

Morning here symbolises awakening, hope, clarity and new perception. But Blake reminds us that this hopeful vision of truth is also fragile, like a new-born. It doesn't announce itself automatically - it must be *actively perceived, verified and recognised*. However, in a world saturated with synthetic media, this truth is constantly threatened by simulated images and videos that look real but are not rooted in any lived reality.

“Doubt is fled, and clouds of reason,”

This line is not a celebration of certainty. Blake warns that reason itself can become clouded - especially when it is outsourced to systems that can simulate everything. Deepfakes do not clarify truth; they destabilise it, replacing good judgment with universal suspicion. This leads to the endless debate in one's own mind: *is it real or is it not real?* When people are constantly surrounded by simulated media, even doubt and reason can erode - replaced by passive acceptance and habituation. People will be living online with a *false sense of certainty*.

“Dark disputes and artful teasing.”

Endless online arguments, viral outrage, fabricated scandals, dark trolling and performative debates thrive on these manipulated images and video reels. Attention is captured, clickbait is clicked, echo chambers are created, emotions are stirred and outrage is made addictive - but understanding rarely deepens. ‘Artful teasing’ is *engineered* to provoke reaction rather than experiencing the truth.

“Folly is an endless maze, / Tangled roots perplex her ways,”

The ‘endless maze of folly’ is systemic. AI models and deepfake algorithms are trained on vast, opaque datasets; outputs feed new inputs, and origins vanish. Once inside the maze, users struggle to distinguish truth from fabrication, potentially stuck in an infinite scroll of misinformation. The confusion is not accidental - it is *structural*.

“How many have fallen there!”

The Bard laments the sheer scale of the damage. In the modern era, billions of online users are already being affected, and more will fall into the tangled roots. Misinformation spreads faster than correction; confusion spreads faster than understanding. Even those who suspect deception are often drawn into the endless maze, too. The real danger is not that deepfake images deceive us - but that *we stop believing our own capacity to see*.

“They stumble all night over bones of the dead,”

Deepfake systems resurrect past voices, faces, performances, music, online traces and movements. The AI models are trained on all this past data - fragments and ‘bones’ of human expression detached from their original context. People then navigate this dark night of recycled imagery without knowing what is alive and what is true, or what is artificial and what is being manipulated. *Society then repeats the old errors with new technology*.

“And feel they know not what but care;”

This line is rather enigmatic, but it does capture a sense of modern anxiety. People feel that something is wrong, but cannot put a name on it or understand it. *Emotion replaces understanding*: outrage, fear, fascination, distrust. Care persists even as knowledge collapses.

“And wish to lead others, when they should be led.”

Those most confused often become the loudest guides - vocally sharing, reposting, retweeting, influencing and interpreting content they do not properly understand - thereby perpetuating even more confusion. Authority detaches from insight, and the folly simply multiplies. This final line describes viral misinformation culture perfectly. The *ultimate human folly*, according to Blake.

Conclusion: Old Failures, New Machines

William Blake was not writing about AI, social media or deepfakes. He was writing about *how societies fail*: when images gain authority without truth, when systems like AI outpace moral responsibility and when people stop trusting both institutions and their own perception.

He was not warning us about lies. He was warning us about something far worse: a world in which perception itself becomes unreliable and where people lose trust in their own senses, their eyesight, their hearing and their cognitive faculties.

The technologies in society have changed, but the failure modes have not.

Almost two hundred and fifty years ago, Blake warned that confusion does not arise from a lack of information, but from false clarity and misplaced authority.

In an age where machines can now fabricate reality itself and create deepfake content indistinguishable from lived reality, his warning feels less like metaphor and more like instruction.

Blake’s relevance today becomes startling and undeniable:

The maze of folly is ancient, and its roots have always been tangled.

But the responsibility to see clearly remains human.

Pay attention - before you no longer trust your own eyes and ears.

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Atlas of Human Imagination