

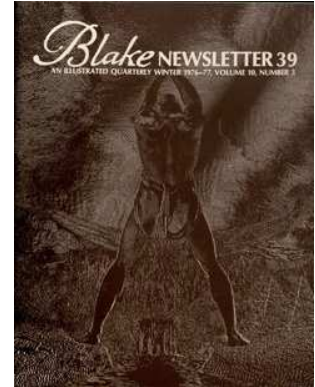
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R E V I E W

Carolyn Keay, William Blake Selected Engravings

Gerda Norvig, Myra Glazer Schotz

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There is a small misunderstanding in the final section that I am happily able to set right. On page 263 Professor Bentley notes that he has been unable to find "Palgrave's Official Catalogue" of the 1862 Exhibition, which he states was cited by me in my essay on Blake's reputation in the *Festschrift* for Sir Geoffrey Keynes.² The form of my citation makes it clear that I was referring to an article by Palgrave which constitutes a part of the one and only *Official Catalogue*: it is a three-page essay introducing the watercolor listings entitled, "The British School of Water Colour Painting." What is remarkable about this short piece by Palgrave is that nearly one page of it is taken up with a comparison of Stothard and Blake. Along with other notices of the Exhibition Blakes it was described in detail and quoted from in my earlier essay, "Pictures at the Exhibitions."³

With the *Blake Bibliography* (produced jointly with Martin K. Nurmi) in 1964, *Blake Records* in 1969, the present book on the critical heritage, and the forthcoming revised bibliography to be entitled *Blake Books*, Professor Bentley has made a most solid and impressive contribution to our knowledge of Blake's fortunes during his life and after. When distant, these separate books appear as One Book; and even if we look more closely, we may note a certain amount of overlapping, or duplication. Roughly three-quarters of the materials of *William Blake: The Critical Heritage* have already been published by Bentley in *Blake Records*; in addition, three-fifths of the Introduction to the present volume are, in its author's words, "largely adapted from the essay on 'Blake's Reputation and Interpreters' in *Blake Books* (forthcoming)"; and finally, all--or almost all--of the items in the present book will be cited in *Blake Books*. To be sure, each of these source books is different and has its own special purpose, that of the volume in hand being to provide an overview for the general student, of early reactions to Blake. But in the light of the considerable duplications mentioned above, one wonders whether this interesting volume on the critical heritage might not have been more indispensable, and at the same time more broadly and accurately reflective of its subject, had its final section on the years 1831-63 been followed by selections from the post-Gilchrist criticism, taking us, perhaps, to the end of the century? It is rather too bad that a book of Blake criticism should end just when things are about to get really lively: it was, after all, in response to the critical challenge posed by Gilchrist's *Life* that informed public discussion of Blake's thought and work suddenly picked up speed and took off.

¹ G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

² "William Blake in the Wilderness: A Closer Look at his Reputation, 1827-63," in Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips, eds., *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 310-49.

³ "Pictures at the Exhibitions," *Blake Newsletter* 21, 1973, pp. 6-12.

Carolyn Keay. **William Blake Selected Engravings.** London: Academy Editions. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975. 84 pp., 4 colorplates. \$16.95 hardbound, \$9.95 paper.

Reviewed by Gerda Norvig and Myra Glazer Schotz

The blurb on the back cover of *William Blake Selected Engravings* suggests we are in for a treat. In addition to a sampling "from almost all the artist's major projects"--from most of the poems and prophecies and from the illustrations for Stedman, Hayley, Blair, Thornton's Virgil and the Book of Job--this volume, we are told, contains "a small number of engravings by contemporary craftsmen after original designs by Blake."

What a letdown when you open the book! Practically every selection from the illuminated canon has been retouched, redrawn, or re-engraved in so crude and careless a manner one needn't wonder at the anonymity of the "craftsmen." Furthermore, the renderings, as it turns out, are contemporary neither to Blake nor to us, for the bulk of them to have been photographed from a stash of awkward, nineteenth-century facsimiles now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Robert Essick, our informant on sources, claims the most shockingly altered designs are from an 1876 lithographic adaptation, the authorship of which has never been acknowledged or determined. Occasionally a composition from that collection is a successful cartoon in its own right, as is the case with some of the radical simplifications of plates from *Urizen*. But to omit proper identification of both the medium and the source, which is Keay's wont, and to pass such work off as Blake's, is at best a gross disservice to the newcomer seeking acquaintance with Blake's authentic vision. Only Schiavonetti's 1808 engravings for *The Grave* are duly captioned as "after original designs by Blake"--an admission which might well have the adverse effect of convincing a beginner everything else is unadulterated.

Unconscionable editorial flaws of this kind are matched by others of a technical and scholarly nature. An abridged group of the Job engravings, haphazardly arranged, appear in murky reproductions that convey little of the special characteristics of line for which they are justly famous. And why, in a book called "Selected Engravings," do renditions of watercolor drawings so frequently show up? Blake's Gray is here, along with a color illustration--not an engraving--for Young's *Night Thoughts*. More puzzling still is the substitution of watercolor studies for three of Blake's finest engravings in the closing section of the book where a run of Dante drawings is featured. This total neglect of Blake's last and possibly greatest achievement in the very medium with which Keay is supposedly concerned, epitomizes the problems of the entire collection.

Even with four color plates, the book is outrageously priced at \$16.95 in hardcover, \$9.95 paper.