

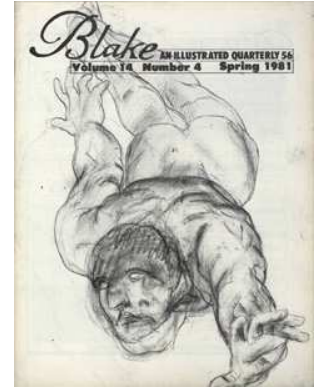
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R E V I E W

Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, eds.,
Blake's Poetry and Designs

Michael Fischer

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Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, eds.
Blake's Poetry and Designs. New York
 and London: W. W. Norton, 1979. xlviii +
 618 pp., 113 illus. (32 color plates).
 \$9.95.

Reviewed by Michael Fischer.

After laying down rules for textbooks in "Choosing Textbooks for Blake Courses: A Survey & Checklist," *Blake Newsletter*, 10 (Summer, 1976), 9-26, Mary Lynn Johnson has decided to play the game. The result--the Norton Critical Edition of Blake (edited with John E. Grant)--is one of the best Blake textbooks in print.

The selections from Blake's work are well-organized, accessible, and generous, so generous, in fact, that it is easier to list what the editors excerpt (*Poetical Sketches*, the Notebook, *The Four Zoas*, *Jerusalem*, *A Descriptive Catalogue*, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, the Marginalia, and the Letters) than what they include in its entirety (virtually everything else of importance, including *Milton*). Thirty-two color plates from the illuminated books let students know what they are missing when they concentrate on Blake in print. Numerous monochrome reproductions interspersed throughout the text are less spectacular but still helpful in indicating how Blake designed his work. The prefaces and notes are also useful: their tone is sympathetic but not canonical, their relation to the text about right. They seldom overshadow or complicate the lines that they try to explain; they identify terms and

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Blake's Poetry and Designs



EDITED BY MARY LYNN JOHNSON
AND JOHN E. GRANT

AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS
ILLUMINATIONS IN COLOR
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RELATED PROSE
CRITICISM

characters without allegorizing them. When the editors make difficult editorial decisions--and with Blake's punctuation they of course must--they always explain their reasoning and refer us to other sources, especially the editions of David Erdman and Geoffrey Keynes. A chronology, maps of Britain, London, and the Holy Land, an extensive bibliography, a list of key terms with page numbers pointing to definitions and examples in the text, commentary by some of Blake's contemporaries (Coleridge, Robinson, and Lamb, among others), and several essays by twentieth-century critics--these useful accessories complete the volume. The critical essays, I should add, are adequate, if predictable, including contributions by Northrop Frye, Jean Hagstrum, David Erdman, and Harold Bloom, among others. T. S. Eliot's "William Blake" and Irene Talyer's "The Woman Scaly," however, come as pleasant surprises. Eliot introduces a dissenting voice in what threatens to be a chorus of unqualified approval; Talyer takes on one of the most important and least understood issues in Blake--his treatment of the sex roles and sexuality.

No book is perfect, not even this one. While Blake's Marginalia is a welcome addition to a book of this kind, the editors' omission of the passages

to which he is reacting robs many of his statements of their humor, force, and truth. A sentence like "Execution is the Chariot of Genius" sounds like an odd exercise in hyperbole--unless one has been reading Reynolds on execution and genius. The editors rightly note that "Blake could have been a masterful controversialist, or even a heckler," but their presentation of his annotations won't allow students to discover why. Although the critical essays do not ignore Blake's drawings--in fact, Hagstrum and Erdman devote a great deal of attention to them--they nevertheless reflect the interests of the literary critics who write them. An essay by an art historian might have placed Blake in art history and revealed what attracts visual artists to his work. Even more importantly, a fuller discussion of Blake's methods as an engraver would have been useful. Familiarity with these techniques allows us to see Blake's critical ideas as he saw them--as practical principles anchored in his everyday life as an artist. Finally, many of the critical essays contain page references to Keynes and Erdman which will force the student to get another book or go digging through this one. When possible, the editors should have correlated these references with citations to their own edition.

But these are minor problems. The highest tribute one can pay to a book like this is to use it, and I plan to in the next undergraduate course I teach on Blake. Or so I dare to hope, for declining enrollments in upper-level literature classes have made such courses rare. Textbooks like this one are consequently in danger of disappearing with small colleges, tenure-track contracts, and other relics of an earlier day. In "Choosing Textbooks" (1976), Johnson could write that "more and more people are preparing to teach Blake for the first time, or teach more of Blake than they did last year, to a growing audience of new readers." Today some of us are hoping to teach him one more time.

Of course literature textbooks are still published but, I would suspect, at a slower rate. And even many of those books that do see print reflect the limited functions that they now serve. If tested by the needs of students, *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Romantic Poetry and Prose*, for example, would probably fail. Harold

Bloom's introduction explains that "the major Romantic questers, whether we see these as the poets themselves or as the quasi-autobiographical heroes of their poems, are all engaged in the extraordinary enterprise of seeking to re-beget their own selves, as though through the imagination a man might hope to become his own father, or at least his own heroic precursor." The headnote to the section on Wordsworth similarly describes modern poetry as "the poetry of the growing inner self." Although that self "was a Protestant creation," "before Luther it was prefigured in Catholic thinkers as diverse as the furious reformer Savonarola and the meditative Thomas à Kempis, who wrote *The Imitation of Christ*." Blake, too, "was primarily an intellectual revisionist, even as Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, in the longest perspective, seem most important as revisionists of the European Enlightenment."

Whatever their other merits, I agree with Johnson that these statements seem out of place in a textbook. Instead of enlightening students, Bloom's overwriting deepens their suspicion that they are missing out on some mystery that no one will explain--some "extraordinary" affair involving men trying to become their own fathers, "daemonic" intellectual revisionists, and "furious" fifteenth-century Italian monks (the strongest students have looked up Savonarola in their Random House Dictionary). One can imagine the frustration of these students when they confront so many unexplained terms and names--or, more precisely, one has to imagine it because in the absence of courses on Romanticism, *The Oxford Anthology* never faces this kind of test. Isolation from a classroom audience may explain why so few readers have objected to the book's insularity. These readers have become professional critics and the book another episode in Bloom's criticism.

Constructed with the needs of non-specialists in mind, *Blake's Poetry and Designs* is a welcome exception to the trend I have been describing. Either the marketplace is flexible enough to allow the publication of seemingly obsolete books, or this kind of textbook is not yet obsolete. I hope that both possibilities are true. In either case, Grant and Johnson have made it easier (if not easy) for us to teach Blake's poetry and prose.