

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Harvey Bellin and Tom Kieffer, *Blake: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; Joseph Viscomi, dir., *An Island in the Moon*

Tim Hoyer

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 20, Issue 2, Fall 1986, pp. 68-70



shown in Blake's works" (finis). Amen! Huzza! Selah! But *this* struggle can only be—being for hearts, minds, and cognitive processes—a "mental, rather than physical, fight," and one wonders to see evident commitment to it reread as an "index of political despair." Such an "index" seems, rather, itself an icon of the ambivalent judgment that posits its existence.

One's overall response to this study, at turns provoking, rewarding, irritating, and disappointing, and to its challenge of "rereading" Blake will probably hinge on whether or not one agrees that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for all its delights, warrants more attention than *Milton* and *Jerusalem* together. As for Blake's "revolutionary ambiguity," one is reminded of the ambiguously revolutionary comment "I used to be indecisive, but now I'm not so sure."

Blake: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Television docudrama written by Harvey Bellin and Tom Kieffer. Produced by the Swedenborg Foundation, New York, 1984. Film or $\frac{3}{4}$ " videocassette, 30 minutes. Rental free (Swedenborg Foundation, 139 East 23rd St., New York, NY 10010).

William Blake's An Island in the Moon. Adapted by Joseph Viscomi, directed by Viscomi and Evamarii Johnson, with music by Margaret LaFrance, 1983. First performed at Cornell, 8–9 April 1983; videotaped before a live audience 11–12 May 1983. $\frac{3}{4}$ " videocassette, 48 minutes. Rental \$50, sale \$130 (Blake, Dept. of English, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27514).

Reviewed by Tim Hoyer

As video has mushroomed in the last several years it is not surprising that Blake has become the subject of several films now available on videocassette. The Swedenborg Foundation has been a good deal more generous with Blake in this film and recent publications than he was with the master in the work from which the film's title is taken. Unfortunately, the film in many ways justifies Blake's original treatment of the institutional

Swedenborg in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, lopsided though it was. What the writers and producers have given us is a distinctly "angelic" picture of Blake and his marriage to his wife and to his work, thus misrepresenting both.

The film opens with Blake sitting up in bed coloring a print of *The Ancient of Days* under the adoring eye of his wife, Kate. The Blakes are represented as living in spotless cleanliness in a small but tidy apartment even though, according to George Cumberland, Jr., who visited Blake with some frequency on his father's business during Blake's later years, their actual Fountain Court "studio" was dirty and crowded. The time is 1827, ostensibly during Blake's last days, but the film does not attempt anything resembling a narrative of this period in Blake's life and career. Instead Blake's pictures are used to illustrate his doctrine of the creative life as it is described in readings from his works. The acting (William is played by George Rose; Catherine by Anne Baxter) is limited to recitation and dumb show and the effect is not dramatic.

Overlooking for a moment the filmmakers' use of *The Ancient of Days* as a focal point for Blake's artistic consciousness in the last days of his life (though Tatham reports that Blake was coloring a copy of this print for him on his death bed, Blake was undoubtedly more concerned at the time with the Dante illustrations he was making for John Linnell), the most obvious problem with the film from the outset is its unremitting sentimentality. Blake and his wife are portrayed as luminously happy, constantly smiling at the world and one another through glistening eyes. Catherine plays a role in many ways more important than Blake's; she is a kind of dewy-eyed docent and nurse to the art and man. The filmmakers' conception of the Blakes' marriage seems extraordinarily off the mark. One does not expect to see the elder Blakes at each other's throats, but the pious couple we do see does not look like a marriage of heaven and hell, nor does it betray a shred of earthly reality. Blake's art contains a sometimes dark and ambivalent view of women and we suspect, on evidence from poems and notebook entries, that his marriage to Catherine was at times extremely difficult for both of them. Any hint of these things is completely absent here and, though it is not completely unrealistic to see the old couple mellowed and accommodated to one another at the end of their long marriage, one expects to see signs, however subtle, of the years of hard poverty and marital difficulties. Instead everything is sanitized and sentimentalized. The tone of the production is pious, almost in the religious sense. We are being given a view of a secular sainthood.

Realism is lacking in other respects too. The only "real" event in the film is Blake's death at the end. But that one event is seen through the sentimental filter of

Victorian accounts of it. This treatment of Blake is not "historical." There is no sense of his relation to his profession, to art, to the political events that engaged him. Though he spent most of his life in London, when we are shown scenes outside the room in Fountain Court in flashback they are of Blake and Catherine walking on a beach and playing with children in the sand, supposedly in the 1790s (this is the filmmakers' way of representing "eternity in a grain of sand" in combination with the children of the *Songs of Innocence*). All is private, internal, just Blake and his dear wife. No Cumberland, no Linnell, no Butts, no Varley, no hint of the artistic and city life that Blake was always a part of even when he was "hid," an obscure figure to an indifferent public.

Still worse is the simplistic view of Blake's art. Blake's visions are portrayed with a literalism that belies their real source, his artistic imagination. Using flashbacks and special effects, the film attempts to show, through a blend of brilliantly luminous reproductions of his works and dramatizations of his "visions," Blake's creative process as a battle between Urizen and Los (thus the emphasis on *The Ancient of Days* instead of the drawings after Dante). The special effect "visions" are supposed to illustrate Blake's internal "struggle." Some of them, especially the Devil and Urizen, are absurd. Blake's hell is entirely missing from these scenes. To portray Blakean vision in this literal way is inappropriate and finally inaccurate.

The inaccuracy lies in the attempt to make key Blakean ideas (e.g., imagination and reason) from his early work represent Blake's actual psychic and artistic concerns at the end of his life. The psychomachia of the Lambeth prophecies becomes the central "doctrine" of his artistic career and the literal "state" of his mind as well. References to *Jerusalem*, both visual and verbal, do occur but they are few and simple. There is no hint of the work and development after 1795, of Job or Dante or any of Blake's other later concerns, either in poetry or art. With the exception of *Glad Day*, selection of the art shown is also limited to illuminated manuscripts, mostly work done between 1789-95. To criticize the selection of art, however, is perhaps a little too harsh. The vivid, full-color reproductions of Blake's pictures, including a number that are not commonly seen by the public, is the strongest point of this film. Though we would like to see more and a wider variety of Blake's pictures, what we are shown in this film is splendid.

Overall, however, the effect of the piety and the simplification is embarrassing and misleading. Though it shows a generous selection from Blake's illuminated art rather nicely, it also misrepresents him. Though it is rather highly produced it lacks a really imaginative view of Blake. Heaven is not opposed by hell and Blake's true humanity suffers as a result. This sort of popular treatment presents an image of Blake that modern schol-

arship has worked hard to banish.

A second Blake film on videocassette does not fall prey to the faults of *Blake: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake's readers have always found in *An Island in the Moon* a counterbalance to the image of Blake the gentle, dotty mystic. Joseph Viscomi's adaptation of *An Island in the Moon* as it was performed by student actors before a live audience at Cornell University's Drummond Studio Theatre revels in this counterbalancing and is at once more lively and truer to Blake than the film produced by the Swedenborg Foundation. The adaptation stays quite close to the text of Blake's manuscript fragment and, though it has shortcomings, it catches the spirit of the piece, placing it within the context of late eighteenth century English popular comedy and musical theater.

Of the few changes made by the adapter the most obvious is the confinement of the action to one act and one scene. Some songs from elsewhere in Blake's work have been added (e.g., "The Garden of Love"). Some of the characters have been fused together in order to simplify the stage business (Etruscan Column and Steelyard become a single character). A few of the songs and parts of the original manuscript have been repeated and slightly reshuffled in order to give dramatic form and coherence (material from the last page of the manuscript has been used in several places so that references to Blake's illuminated printing become a theme through repetition).

The stage is unadorned and the characters are disposed as if they were in a drawing room. There are a few entrances and exits but the scene is essentially unchanging. Musicians with their instruments (a piano and a flute) are included among the actors on stage and the music, for the most part, is excellent, enhancing the lively, period atmosphere of the production. The characters are costumed but not elaborately in period dress and, although some props are used, these too are minimal. More might have been done to identify the individual characters with the costuming and mannerisms to mark them as types since Blake, having given each a stock name, clearly intends this. But it is clear that the show must depend almost entirely on the talk and the songs.

Having accepted Blake's words as the focus, the adapter gives this production a good deal of life despite the inherent shortcomings of Blake's manuscript. The film's flaws as drama are primarily Blake's flaws as a dramatist. Perhaps he was writing, as Martha W. England has suggested, with the chaotic virtuosity of Samuel Foote's comic reviews of current events and popular or notorious personalities in his mind. This would account for the loose structure and lack of dramatic continuity in the piece as well as the topical nature of its satire. The film, despite its high spirits, suffers from these things and is at times somewhat confusing and

lifeless because of them. The repartee, interesting to a Blakean, is not sufficiently interesting for a general audience. The deficiencies of the unfinished manuscript are ultimately impossible to fully overcome.

Much of what might have been obscure in the text, however, has been made clear on the stage. A successful effort is made to render the atmosphere of the late eighteenth century London of this group of ambitious young men and women with all their pretensions to better society (whether the society of better drawing rooms or that of better artists than those who governed the Royal Academy). The acting is amateur and this has its drawbacks. But it also has the value of matching the youthful spirit of Blake's own work and the enthusiasm of his young characters. The energy, brashness, vulgarity, and adolescent critical irony of the original is well conveyed. We get something of Blake's own curious ambivalence toward success, both social and artistic. Miss Gittipin is nicely done up like a Reynolds or Romney portrait of a fashionable lady. This makes an interesting tension between the obvious satire of this type, on one hand, and the equally obvious attraction she exerts on Blakean Quid, on the other, bringing out Blake's ambivalence toward sexual and artistic success very adroitly. The philosophers, in their close puppy-like grouping, nicely convey a touchy adolescent violence of emotion and expression mingled with the almost physical need for close contact with others, another characteristically Blakean problem. Blake's youthful cockney wit is oc-

asionally shown to advantage and all of this works to give the audience a Blake that is not the common property of the public, which is probably the best thing about *An Island in the Moon*. Of course, it also contains many of the preoccupations of the maturer Blake but, at first sight, in an un-Blakean setting. *An Island in the Moon* adds a dimension to Blake despite its shortcomings as art, dramatic or otherwise. Young Blake comes across as a brash, bloodyminded fellow, who could be self-critical while lambasting everyone else. He manages to spread his own defects among the characters, ridiculing his own pretensions along with those of his society. This self-implication is at the core of Blake's art; Blake is never detached from his time or scene, even when he is railing against it.

On the negative side, frequently the lyrics are poorly presented. Sometimes the sound equipment is inadequate to pick up the singing but often the singing is simply too weak to be heard over the musical accompaniment. In most cases, it does not adequately show off the lyrics (especially in the case of "Holy Thursday"). Part of the problem is a natural consequence of taping before a live audience. Still, Blake's lyrics are of greatest interest here and they are hard to understand, even when the hearer already is quite familiar with them.

Despite its defects this production provides a ready way for the student into Blake's world. As a piece of drama, however, it is less appealing, somewhat amateurish and lacking in compelling action.

THE SCATTERED PORTIONS

William Blake's Biological Symbolism

Rodney M. Baine
With the assistance of Mary R. Baine

Against the traditional background of iconology which Blake inherited, *The Scattered Portions* studies his use of biological symbols—animal, avian, insect, reptilian, marine, and botanical. It concentrates upon the illuminated canon, where it examines particularly the complex and controversial examples; but it draws also from Blake's designs for the Bible, Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, Gray, and Young. It shows that Blake rarely inverted or perverted his biological symbols, but used them conventionally. It thus assists the student of Blake to understand a vital and virtually forgotten part of his vocabulary.

1986 xx+260 pp.; 77 illus. \$24.95, hardbound

Distributed by the author, Department of English, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602

