Bette Charlene Werner, Blake’s Vision of the Poetry of Milton

Janet Warner

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 22, Issue 1, Summer 1988, pp. 25-26


Apthorp, 328.


---


Reviewed by Janet Warner

Since 1980, Blake's designs for the poetry of Milton have been the subject of books by Stephen Behrendt, Pamela Dunbar, and now Bette Charlene Werner. The most beautifully produced book is Behrendt's, and Dunbar's contains much useful information, but because of its ease of reference, and brief, sensitive interpretations, I find Werner's book quietly impressive.

The structure which informs Werner's study is based on the generally accepted idea that Blake saw his role vis-à-vis Milton as clarifying and purifying the visionary element in the poetry: to redeem the sixfold emanation, in this case the six poems by Milton that Blake chose to illustrate. Werner discusses the six poems in the order of Blake's first treatment of them from 1801 to 1825: *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* (Blake's *Comus* designs); *Paradise Lost*; *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*; *L'Allegro*; *Il Penseroso*; and *Paradise Regained*. In cases where Blake produced more than one series of illustrations, such as *Comus, Paradise Lost*, and the *Nativity Ode*, Werner usually discusses the designs in tandem. She asserts that Blake's ideas about Milton were re-thought over the years and it is important to view the distinctions between each complete series. Her overview states that Blake's interpretations tend to become more affirmative in successive treatments of the same poem and also in subsequent series of illustrations. She sees Blake's method as "contending with and discarding any obscuring layer of error and then highlighting the area where he finds the work's essential validity." Werner approaches each series with this consistent point of view.

Although her general interpretations of the Milton designs are not unusual and her style is unfailingly moderate, Werner's consistent approach to each design gives such a close "reading" of visual detail that she often makes perceptive observations. For instance, she contrasts the *Paradise Lost* illustration *Satan as a Toad at the Ear of Eve* with Milton 38, noting similarities in the male pose and observing that "taken together, the two illustrations convey visually Blake's understanding of sexuality's dual nature, both its proximity to spirituality and its potential for precipitating a further fall into debased carnality" (74).
That the list of illustrations at the beginning of the book
is illustration 79. One must refer to the back of
Washington being illustration 8.

It is hard to get excited about Blake's Milton designs
in this book, because Werner's observations in the wider
scheme of things are always cautiously correct. However,
one of her best sections is her discussion of The Spirit of
Plato (L'Allegro and II Penseroso, design 9), where per-
ceptive detail bears out her statement that the design
shows "the rich ambivalence" of Blake's attitude toward
Milton.

I wonder if this ambivalence isn't also present in
the illustrations to the Ode on the Morning of Christ's
Nativity. Werner suggests as much in comparing the
Nativity Ode with Europe, and calling Blake's poem a
sardonic parody of Milton's. What Werner does not say
is that Blake's illustrations to the Nativity Ode are surely
among the most cluttered and least attractive of all
Blake's designs, and I wonder why we avoid commenting
on aesthetic effect while we are attempting to be combi-
nation literary-and-art critics. It is easy to get lost in
Minute Particulars.

Minute particulars are important in Werner's book,
and so I am going to be particularly minute and note
here some bothersome inconsistencies. In discussing the
upraised hands of the Lady in Comus 2H, Werner says
the Lady is registering her "indecision." However, the
same gesture on the Attendant Spirit in Comus 1H is
supposed to be "an attitude of gentle piety." Now it can-
not be both. Again, Werner refers to the Lady's gesture
in Comus 1B as an attitude of "openness" when it is
clearly a gesture of protest (cf. Christ making the same
gesture at the Banquet Temptation in Paradise Reg-
gained). And Mary in PR 12 is not really "raising her
arms in freedom" but expressing astonishment. And it
is a worm, not a snake around Adam in Elohim Creating
Adam. Details!

Werner has adopted a rather unusual system for
referring to illustrations in the text of the book: for ex-
ample, the Comus illustrations are numbered one
through sixteen, rather than 1-8 H (for Huntington set)
and 1-8 B (for Boston set). This means that if one is look-
ing for Comus with his Revellers (Boston) it is called
illustration 9, The Lady's Return to her Parents (Hunt-
ington) being illustration 8. Paradise Regained 12 (Fitz-
william) is illustration 79. One must refer to the back
of the book to find the illustration itself and its usual
appellation. Once I got used to the system, I realized
that the list of illustrations at the beginning of the book
was in reality the finding list for the designs. In a book
in which one is constantly having to flip back and forth
to compare design and text, I think a system of putting
similar subject designs on facing pages would have made
the book easier to use. The notes, however, are conveni-
ently placed at the end of each chapter, and there is a
bibliography useful for both Blake and Milton studies.
A good deal of careful scholarship lies behind this work.
One can certainly recommend this book to anyone be-
beginning a study of Blake's Milton designs.

David V. Erdman. Commerce des Lumières:
John Oswald and the British in Paris,
1790-1793. Columbia, Missouri: Univer-
sity of Missouri Press, 1986. xiii + 338 pp.,
illus. $39.00.

Reviewed by Michael Ferber