

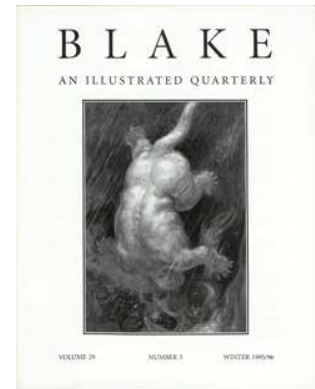
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph
Viscomi, eds., *William Blake, The Early
Illuminated Books*

Michael Ferber

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 29, Issue 3, Winter 1995/96, pp. 88-
90



Recounting his experiences as a compiler, Dörrbecker emphasizes the significance of an "annotated" bibliography: "In the future, they [annotations] will have to be considered as central to—and, in practice, the *raison d'être* of—the whole endeavor [of compiling a bibliography]."³⁹ If annotated, Bentley's bibliography would be tremendously useful to scholars who are involved in the promotion of global reading of Blake. There is in fact a plan for compiling an annotated bibliography, on CD-ROM, of Japanese Blake scholarship, conceived by Keiko Aoyama, who assisted Bentley in translating/transliterating the material for his bibliography. Bentley is to be congratulated for his commitment to international scholarship in bringing Japanese achievement to attention, and any future bibliographic work of Japanese scholarship will be made on the basis of *Blake Studies in Japan*.

William Blake, *The Early Illuminated Books*.

Edited with introductions and notes by
Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph
Viscomi. Princeton: The William Blake Trust/
Princeton University Press, 1993. Blake's
Illuminated Books Volume 3. General Editor
David Bindman. 286 pp. \$75.

Reviewed by MICHAEL FERBER

This is an altogether splendid volume of plates and commentary. It covers all of Blake's "illuminated" work from 1788 to 1793 except for the *Songs*, which made up Volume 2. Of the three volumes I have seen (there will be six in all, not five, as originally announced), this is the most interesting and original in its commentary, though like the others it tries to be catholic and fair in its citations of scholarship. Unlike the first two volumes, however, it escapes serious damage from sleepy compositors and proofreaders. It gives us several of the works we are most likely to teach after the *Songs*: *Thel*, *Marriage*, and *Visions*, as well as the early tracts *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*. It is too expensive to assign to students, but for almost any course on Blake professors must see that their library has it on reserve; for specialists the commentary alone is worth the price.

I have not tried to compare the plates with the originals, but they seem about as faithful as one could ask. Color variations are subtle, and nothing seems either too bright or too subdued. And the publishers have been generous. Besides the eight plates of *Thel* copy J, for example, we are given six supplementary plates: two proof copies of plates 2 and 3,

plate 6 of copy K, plate 7 of copy I, plate 8 of copy N, and pencil sketches of plates 6 and 7. There are particular reasons for including these (a bit of design or text is added), but it is also good to have them just for the differences in coloring, so a student will see that even in general impact Blake's versions of the same work differ dramatically. So with the other works: there are 14 extra plates for *Marriage* and 11 for *Visions*. We get four versions of *Marriage* 21, the wonderful nude male who reappears in *America* 8, and three versions of the great frontispiece of *Visions*, one of which is reproduced at about twice the original size on the dust jacket of the volume. Even with no scholarly questions in mind it is rewarding to gaze at the different versions of these designs.

The introduction presents the most lucid and succinct summary of Blake's methods of book production that I have seen. It stresses that Blake composed designs directly on the plate and thus did not need a fair copy, though he manifestly had pencil sketches of many if not all of them. The fundamental unit of production was not the individual copy of a work but the printing and coloring "session," which typically involved two copies and sometimes more. Different ink colors might be used in one session. "The products of each printing session correspond to an 'edition' of a book, while each ink colour can be considered a different 'issue' of the edition" (11). These categories reflect the brilliant reconstructive research of Joseph Viscomi, who elaborates his argument in *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton, 1993).

One result of his researches is a new approach to *There is No Natural Religion*. "Viscomi's recent discoveries" (22), as detailed in his book, showed that 50 of the 153 known impressions of the 20 plates of *NNR* were not done by Blake. The authentic ones represent just two sessions, one c. 1794 and one c. 1795. From the six copies that Viscomi determined stem from the first session, the same eight plates are lacking (that is, the bulk of the "b" series as usually printed now: b1-2, 5-11, including the one missing from all copies, b5). In other words, Blake printed and colored six sets with the same 12 plates, a1-9, b3, b4, and b12. It strongly appears that Blake's intention, at that time, was to make an independent work out of the two sequences he had engraved as early as 1788. Viscomi et al. go on to argue that there is no sharp inconsistency in combining the three "b" plates with the "a" plates, and that indeed "The 'a' part cannot stand alone; without its second half, the irony would not be apparent and Blake would have appeared to contemporary readers as an advocate of the very position he is attacking," namely the rational empiricism of Bacon and Locke (25). We are given a new work, and the plates are here so arranged. (The c. 1795 printing is the "b" series with the "a" title page.)

It is not to question Viscomi's research to wonder if it is so clear that the "a" series cannot stand alone. A *reductio ad absurdum* argument can be quite straight-faced; it needn't

³⁹ Dörrbecker, "Blake and His Circle," *Blake* 26 (1993): 76.

pounce on a conclusion as in b3 and b4. The fourth through sixth propositions (a7-9), involving thought and desires (e.g., "Mans desires are limited by his perceptions"), might well have struck a contemporary as evidently false without explicit prompting. The "a" series might (originally) have been intended to convey through a mixture of plausibly Lockean ideas and ironic distortions of them the sheer paltriness of such a philosophy, giving us not so much a logical absurdity as an outrage to the human spirit. This is all we can grind out of Locke's mill, it seems to say: Are you satisfied? The editors later concede, somewhat inconsistently, that "Blake exaggerates (and thereby parodies) their method [Bacon's and Locke's]" (28) and that "Even a reader favourably disposed toward Bacon and Locke might begin to suspect [with a8 and a9] that this strait jacket has been fitted a bit too tightly" (32). I agree. By 1794, it may be, Blake lost his nerve a little, and added the three "b" plates to make sure his readers got the point. In any case we do seem to have an evolving intention, and if we are to respect that intention then future editions of Blake should print three sequences, the "a" and "b" sequences (as in Erdman 1982) and the 1794 sequence.

With the otherwise very helpful commentary on *All Religions are One* I have only one quibble. The editors take the "Argument" as a statement no empiricist would question—for they take "experiment" and "experiences" to be used in the modern (Baconian) sense—concerning "the true method of knowledge"; "but Blake immediately begins to overturn that easy assumption by introducing as his first principle 'the Poetic Genius'" (29). I think Blake is slyer here, and is not exactly overturning his assumption. He may be trying to lure an empiricist to agree with his argument, but Blake can agree with it, too, for he is also using "experiment" and "experience" in the older and broader sense found in the language of religious enthusiasm. As William Haller writes, "the Preachers made experiment a familiar word on the plane of religion and morals long before it became supreme on that of natural science" (*The Rise of Puritanism* [NY: Columbia, 1938] 299). As an example from the radical sects, take Gerrard Winstanley, who wrote in 1649 that the Scriptures are a record of the "pure experience" of the prophets and apostles, and in reading them we gain "an experimental persuasion, grounded upon sight and feeling of the spirit of truth" (George Sabine, ed., *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley* [Ithaca: Cornell, 1941] 128-29). Methodists in Blake's day had "experience meetings" where people gave personal testimonies. Though Blake does not say that the Poetic Genius experiences anything, it is not inconsistent with his formulation to say that the Poetic Genius enables us to experience things not dreamt of in the philosophy of Bacon and Locke. The empiricists experience through the chinks of their caverns: we, at our best, experience through fourfold vision.

Most Blake scholars, I suspect, are closet commentators, near kin to classicists and medievalists who dream of producing the Great Commentary on their cherished author,

line by line and word by word. I for one have had to struggle, not always successfully, against an impulse to shovel gobbits out of my notebook of hard-earned annotations into my articles and books. What fun to have the license to fill 15 large pages with comments on *Thel*! But you thereby expose yourself to the jealous scrutiny of the commentary guild. Let me say, then, before I put forth my own additions and corrections, that the commentaries on *Thel*, *Visions*, and *Marriage* are all excellent; I might have done them a little differently, but I could not have done them better.

I was a little surprised to see the point that "By referring to herself in the third person (4:11; see also 5:3), *Thel* also separates herself from herself, as though consciousness without identity leads to a grammatical expression of alienation" (75). (The plate numbers here are two higher than the standard numbering, and there are four instances, not two, of *Thel*'s calling herself "*Thel*.") Aside from the fact that my two-year-old daughter, not yet self-alienated, calls herself by her name, I find this very far-fetched. What do we say about *Lyca*, then, who calls herself "*Lyca*" four times in a shorter poem, and uses "her" to mean "my"? Or *Oothoon*, who calls herself "*Oothoon*" six times? It is also awkward that *Thel* drops that habit in the latter three plates. This idea should have been laid to rest, not preserved in a commentary that will be much consulted for a long time.

The discussion of the titlepage design for *Thel* leaves out something important about the willow, and it strikes me as misleading to say that the "entwined vine forms a traditional emblem of marriage or education" (81). That may be true (though marriage and education are quite different things), but it ignores the symbolism of the willow by itself. The willow means just the opposite of marriage. In a tradition going back to Homer, the willow is "worne of forlorne Par-amours," in Spenser's phrase (*FQ* 1.1.9). It is described thus throughout Shakespeare: the report of Ophelia's drowning, for example, begins with a willow, and Desdemona sings of a willow before she is murdered by Othello. In Blake's day, "she is in her willows" meant "she is mourning her husband or betrothed." Willows were also frequently carved on tombstones; thus the tombstone shape that the willow describes on the title page is probably not our fancy. Indeed the sole willow in Homer is at the entrance to Hades.

In the "Notes" to *Thel* (108f) I would add the following:

4.4 (=2.4) "crave" deserves a note. It means "ask" or "beg"; the "voiceless" are those who "cannot crave." See *King Edward the Third* 6:45-46: "nor shall the young / Crave or be heard" (E 438). Joseph of Arimathea "craved the body of Jesus" from Pilate (Mark 15.43). Yeats may have been inspired by Blake's line in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time": "Lest I no more hear the common things that crave; / The weak worm hiding down in its small cave, / The field mouse running by me in the grass."

4.7 (=2.7) "taints": cf. *Lycidas* 46: "Or Taint-worm to the weanling Herds that graze." "Taint" by itself could mean "taint-worm."

6.6 (=4.6) "cherish" means "make warm" or "keep warm." Cf. *PL* 10.1068-69 ("some better warmth to cherish / Our limbs benumbed") and several occurrences in the AV.

8.1 (=6.1) "northern bar": cf. Job 17.16 ("the bars of the pit"); also *Auguries* 42 ("polar bar") and *Milton* 23.42 ("Satans Bar"). Perhaps also relevant are the "exclusive bars" of "membrane, joint, or limb" in *PL* 8.625; the editors cite this for the final line of *Thel* but treat "bars" as if it were a verb.

The editors make a good case against the standard view that the final plate of *Thel*, which seems different in tone and imagery from the others, was engraved two years after they were. The evidence rests in part on the changing shapes of the letter "g," David Erdman's discovery, and the editors show that Erdman's argument as to dating *Thel* and *Marriage* can no longer be sustained. There is also no direct evidence of an alternative ending. They acknowledge that Blake may have had difficulty coming up with an ending to the poem, but they deny there was an appreciable delay. We do not have a case like Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode. Those for whom the process of production, as evidence of Blake's intentions, is crucial to interpreting the work must take note. Those for whom it is the final product that counts (perhaps following Blake's intention there as well!), are left where they were, trying to make sense of a somewhat baffling ending.

The editors, following more work by Viscomi, argue that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was begun and very likely completed in 1790; Blake did not take until 1793 to do it, as most scholars have argued or assumed. He worked within discrete textual units, such as plates 16-20, probably did not produce them in the final order (departed from in copy G in any event), and could have assembled them in almost any order. In a recent talk at the "Blake 1794/1994" conference at St. Mary's College, Viscomi gave more details of the production of *Marriage*, and made a case that Blake may have intended one or more parts of it as a separate pamphlet or broadside. I couldn't help feeling a little surge of satisfaction, as I have recently claimed that *Marriage* has very little structure despite many ingenious efforts to reveal it. As an anti-intentionalist I would not rest my claim on evidence from the production process, but those who do not draw the line where I do should take careful note of the new evidence. (Viscomi is at work on a second book, which will expand and occasionally correct his first.) The editors do find a category for the form of *Marriage*, the "category called Menippean or Varronian satire" (118), but it is safe to say that no one has ever found a structure common to these satires.

The "Contexts and Themes" section of the introduction to *Marriage* is terrific. Among other merits it has a rich though concise discussion of just what it was in Swedenborg's style and beliefs that roused Blake's faculties to act. Their notes on the "Memorable Fancy" of plate 15, the "Printing house in Hell," are interesting, if not quite convincing, as

they have a good go at reading it as an allegory of the phases of Blake's printing method. In the commentary the point I missed most (perhaps they felt it was too obvious) is that the *Marriage* is not really a marriage after all, whatever the titlepage design may suggest. It is certainly not a marriage of two equals, resulting in a higher synthesis: it is more like a spiritual war, where the Angels lose every encounter or (once) convert to Devilhood. I thought the editors went over the top in suggesting that the titlepage design describes a large human face (131), but the road of excess, after all, leads you know where.

There are no surprises in the discussion of the production of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, but the commentary is exemplary. I only missed an acknowledgment of the importance of the subject of epistemology, and of the startling turn in Oothoon's speech (at 5:30 = 2:30) from her claim to be pure after her rape to a tirade against empiricism and the five senses. To work out what these seemingly unconnected topics are doing in the same speech, I think, is pretty much to work out the whole poem.

Throughout their commentaries and notes the editors are generous in acknowledging scholarship and admitting many incompatible points as worth considering. Such hospitableness does not demand that we embrace "interpretive multiplicity" and refuse to resolve it into a unity. "The conclusion that *Thel* offers no such unity would be unsettling for readers of logical arguments," the editors conclude, "but need not be for readers of poems" (81), as if Blake deployed his logical arguments for the aesthetic delectation of poem readers. Undecidable interpretive multiplicity is now so ubiquitous a touchstone of literary criticism that it has grown invisible. This is not the place to argue it out, but I would at least ask the editors what Blake would think of it. Or of this: "ambivalence, both visual and linguistic, is one of Blake's most effective satirical tools [in *Marriage*]—an infernal tool, because heaven is not built on ambivalence" (130). I think Blake's response to this would not be ambivalent at all. Fortunately the editors don't hesitate to pass positive judgments and to rule out some interpretations as mistaken, and in this more Blakean spirit they have produced an outstanding commentary.

I have noticed the following typographical errors:

- p. 56: texts for plates b4 and b12 are transposed.
- p. 79: the Greek word should end in a nu, not an upsilon (and "Thalia" the noun is not strictly speaking *from* the verb form "thallein").
- p. 225 near the bottom: a line (or more) has dropped out.
- p. 228, l. 22: "entagled" for "entangled."
- p. 231, l. 13 from bottom: the accent is wrong.