

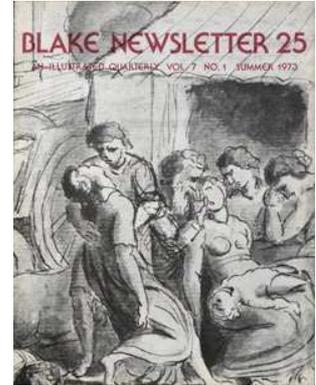
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R E V I E W

John Adlard, *The Sports of Cruelty: Fairies, Folk-songs, Charms, and Other Country Matters in the Work of William Blake*

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The Sports of Cruelty: Fairies, Folk-songs, Charms, and Other Country Matters in the Work of William Blake by John Adlard. London: Cecil and Amelia Woolf, 1972. £3.15

Reviewed by Katharine M. Briggs

John Adlard has written several articles on folklore beliefs underlying some of Blake's references, as, for instance, "Mr. Blake's English Fairies" in *The Bulletin of the Modern Language Society* 2, LXV (Helsinki, 1964). He has now written at greater length about Blake's attitude to folklore generally, and in particular to the fairies, by whom Blake appears, sometimes at least, to symbolize the cool provocativeness of a flirtatious woman, who titillates desire without fulfilling it. This interpretation, as John Adlard points out, is a development of Pope's treatment of the sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*. One passage, "A fairy leapt

upon my knee" (p. 188 of the Keynes edition), is almost a quotation.

The fairy element is not the only feature of the book in which every folklore reference by Blake is minutely examined by a scholar who shows a wide and far-ranging knowledge of his subject. Blake's journals, letters, and conversation are analyzed to provide a clue to cryptic passages. For instance the germ of that passage in *America*--about the

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are the reverberation effects used in the *Visions* tape. These kinds of effects require caution to keep them from being laughable. Reverberation is used more skillfully in soap operas.

But finally, about halfway through *Visions* we slip back into the unfortunate groove of the *America* tape--a drone of readings accompanied by an endless stream of pictures, one more or less like another in unexplained juxtaposition and sequence. The lesson in iconography that I assume is intended is lost, and the graphics at last seem to function like the music, as a merely "appropriate" background.

Something I learned from showing the York videotapes to students is that, despite McLuhan, television in the classroom is not an attention-getter. Rooms are large, television screens are small, and students are restless. And he who will have television will also have its technical distractions--hum, hiss, click, roll, and wave. The videotape reel will be warped, or the machine will be on the blink. Hence the videotape must be aggressive. Long stretches of monologue, even the noisy hysterical kind in the *America* tape, shouted over pictures of battles, engravings from here, statues from there, and reclining nudes, all accompanied by routine music, only encourage the viewer to tune in to the TV hum and drift away in a

semitrance.

The only way to keep that from happening is to make the tape as lucid and substantial as possible. The only way to get *that* to happen is to have an absolutely firm sense of purpose. The York tapes get lost in their search for an audience. Sometimes they seem intended to teach students how to read poetry as well as how to read *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and yet other times they seem aimed at a much higher level. The level must be sought, found, and kept. Then continuity must be established and maintained without fail. The method of the York tapes in practice is too often interruptive and disruptive. Comparative material from art and history must be used with maximum efficiency. Otherwise the effect of these audiovisual "aids" is to display Blake's work in a diminutive context. As the use of comparative material is decreased, the use of Blake material should be increased. One of the ways to make *America* more interesting is to look more closely at it; the way of the York tapes is often to shift attention from *America* to other things. By "look more closely" I mean, for example, explore Blake's use of his medium more closely, the graphic and literary movement of the narrative, the music (in the serious, large sense) of his verse, the techniques of relief etching and watercoloring. And finally, the tapes

mysterious palace built in Atlantean hills by Ariston for his stolen bride--might well have sprung from Cumberland's meeting with Thomas Johnes of Haford, who had built among the Welsh Hills a castle, almost a palace, for his wife Jane, where they founded an idyllic community to surround a house and gardens embellished with every beauty which his imagination could conceive. The ruin of the house is still left, and in a recent article in *Country Life* the place was described.

John Adlard further explores Blake's references to dragons, folk customs and beliefs, folk songs, and dialect. The book should be of great use to Blake scholars, but the scattered and diffused matter on which it works has made it difficult to draw the whole subject into a unity, so that it reads rather like a series of excursions into literary detective work than a finished book. This, however, will not deter the specialist.

should be shorter, not only because that would make them more effective, but also because they are now too long for the average classroom "hour." Forty-five minutes is the outer limit, and forty would be better. Nothing ever goes quite right when you use a videotape in a classroom, and if you use one as seldom as I do, the time sacrificed to technological logistics will astound and amaze you.

Warner, Sutherland, and Wallace have been extraordinarily brave, I think, to experiment with the teaching of Blake in a difficult new medium. And usually, I think, that is the way teaching improves: not with elephantine grants from government agencies whose support will be snatched away just as you start to get somewhere, but with small reserves of money and large reserves of talent and energy. The York University team will have to go further before we can tell how much talent they have, but they obviously have large reserves of energy to support whatever talent their work in videotape production eventually shows. I regard their first two tapes as a pair of instructive failures. Since the second is less a failure than the first, I am encouraged, and I hope they are, too, and will try yet again. If they just can't rouse themselves for another go, then I hope someone else will pick up where they left off after a slow but still promising start.