

# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Raymond Lister, *George Richmond: A Critical Biography*; William L. Pressly, *The Life and Art of James Barry*

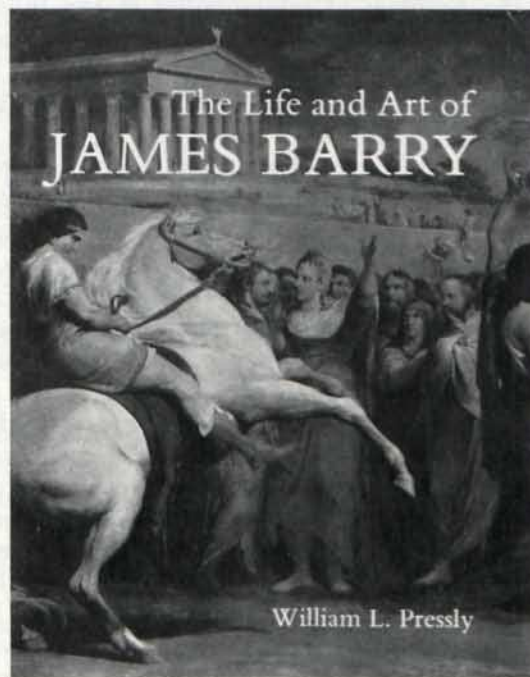
Shelley M. Bennett

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leviathan and behemoth, assuming, because leviathan is elsewhere mythological, that they must both be mythological and demonic creatures in the Book of Job. But, if one really bothers to read the context, it is perfectly clear that these two strange beasts are part of a grand zoological catalogue, that they are the crocodile and the hippopotamus, quite realistically rendered in many respects, though with a degree of poetic hyperbole that draws on mythology for heightening effects. The poet's point is that both are exotic and uncanny beasts dwelling along the Nile, far from Job's observation, and thus are vividly part of that vast panorama of creation beyond his ken. In any case, they are not represented in the poem as evil; on the contrary, they are objects of God's providential supervision as Creator; and in no sense could anything that preceded lead us to imagine Job was ever in either of their bellies, figuratively or otherwise. One could hardly have invented a clearer case in which the adhesion to archetypes has led a gifted mind to drastic misreading.

Individual literary texts, of course, cannot be read in isolation. Literature is certainly a cumulative tradition and, as Frye has so often argued, an endlessly cross-referential system. But by fixing above all on the system, we may forget to look for what the individual text gives us that is fresh, surprising, subtly or startlingly innovative, and that, alas, is the fault illustrated page after page in *The Great Code*.



**Raymond Lister. *George Richmond. A Critical Biography*. London: Robin Garton Ltd., 1981. \$40.00.**

**William L. Pressly. *The Life and Art of James Barry*. New Haven and London: Published for The Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1981. \$65.00.**

**Reviewed by Shelley M. Bennett**

In recent years there has been a remarkable increase in the quantity and quality of serious studies of British art. This upsurge is undoubtedly related to the rather belated growth of this area as an academic discipline. The magnificent new Yale Center for British Art and the lavish publications of the Yale University Press have further broadened general exposure to English art and fostered a more enlightened appreciation of this subject. Monographs by William Pressly and by Raymond Lister now add to this growing wealth of knowledge about British art.

Because this is a relatively new scholarly field, the need for basic information, which both books so generously supply, is still of critical importance. Lister's *George Richmond, A Critical Biography*, for example, is founded



on heretofore inaccessible Richmond diaries and family manuscripts. For the most part, Lister limits himself to a biographical account based on condensations and summations of the diary entries. A concluding chapter deals more specifically with his art, while a very useful appendix lists all his known portraits.

In his own day, George Richmond, R. A. (1809–1896) was best known for his fashionable portraits of eminent Victorians, through which he gained both financial and social success. He also painted narrative subjects and landscapes, primarily for his own amusement, and received some critical acclaim for his work in art restoration. He is best known today, however, for his connection with William Blake. Richmond was one of the young group of disciples, which included Samuel Palmer and Edward Calvert, who gathered around Blake in the last years of his life. For a brief period, in the late 1820s and early 1830s, Richmond was deeply influenced by the art of his mentor. Of the Shoreham circle of artists, his art was in many ways closest to Blake's. In Richmond's early drawings and prints, as in Blake's art, anatomical accuracy and convincing spatial foreshortening have been sacrificed in order to maximize the flow of the taut, bounding outlines. Contour lines sharply define the forms and create rhythmic, expressive patterns across the surface of both artists' work. Furthermore, Richmond relies on a figure type that is very reminiscent of Blake's distinctive manner of depicting the human body. However, Richmond, unlike Blake, was concerned with a more traditional, Christian imagery, as was the Shoreham circle as a whole, reflecting their rather conventional views. Richmond's early visionary works represent a nostalgic, spiritual world of private fantasy quite different from Blake's.

Lister's book is the first monograph devoted exclusively to this artist of Blake's circle. Prior to its publication, the only existing information on Richmond was to be found in a few, rather meager articles and in A. M. W. Stirling's edition of *The Richmond Papers* (1926), which is concerned primarily with Richmond's son. In addition to providing a vast new body of biographical information about Richmond, Lister amends several incorrect accounts recorded by Stirling. Of particular use is the list in Appendix I of Richmond's approximately 2500 portraits, including prices when known. This compilation is based on manuscript material provided by the Richmond family. Students of British art will be especially grateful to Lister for this new factual material. The numerous illustrations of Richmond's works from his early visionary period supply valuable information about this artist. One is very thankful to now have this visual material so readily available. Lister's analysis of Richmond's art, on the other hand, provides few new insights, particularly in regard to the portraits. Lister has quite meticulously noted Richmond's specific borrowings and quotations from other artists, especially Blake, but he goes little further in analyzing his

style, subject matter, or the historical context of his art.

William Pressly's *The Life and Art of James Barry* is a more intensive art historical study. In addition to providing a full biographical account of Barry's life, Pressly is concerned with relating Barry's art to the general developments in English art. This is particularly appropriate and relevant, for Barry was a central figure in the flowering of an internationally renowned school of English painting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

James Barry (1741–1806) shared the concern of his fellow artists during this period with improving the status of English art and of English artists. To do so, Barry directed his artistic energies to promoting an English school of history painting, the subject matter held in highest esteem by his contemporaries. His efforts in this public arena culminated in his intricate, intellectual mural program in the Society of Arts rooms in the Adelphi, executed at great personal cost ("Barry told me that while he Did that Work—he Lived on Bread & Apples," writes Blake in his "Annotations to Reynolds"—"O Society for Encouragement of Art"!).

In addition to creating history paintings in the grand manner, Barry, like many of his fellow artists, began to expand the scope of art, turning to new subjects ranging from literature, classical mythology and early British history to contemporary politics and portraiture. Likewise, to enlarge the emotional gamut of his art, Barry developed a wide variety of styles, making adjustments in his style for different subjects. Barry's conscious manipulation of style for a variety of expressive effects in his paintings, drawings and prints provides an important link between contemporary English art and esthetic theory, particularly as formulated by his early patron Edmund Burke in his influential treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Furthermore, his experiments with the expressive potential of line were influential in the evolution of an abstract linear style in the hands of Blake, Flaxman, and Stothard.

Pressly's monograph grows out of his dissertation on the same topic (1973) and represents years of intensive study based upon a wide array of primary and secondary sources. Though preceded by a dissertation by Robert Wark (1952) and by two master's theses, by Charles Kriebel (1966) and David Solkin (1974), Pressly's study is the first full scale treatment to reach publication since Edward Fryer's early nineteenth century account. It supplements the previous studies with new information, particularly concerning Barry's prints. As a readily accessible source on this important English artist, it will be of assistance in all future studies of the art of this period.

Pressly has arranged the book in a general chronological sequence. Within each chapter, he expands upon various themes, such as Barry's formation as a history painter, his portraits and politics, his Society of Arts program, etc. As Pressly states in his preface, his goal has



been "to present a detailed iconographical and stylistic study of Barry's work that takes into account his forceful and idiosyncratic personality as well as the impact of contemporary social, political, and theoretical issues." On the whole, Pressly does an admirable job in fulfilling his aim; however, on occasion, the emphasis falls rather too heavily on an analysis of Barry's tempestuous personality. A more balanced perspective could have been achieved if Pressly had presented the reader from the beginning with a broader view of the art historical context rather than relegating it to the conclusion. This would have been of particular help in clarifying Barry's contributions to the stylistic developments associated with English romantic art. Likewise, the study would have profited by a more thorough discussion of such pertinent issues as how Barry's works were perceived by his contemporaries. Who was his audience and, more importantly, who bought his prints? Pressly tells us that Barry's prints were the chief means by which he supported himself and the one area in which he was able to reach an audience successfully. Were his prints given a different reading than his full scale oils, which were, for the most part, undervalued in his own day? This line of pursuit would have set Barry squarely in the context of his times. Pressly, nonetheless, provides the reader with an invaluable amount of new information about both Barry and English art in general in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Pressly supplements the monograph with various helpful appendices including a *catalogue raisonné* of Barry's paintings, drawings and prints. Unlike earlier listings of Barry's works, Pressly's catalogue is conveniently arranged by subject rather than collection and arranged chronologically within each section. Copious illustrations further enhance the value of this handsomely produced book. Pressly's lucid manner of writing makes this excellent scholarly text a pleasure to read.



## FLAXMAN'S ILLUSTRATIONS TO HOMER

*Drawn by John Flaxman*

*Engraved by William Blake and Others*



Essick and La Belle, eds. *Flaxman's Illustrations to Homer*. Dover, 1977.

Reviewed by Janet Warner

This edition of Flaxman's designs to Homer was published five years ago and has become a most useful reference book for anyone interested in sources of English neo-classical design. Robert Essick and Jenijoy LaBelle provide a scholarly and pertinent introduction, a useful annotated bibliography chronologically arranged, and just enough commentary on each design to identify it and suggest its relation to Blake's and other artists' treatments of similar subjects.

The reproductions of the outline designs are very clear, even perhaps a little more highly contrasted than the originals I have been able to compare them with. The editors note the favorable reception of the designs from their first appearance in 1793, and their undeniable influence on motif and style in nineteenth-century Europe. Irreverently, I was reminded of the twentieth-century comic strip (see *Scylla, Odyssey*, plate 20): should we blame Flaxman for this? The flattened plane and economy of line of the illustrations appeal to the taste of the modern viewer more than does the classical subject