

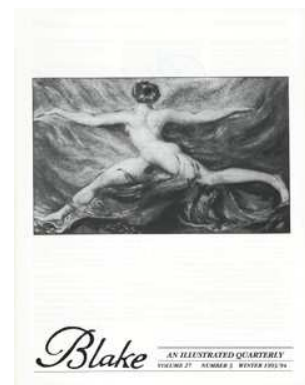
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R E V I E W

Linda Lewis, *The Promethean Politics of Milton, Blake, and Shelley*

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lenarian and radical subcultures of the period.

Chapter 2, "Northern Antiquities," valuably explores the intersection of antiquarian and radical interests. Macpherson's *Ossian*, Joseph Ritson's writings on English songs, Edward Williams' Celtic researches, and Daniel Isaac Eaton's *Politics for the People* are among the sources explored in relation to Blake's works of the 1790s. Eaton's comparison of England's war against France with the "ferocious Odin . . . the active roaring deity; the father of slaughter, the God that carrieth desolation and fire" (99) aptly demonstrates how Blake participates in a shared radical discourse; and once more, there are cogent distinctions between Blake and, for example, "the disabling nostalgia of literary primitivists like Macpherson and Blair" (108-09). From this rich discussion, we go on to a chapter on mythology and politics that creates a context for Los as prophet and bard among authors as diverse as Thomas Paine, Constantin Volney, and Thomas Spence, among others. The concern is once more not so much with sources as with, as the author puts it in discussing the image of the sun of liberty, "the deep involvement of Blake's rhetorical resources, both written and visual in the Revolution controversy" (136). Later, the mythological-scientific poetry and prose of Erasmus Darwin is examined in relation to parts of *Europe*, *The Book of Los*, and *The Song of Los*. Some of this ground has, as the author acknowledges, been covered before, and this part of the exposition is more valuable for consolidating what is already known than for fresh insights. The same may be said for much of chapter 4: "Blake, the Bible, and Its Critics in the 1790s." The work of Alexander Geddes, whose biblical scholarship is an important topic here, has been discussed, as Mee notes, by Jerome McGann, and so the matter of "textual indeterminacy" will already be familiar to some readers. Viewing Geddes's biblical criticism with that of Priestley, Paine, and other contemporaries does

produce an interesting perspective. However, when specific Blakean texts are discussed in connection with the Bible here, the results are not as colored by the preceding historical discussion as one would expect; and although the author vigorously argues for a political reading of *The Song of Los* in opposition to the view of Leslie Tannenbaum in *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies* (1984), no hypothesis is advanced to account for the phenomenon of diminution evident—both in length and in number of copies produced—in the 1795 Lambeth books.

One further point, not as a conclusion, but as an endnote: *Dangerous Enthusiasm* is a richly documented book, with respect to both primary sources and to recent criticism and scholarship, yet there are some puzzling gaps in its documentation involving the omission of particularly important sources. A footnote reference to Hayley's *Life of Milton* (218) refers to several modern scholars, but not to the one who has written most extensively on this subject in relation to Blake: Joseph Anthony Wittreich. The author refers to "the boom in speculative mythography which gathered pace in the eighteenth century" (124-25) but not to the classic study of this subject, Edward B. Hungerford's *Shores of Darkness* (1941), in which the term "speculative mythology" was coined. Although some discussions of Blake's derivation of the "Druid" serpent temples from William Stukeley are cited, there is no mention of why we know that Blake, who never mentions Stukeley, was nonetheless indebted to him: Ruthven Todd's discovery (in *Tracks in the Snow* [1946] 48-49) that the serpent temple of *Jerusalem* 100 is based on one of the engravings in Stukeley's *Abury*. In the discussion of Blake's engraving after Fuseli of *The Fertilization of Egypt* (157-59) Todd's article "Two Blake Prints and Two Fuseli Drawings,"² would have been pertinent to the question of "collaboration between daughtsmen and engravers" (157n), as

that design is one of the two discussed. It is surprising that a work with the historical awareness of *Dangerous Enthusiasm* should at times show such unawareness of the history of its own discipline.

¹ Interestingly Ma[t]her had had links with working-class radicalism more direct than those of many seekers. In a pamphlet of 1780, *An Impartial Representation of the Case of the Poor Cotton Spinners of Lancashire*, he had spoken in the voice of unemployed weavers who had destroyed spinning jennies: "We pulled down and demolished several of these machines," he wrote, speaking for "men and women, prisoners in the castle of Lancaster," who were, he said, about to be tried by a jury largely composed of relatives of the machine owners (15-16).

² *Blake* 5 (1971/72): 173-81.

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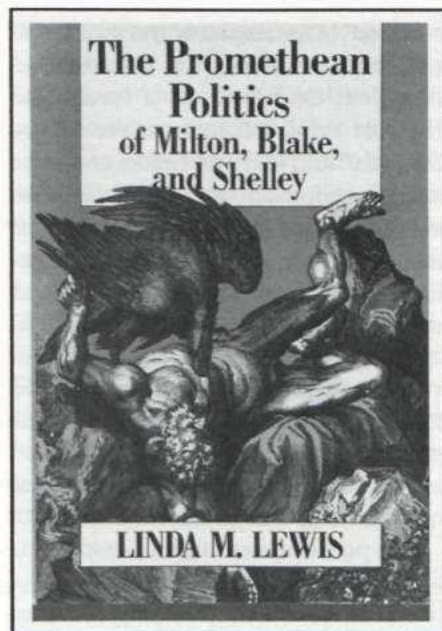
Reviewed by
George Anthony Rosso

This readable book treats the mythic figures of Prometheus and the Titans as "political icons" in the work of Aeschylus, Dante, Milton, Blake, and Shelley. Binding Stuart Curran's discrepant versions of Prometheus (in *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis* [1975] and "The Political Prometheus" [Studies in Romanticism 1986]), Lewis pursues a "diachronic study" of Promethean myth, tracking its modifications and new meanings, but "only inasmuch as these meanings apply to the study of power and powerlessness" (11). With something of Northrop Frye's allusive range—minus his insights into genre—she al-

so adeptly relates literary and pictorial "iconography" in a peppy, upbeat style. Despite its two major drawbacks—ubiquitous use of the term "power" and conventional treatment of Blake—the book provides a serviceable road map for exploring the politically charged revisionism at the core of Prometheus-Titan mythology, focusing especially on Milton's influence on Blake and Shelley.

Chapter 1 offers an interesting overview of the cultural and political context of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. Following George Thomson and Anthony Podlecki in regarding Aeschylus as a "moderate democrat," Lewis insightfully explains how Aeschylus, hater of tyrants, inherited two distinct Promethean figures: the creative champion and the overweening malefactor of mankind. While Aeschylus draws on several sources, Hesiod's *Theogony* remains the primary extant text, the one that sets the stage for interpretations of Prometheus as a benevolent soul who led a tragically misguided attack on the established authority of the Olympian regime.

Aeschylus's shrewd changes in the received myth reveal, says Lewis, "how carefully he set out to exalt his Titan rebel," turning Hesiod's failed usurper into a "political radical" (21). Two key inventions indicate Aeschylus's strategy. First, he portrays both Io and Prometheus as "victims of Zeus's abuse of power," turning Zeus into the antagonist. By giving Zeus the traits of tyrannical earthly sovereigns, *Prometheus Bound* illustrates the poet's "revisionist view of monarch and rebel" (22). Second, Aeschylus separates the binding of Prometheus and the sending of the eagle to eat his liver, which in Hesiod are two parts of one verdict for the theft of fire. In *Prometheus Bound*, the binding alone is punishment for the crime; the eagle, on the other hand, is sent by Zeus because Prometheus will not recant his deed or reveal the secret of Zeus's ultimate downfall. This "defiance" characterizes Promethean heroism and underlies the titan's rebel legacy.



The latter part of the chapter deals with Titan iconography. Although they do not make out as well as Prometheus, the Titans occupy a central place in the myth, since their "titanic nature" is feared as a threat to religious and social order. The value of the opening chapter emerges from Lewis's demonstration that Dante and later poets inherit a complex, even contradictory, Promethean-Titan mythology.

The second background chapter, "Titanism and Dantesque Revolt," expands discussion of the Titans by introducing the crucial Christian component that informs later treatments of the myth. By Dante's age, Christian commentaries associate the Titans with the rebel angels of biblical lore. Where Aeschylus allegedly seeks to restore the Titans to favor with Olympus, Dante and medieval allegorists consign the Titans to hell as "political traitors." Prometheus in turn takes on a divided role as "type" of Christ and as rebel to divine authority, a duality that penetrates to the heart of Dante's own predicament in mid-thirteenth-century Florence.

Suffering the ignominy of exile, Dante was forced to wrestle with the vexed issue of rebellion in God's empire. Lewis writes some effective prose explaining how Dante carefully avoids the charge of Titanic disobedience. By

opposing the Pope in the Guelph and Ghibbine struggles, Dante incurs the charge of treason; he counters that, since monarchy and empire are in fact ideal forms that can be perverted by tyranny and corruption, he has the right to exercise the independent "intellectual powers" willed to him by God. Setting up such a standard, Lewis writes, "Dante is able to separate his own behavior from Titanism" (53-54). Yet failing to integrate his intellect with the "Titanic" rebelliousness of his temperament, Dante projects Prometheus into hell with the Titans, leaving it to Milton to divine the true Christian aspect of Aeschylus's hero.

The three major chapters that follow explore this mythic-political nexus in terms of the dual Prometheus: the light-giver and bringer of hope, associated with Christ; and the thief-rebel and bringer of despair, associated with Satan. This "iconography" is a bit simplistic and reductive, as we will see in Lewis's discussion of Blake, but it helps Lewis to draw analogies between Milton, Blake, and Shelley on the nature of political tyranny and rebellion.

In the Milton chapter Lewis proclaims that in *Paradise Lost* the poet explores "the whole interrelated pattern of myth" sketched in the opening chapters, ranging from the "titanic seizure and division of power" to the "search for recapturing lost Eden" (56). A special feature of the chapter is Lewis's engagement with the critical issue of Satan's heroic status, situated in the context of Milton's political activity. Like Dante, she argues, Milton must prove that his rebellion against authority—regicide—is not disobedience to God, as royalists claim, but resistance to tyranny: "He accomplishes this," Lewis asserts, "through his double use of the Prometheus myth" (61). Lewis shows that after Satan's degeneration following the scene on Mount Niphates in Book IV—when he announces "Evil be thou my Good"—Milton increasingly dissociates Prometheus and Satan until Satan's heroism is exposed as a hoax,

a mockery of the Son of God's genuine Prometheism. "Christ as word and wisdom of God," Lewis states, "usurps the positive aspects of the Prometheus myth," negating the "phony Prometheism of Satan" (98).

Lewis concludes that Milton's revisioning of Promethean myth, coupled with his conception of Christian liberty, underpins his critique of Satan as a tyrant. For Milton, Christian liberty is based on God's love and man's free will; Satan's rebellion, rooted in envy, force, and deceit, violates this fundamental conception. Departing from Calvin's strict separation of civil and religious concerns, Milton reasons that since political power derives from the people, not the king, citizens have the right of independence or even rebellion in the exercise of their liberty. He further denies that kings rule in the image of God, arguing in particular that since Charles I failed to govern by love and right reason, the real image of Godly virtue in politics, Christians were duty-bound to depose him. Sadly, for Milton, the radical Puritans also fail to live up to his principles. Aiming his rebellion at the earthly not the heavenly sovereign, Milton places Charles and both his "Titanic" defenders and opponents, the irrational sectaries, in Satan's camp, while reserving a place for Prometheus in God's kingdom. God is the only true monarch because his rule, in contrast to all earthly kingdoms, is manifest in the Son's "loving Prometheism."

Lewis applies Milton's Promethean design to Blake's work, claiming that Blake's "whole constellation of meaning turns on the bad (Orc) and good (Los) versions of Prometheus." Lewis evinces a broad familiarity with Blake's myth from *America* to *Jerusalem* and seriously grapples with Blake's critique of *Paradise Lost*. She contends that in the epic prophecies Blake "is writing against the tradition that, for him, culminates in *Paradise Lost*: the deceiver Prometheus/Satan unmasked and punished and Prometheus/Christ seated at the right hand of the Judeo-Christian God, reason per-

sonified" (121). Blake corrects Milton's errors by recasting the Promethean complex: God is made a tyrant, the "Satanic fire-thief becomes the saving Messiah," and Orc and Urizen are fused and neutralized in the apocalypse. Orc and Urizen are *both* tyrants because, as the romantic ideology has it, revolution turns into its opposite when defiance is not transcended by imagination and love. Blake's seminal revision exchanges the bad for the good Prometheus, Orc for Los, who rejects political for "universal values and ideas" and thus transforms political rebellion into imaginative art (149-50).

The problem with this assessment is that it reiterates what an influential faction of Blake scholars have been saying for decades: that the Promethean Orc is not liberatory but tyrannical and that Los is called in to bring about the mental apocalypse. This view possesses a general validity, although to substantiate it Lewis makes a number of questionable moves.

First, by declaring that Blake is more faithful than Milton to the Aeschylean model, Lewis suggests a classical paradigm for Blake's myth. She speaks to the issue on page 118, saying that despite his adverse prefatory comments in *Milton*, Blake "borrows freely" from classical sources; however, she argues that to be true to his "revisionist view of reality" Blake "must abandon the Greek and Roman system" (123). She then drops the point, which is unfortunate, since the collision of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian systems produces much of the creative tension in Blake's epics. Second, Lewis shuns analysis of the formal ties between Blake's Lambeth and epic prophecies, skirting discussion of Blake's narrative complexity and making somewhat reductive generalizations about his characters. Urizen and Orc are bad; Los is good. Los's self-sacrifice sets in motion the redemptive power of the epic prophecies, the "Lamb in Luvahs robes," but the intricate relations of Orc, Luvah, Los, and the Lamb are left unexamined. Third, while she illu-

minates the "progress" of Blake's myth from the rebellion of Orc to the creativity of Los, Lewis idealizes Blake's politics. That is, Los represents the light-bearing Promethean gospel of imaginative apocalypse in which "political power and powerlessness become irrelevant issues" (141). Again, many readers will not quarrel with this position, but they may wonder whether it advances discussion.

The problem is carried over into the chapter on Shelley, in which Blake plays a pivotal role. Lewis is instructive on the political and literary models that Shelley draws on for his portrait of Prometheus. But she tends to eviscerate a realistic conception of power politics, as exposed most starkly in the semantic proliferation of the term "power" in the opening pages of the chapter.

Lewis begins with the romantic Satanist charge against Shelley, countering that to equate Prometheus and Milton's Satan is distorted because Prometheus incorporates aspects of Adam and Christ as well as Satan. Shelley adapts the traditional myth as "sub-text" but revises it to convey his political meaning. He reforms Prometheus, making him a prototype of passive forgiveness and love while defining Jupiter as both a tyrant and a rebel. Prometheus, in fact, is no rebel at all: "he is innocent of Titanism . . . and the potentiality for violence that Hesiod, Dante, and Milton condemn" (160). Further, Shelley undermines Milton's dualistic universe, combining Prometheus and Jupiter as component parts of the soul rather than separating them, as Milton does with his Promethean Messiah and Satan (185). And he performs this feat by trumping Milton with Rousseau: the figure of Demogorgon, "grim power of the people," Lewis claims, embodies Rousseau's concept of "sovereignty," the "vital force" that, united with the "mind of man (Prometheus), can remove despots from power" (187). These creative revisions turn the Aeschylean into a distinctly romantic hero: Shelley's Prometheus unbinds himself from the

manacles of defiance and ushers in a "system never before tried, one based on pure love and pure idea" (181).

Despite her breadth and erudition, Lewis's account of Shelleyan politics and power verges on the metaphysical. Ignoring the more seasoned work of Kenneth Neill Cameron and Carl Woodring, and avoiding Shelley's overtly political poems, Lewis ensnares herself in the trap of myth criticism, concluding that "political man" and "Promethean man" are ultimately distinct (190-91). Also, by eschewing "specific political allegory" for "broader notions of power" (12),

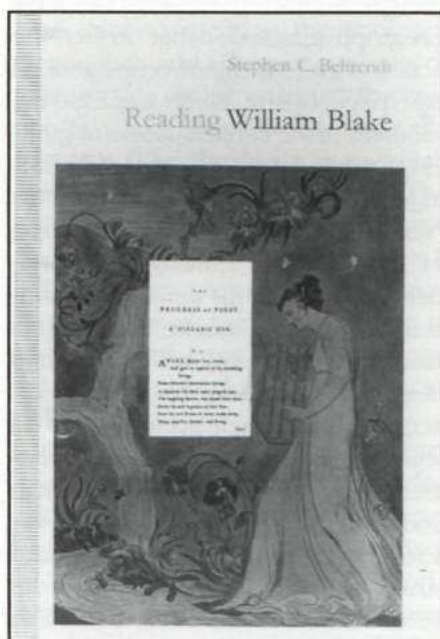
Lewis's intertextual analyses beg some fundamental questions. For example, how does "democracy" in late eighteenth-century London differ from its appearance in fifth-century BC Athens? What role does the French Revolution, or Enlightenment philosophy, play in Blake and Shelley's effort to "negate the God of Christianity"? How does the "post-Christian" cosmology that Shelley inherits stem from Blake's unorthodox yet decidedly Christian cosmos? Finally, how is the romantics' treatment of Prometheanism an advance on Milton when they too opt for a "return to Eden" solution

to political power and rebellion? These questions require a more substantial historical theory than the archetypal method affords, one that can account for disparate social and political factors in the reproduction of a myth. While Lewis undoubtedly contributes to an understanding of the Promethean-Titan complex in western culture, her contribution neglects historical differences for mythological continuity. Succeeding in her quest for mythic coherence, Lewis uncritically ratifies the stubborn idealism currently under siege in Blake studies and literary theory.

Stephen C. Behrendt,
Reading William Blake.
New York: St. Martin's
Press, 1992. xv + 196 pp.
\$45.00.

Reviewed by
Dennis M. Welch

This book explores the dynamics of the reading process involved in reading William Blake's illuminated poems, focusing specifically on "some of the demands" that his texts place on us by embodying "a fertile intersection among frequently differing . . . [artistic] systems of reference . . ." (viii). Following "A Note on Copies," in which Behrendt acknowledges multiple differences among various copies of the illuminated texts and proposes therefore to "deal only sparingly with these matters of variation" (xv), he includes six chapters: "Introduction: Reading Blake's Texts," "Songs of Innocence and of Experience," "Three Early Illuminated Works," "Lambeth Prophecies I: History of the World," "Lambeth Prophecies II: History of the Universe," and "Epic Art: Milton and Jerusalem."



The Introduction lays out primarily Behrendt's theory of Blake's perspective on readers and reading: his "works challenge . . . our assumptions and expectations about the authority of both narrator (and/or author) and text," requiring that we possess "both equilibrium and a good deal of self-assurance" and "serve as co-creators of the work under consideration" (1). Behrendt initially offers us the comforting assurance that "Blake does not *require* [although he 'encourages'] of his readers elaborate preparation" in order to read with feeling and intelligence what Behrendt calls

(via Wolfgang Iser) Blake's intertextual "metatexts." But if the poet-and-artist's aim is in fact "to liberate" us "from conventional ways of reading" (4), then *disequilibrium* seems to be a primary strategy for fostering such liberation. As Behrendt himself observes, Blake's texts are in a sense "non-authoritative" (5), tempting us to impose on them reductionist understanding. It is this temptation that helps to unsettle us and to transform our vision.

Citing Robert Adams's *Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness* (1958) and Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader* (1979) and *The Open Work* (1989), Behrendt considers Blake's illuminated work "open" like the novels of Fielding and Sterne and the history painting of Benjamin West—open to countless interpretations, making "readers" take responsibility for them. While certainly democratic, this view is true only to a point. There is little doubt that Blake had strong convictions although he was open to change ("Expect poison from the standing water"). Indeed, the refusal in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* even "to converse with" the Angel "whose works are only Analytics" (pls. 9, 20; E 37, 42) implies that he was not always open-minded. Nor do I believe (despite my desires otherwise) that his texts and his expectations from readers are always open-minded. His