

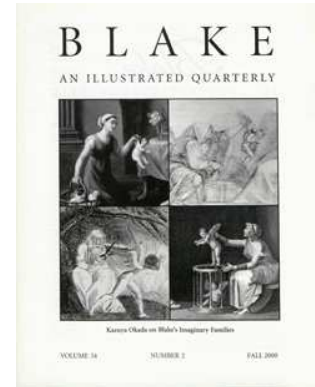
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830*

Mary Lynn Johnson

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 34, Issue 2, Fall 2000, pp. 54-61



attain a mutual infiltration of parole and langue and consequent linguistic activation, thus resisting political, religious and intellectual oppression, or sterility and obscurantism.

The Book of Ahania provides an example of the state of linguistic activity under the autocratic reign of the written; the voice of change is suppressed. As I suggested at the beginning of this article, Blake was drawing attention to his own view of printing and the printed text; he was, in addition, criticizing the contribution made to a dangerous situation by automatic deference to the biblical text. He believed that the danger could be counteracted: to read Blake's illuminated books is to be well aware not only of his unique "printing" method but of his metatextual concept of writing. Behrendt states that the "reading activity Blake advocates is one of dismantling, of uncovering, of removing the semantic and intellectual garments and displaying the pristine, naked eternal truth that is everywhere the primary objective of his art" and the reading "must be a subversive activity whose processes are corrosive to the authority both of text and of the acts and principles embodied in that text" (127). As Blake's corrosive acid removes surfaces and allows the truth to stand out, his texts, with the convergence of the oral and the written, make us question the validity of the language situation of our own time and our methods of linguistic expression and communication, so much controlled by institutional customs, rules and prejudices. They demonstrate a way of achieving freedom from coercion, discrimination and suppression in almost every human activity and society, by their endless effort to flee from finalization.

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R E V I E W S

Clifford Siskin. *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. x + 285 pp. \$39.95, paper \$16.95.

Reviewed by MARY LYNN JOHNSON

Why is this journal reviewing Clifford Siskin's *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830*, when "Blake" is not even in the index? It must be because the title links one of the arts Blake practiced to one of his highest aspirations as an artist, the transformation of society. But composing prophecies by night under the inspiration of the Poetic Genius after doing commercial engravings by day to put food on the table is not what Siskin means by "writing": here the operative word is "work," as in "produce observable social results." For Siskin, following Raymond Williams in *Writing in Society* (1983), writing is "shorthand for the entire configuration of writing, print, and silent reading" (2) that rapidly expanded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as "more people had more occasions to write more," and as readers themselves became writers (contributors of letters to periodicals, for example). Siskin seeks to recover a history of writing that reveals "what changed and who paid the price" (3) in this critical period. He holds that gender inequities, in particular, were exacerbated by the "work of writing," which organized knowledge into deeper and narrower channels (from which emerged new university disciplines), instituted sharper divisions and rankings among occupations by means

of written qualifying examinations, and elevated "literature" from the written word in general to a special category of highly imaginative works produced by gifted individual authors in a tightly restricted range of genres—all at a time when the newly united British nation was shaping, through writing, a sense of its collective identity. The densely compressed introduction, "The Argument: Writing as a New Technology" (best re-read as a coda), forces into conceptual proximity the loosely parallel historical strands of the book's four main sections—disciplinarity, professionalism, "novelism" (the subordination of writing to the newly-recognized literary genre of the novel) and gender—all considered as developing in tandem with, and partially in response to, the increasing dominance of print culture. By the end of the period, according to Siskin, "writing" had ceased to be experienced as unruly and threatening and had come to seem familiar, safe, manageable, and even natural, along lines analogous to our own adjustments to the much faster rate of change in contemporary communications technologies.

Siskin does not claim to present "an absolute theory of how writing works" but rather "a description of some of the work that writing did do" (10) to impose order and manage growth at a time when its forms, purposes, and participants were multiplying as wildly as Internet interactions are now. Part of this "work" was a self-reflexive criticism of writing itself that permeated all literary genres. Siskin cautions that academic literary studies, insofar as they perpetuate such romantic-value-laden distinctions as the one between critical (inferior) and creative (superior) forms of writing, fail to consider that "what we take now to be secondary may have functioned, back then, as a primary condition and product of the act of writing itself, as long as that act was still experienced as new" (25). By repositioning "Literature" (which he spells with a capital L to call attention to its comparatively recent "higher" meaning) within "a materialist history of writing" (7), Siskin hopes to "reconceive literary study by mixing different kinds of data into it" (23), as he had begun to do in his *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (1988). His "relentlessly combinatory" (15) method breaches received distinctions, especially that between "creative" and ordinary utilitarian writing, and interweaves critical commentary on familiar and unfamiliar texts with data and insights from such varied disciplines as sociology, pedagogy, communication studies, law, and of course history. These ad-hoc mixtures, he says, are neither "haphazard combinations" nor formulas to be applied to all cases; they are to be judged by how well they "help make sense of the current proliferation of descriptions of contemporary change" (211) in an age of proliferating electronic media, declining print culture, and self-chosen aliteracy.

Criticism of a thesis as complex and far-reaching as this one, developed from hundreds of period vignettes alternating with contemporaneous media-prompted reflections on

American academic and popular culture, cannot be accomplished within a single field of study, nor can it be conducted intelligibly without citation of a great many more secondary sources than is customary in a book review. Siskin likens the "thrill of interdisciplinarity" to bungee jumping: "flying free of certain constraints while staying solidly tethered to the platform of one's own discipline" (72), even at the risk of smacking into that discipline on the rebound. With "culture" as the super-flexible tether, he zooms and boings among his four principal topics with such velocity that facts, assertions, and speculations whiz by in a blur. Is the perceived superiority of mental labor, above physical labor, really datable to 1700-1830 (24)? Can silent reading, which is subsumed under the shorthand term "writing," be presumed (without discussion) to be a post-Gutenberg skill (2, 31), despite vigorous challenges over the last 20 years from biblical and classical scholars as well as the medievalist Paul Henry Saenger, whose 1982 essay has recently been incorporated into his *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (1997)? Is it fair to say that by 1830 "courses in English Literature" were being taught "in English universities" and "a section of school" could be known as the English department (12), if only one university, the newly founded University College of London, and only one school (in Belfast) are cited? Granted that such eighteenth-century developments as increased mechanization of the printing process, mass marketing, and enforcement of the copyright law encouraged the proliferation of writing and associated changes in personal and social behavior, should "writing" in this period be considered a "new technology" (3, 31)? In six of the nine chapters, some of the choppy (or perhaps deliberately nonlinear) exposition may result from adaptation of previously published work in journals and essay collections devoted to romanticism, eighteenth-century studies, the novel, and Austen and feminism—only a tiny sampling of Siskin's research interests. The thrill of following so many heterogeneous juxtapositions and quickie generalizations soon becomes distracting (bungee jumping is not much of a spectator sport), yet to wish that fewer subjects had been considered in greater depth would be to reimpose upon the author the very disciplinary limits he seeks to escape.

Both the provocations and the provocativeness of Siskin's cross-disciplinary leaps are intensified by his organizational strategy, which produces forward movement in a multi-stranded, doubling-back spiral. Because early sections rely on sketchy adumbrations of matters to be developed more fully in later sections, the reader is always *in medias res*, constantly struggling with the work of reading, and grateful for footnotes beginning "My point here is . . ." As with Mandelbrot's fractals, intricate patterns are generated from the breakdown of progressively smaller units into still smaller parts containing the same structural elements in miniature. For example, in the first and longest section, "Disciplinarity: The Political Economy of Knowledge," all three chapters—

"Writing Havoc," "Engendering Disciplinarity" and "Scottish Philosophy and English Literature"—touch in one way or another upon the book's four main themes of disciplinarity, professionalism, literature, and gender. These three chapters, like the six that follow, are in turn subdivided into at least three smaller parts, making 29 in all (not counting the six sub-units of "The Argument"), many of which contain microcosmic elements of the parent chapters. This is evident already in the first chapter, "Writing Havoc," which consists of "Writing and Madness," concerning poetry; "Pens and Periods," concerning gender; "Productivity and Proper Subjects," concerning disciplines; and "Disciplinarity and the Middle Class," concerning present-day socioeconomic and political classifications.

Within the fractal units, as within the book as a whole, disparate materials are linked partly by analogy, partly by contemporaneity, partly by reference to the controlling thesis. The first unit of "Writing Havoc," "Writing and Madness," sets up Pope's "Epistle to Arbuthnot" and Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" as a "chronological framework for focusing on the chapter's central issue: writing's capacity to wreak what Hume called 'havoc' on itself and its users" (this explanatory statement [38] is from the second unit; the discussion of Hume [49-50] appears in the third unit); within this framework, society's concern shifts "from the potentially disruptive power of the technology of writing to the possibly disrupted personalities of the people who wrote" (34). For Pope, hordes of crazed, overproductive writers are leechlike annoyances and threats to the social order; for Wordsworth, 70 years later, mental illness is an occupational hazard to be warded off by emulating in his own vocation the leech-gatherer's perseverance in his task, thus turning his crisis in poetic development into the subject, in turn, of yet more writing. With the once out-of-control technology of writing now subjected to "disciplinary and professional ends" (38), Wordsworth's commitment to poetry as a professional discipline has come to define his personal identity and his value to society. The next section, "Pens and Periods," undertakes to make up for the incompleteness of the patriarchal Pope-Wordsworth paradigm by putting forward an alternative pair of period-framing texts: Anne Finch's mixed-genre preface to the folio manuscript of her poems (c. 1702) and excerpts from "A Tour to the Glaciers of Savoy" (1796) by someone who wrote as "Eliza." Here the similarities are more important than the differences: both poets "adjust[ed] to the obstacles they faced as women by acquiescing to limits in ways that made those limits occasions, sooner or later, for more writing" (40). For Siskin's purposes, it does not matter that Anne, later Countess of Winchelsea, was recognized as a poet not only by Wordsworth but by some of her most prominent male contemporaries, or that "Eliza," in the rollicking anapests of a comic epistolary travelogue addressed to a male friend, only playfully acknowledges her friend's artistic prowess. Siskin's

point is that both of these female-identified writers declare themselves deficient in poetic talent; both defer to more gifted male poets; both choose to limit themselves to lesser subjects or forms; both make their self-imposed limits the subject of pieces of writing; and together they exemplify "a gendered pattern demonstrably common to women writers but certainly not restricted to them (or them to it): proliferation through limitation" (42).

The notion of proliferation through limitation forms the bridge to the next section, "Productivity and Proper Subjects," which argues that "exertions of control for the sake of growth . . . helped to effect the large-scale behavior we call disciplinarity" (43). The Wordsworthian turn toward "internalization" served to generate more (and more disciplined) writing on narrower and deeper subjects, but it also led to the separation and downgrading of unproductive or useless studies. Here the exemplary text is from Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology* (1846; published 1932)—a bit beyond the study's cut-off date and geographical range, but useful as "a means of articulating . . . the work of writing" because it so memorably presents the "new criterion of productivity—specifically the capacity to produce progress" (42). In this text Marx and Engels attack idealist philosophy as the intellectual equivalent of onanism, as opposed to "study of the actual world," which is analogous to productive sexual love. Citing Henry Abelove's "now infamous" 1989 article in *Genders*, "Some Speculations on the History of Sexual Intercourse during the Long Eighteenth Century in England," Siskin notes that Marx and Engels's assumed sexual norm "turns out to be a statistical and thus historical phenomenon" (45); Abelove attributes the increase in fertility to "a remarkable increase in the incidence of cross-sex genital intercourse" and speculates that "nonreproductive sexual behaviors" (as well as other "behaviors, customs, usages which are judged to be nonproductive," such as being idle on weekdays) must have come under "extraordinary negative pressure." The result, according to Siskin, was "a sweeping reorganization and reconstruction of the human according to the criterion of productivity, including—and, in many ways, transpiring through—the increasingly important behavior of writing" (45), especially in eighteenth-century discourses on political economy and in such developments in natural history as Priestley's "systematic historicizing of experience, discovery, and theory" (48) and establishment of a research agenda for future investigators in *The History and Present State of Electricity* (1767), as noted by Charles Bazerman in *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (1988).

"Productivity and Proper Subjects" ends with a discussion of the concluding pages of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)—sparingly quoted—as a milestone in establishing limits for disciplined inquiry. Because the final paragraph of this treatise supplies the second

word of the chapter title, "Writing Havoc," and because allusions to "havoc" as a product of "writing" recur throughout the book, the passage is worthy of detailed attention. In Siskin's summation, Hume

wrought havoc by insisting skeptically on narrowness and limitation—not as caps to, but as the enabling conditions of, productivity: disciplines made narrow could become deep and thus serve to induce and control the proliferation of writing and knowledge. Cast in that form, these newly differentiated kinds of knowledge, as with social classes, could then be made subject to arguments about their relative productive value: the distinction of kind between a dominant philosophy and its subordinate branches collapsed and was replaced with a new hierarchy of degrees—degrees of productivity. (52)

In context, however, it is clear that Hume's restrictions on inquiry concern philosophical investigations only, not inquiry in general. Having pointed out the destructive effects of "excessive skepticism," Hume identifies two species of "mitigated skepticism, which may be of advantage to mankind": one is to awaken "dogmatical reasoners" to an awareness of "the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state," thus diminishing "their fond opinion of themselves" and encouraging "a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty" which "ought forever to accompany a just reasoner"; the other is "the limitation of our inquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding," while "leaving the more sublime topics to the embellishment of poets and orators, or to the arts of priests and politicians." Relying as they must on the limited faculty of reason, as opposed to the unfettered powers of the imagination, philosophers should concentrate on common life, using either "the more perfect species" of abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number (the only proper "objects of the abstract sciences or of demonstration") or the lesser species of experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence, as tested by experience of cause-effect relationships. This lesser species is "the foundation of moral reasoning" and of many of what we would now call the natural and social sciences. For philosophers, borderline studies involving reason are off limits: for example, although theological study has a foundation in reason, as supported by experience, "its best and most solid foundation is faith and divine revelation," while morals and criticism (e.g., judgments of beauty) "are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment." Hume, then, freely acknowledges the legitimacy of studies other than philosophy and the employment of faculties other than reason; his final paragraph proposes principled skepticism as an acid test for detecting worthless books of philosophy, not worthless books in general:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity and school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Siskin insists on reading Hume's finale more broadly as a rejection of "all volumes that do not concern either 'quantity or number,' on the one hand, or experiential reasoning on human 'existence,' on the other" (52). By establishing this division, he argues, Hume "helped to institute our now familiar distinction between the sciences and the humanities" (52). This division forms the link to the chapter's final unit, "Disciplinarity and the Middle Class," which credits Marx and Engels with making disciplinary change "a prerequisite for larger-scale institutional and social change" and Hume with contributing, through his writings, to both kinds of change. Siskin suggests that "Humean havoc," or the reslicing of the body of knowledge into new disciplinary categories, "is now our institutions" (50), so that nowadays "if one wants to produce institutional havoc by challenging what is proper—propriety and property—then, like Marx and Engels, one must struggle with the force of disciplinary difference" (51). Thus it is not surprising that "today's havoc" in the academic world, in the face of disciplinary realignments, middle-class tax revolts, and threats to humanities funding, "is occurring at another moment of technological change" (53). Commandeered as the governing metaphor for "Writing Havoc," Hume's image of library-wrecking is powerful, even irresistible. So why not just say so? It is not necessary to distort Hume's text to appropriate his image for other purposes; a straightforward acknowledgment of the broader application would only have strengthened this chapter.

Throughout *The Work of Writing*, but especially in section two, "Professionalism: The Poetics of Labor," Siskin has interesting things to say about the shifting meanings of "work." He relates the invention of the "deep, developmental self" (106)—a romantic (or Wordsworthian) innovation—to a "rewriting" of the concept of work that altered it "from that which a true gentleman does not have to do, to the primary activity informing adult identity" (107). The myth of vocation "made work more than necessary: it made work desirable—and necessary for personal happiness" (107). Siskin notes that the adjective "professional," along with the differentiating term "amateur," entered the language at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries; before that time, "profession" meant simply "known employment" and "professional behavior had been idealized as the behavior of gentlemen" (108); afterward, codes of professional conduct had to be developed as the new way of writing about work "rearranged the rela-

tionships among—and the functions of—character, identity, status, work, money, education, property, and propriety” (109). One of the surprises of this section is that both of its chapters employ literary genres as explanatory devices to suggest that the proliferation of writing “not only helped to occasion through limitation the re-forming of knowledge into disciplines—including Literature as the disciplinary home of writing itself—it also altered work, enabling and valorizing newly specialized forms of intellectual labor” (104). “The Georgic at Work” goes so far as to describe “writing in the form of the georgic” as a “crucial tool in the making of modern professionalism” (120) because in dignifying hard work as “the proper mode for nation building and the affirmation of personal and civic virtue” (119) and in “naturalizing what it articulated,” it became “the means by which the work of writing itself came to be seen as a potentially heroic activity” (120), with the key texts being Dryden’s translation of Virgil, the “prose georgics” of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, and Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. The balancing chapter, “The Lyricization of Labor,” seeks to connect the historical development of the lyric to other developments of the same period: the recategorization of work into higher and lower orders on the basis of age, skill, character, and gender, and the reorganization of knowledge into disciplines “that fostered narrow but deep subjects such as Literature” (133). Here Siskin is careful to stop well short of a cause-and-effect claim that lyrics actually produced changes in the form of labor; instead, “the work of writing, and how writing worked, changed in the same kinds of ways in which other kinds of work changed” (146). With specialization as the link, Siskin finds broad social significance in the lyric’s movement from a mixed, experimental form employed early in the century by many different kinds of writers of both sexes to its glorification later in the period, by the romantics, as the most “literary” form of literature, the most intensely poetic form of poetry, a form of expression so exalted that it could be attempted only by the most gifted and sensitive poets (all male): “Without claiming causation, we can find in the lyric—and in its fate (i.e., in whose hands it ended up)—ways to make sense of contemporaneous regroupings of knowledge and labor” (146). Regrettably, however, Siskin turns away from poetics to find silly slogans for these changes: “‘Bring home the bacon’—from by-employments to occupation; ‘Whistle while you work’—from combinations to trade unions; and ‘Look Ma, no hands!’—the advent of mental labor” (135).

Siskin begins the section on “Novelism: Literature in the History of Writing” by pointing out a striking incongruity: standard accounts of the “rise” of the novel, which peak with Fielding, Richardson, Smollett, and Sterne, give short shrift to the last two decades of the century, just when the publication rate of new novels (and other genres as well) shot up to unprecedented heights. Making use of figures tracking both the general economy and print markets, from sources as varied as Anthony J. Little, *Deceleration in the Eighteenth-Cen-*

tury British Economy (1976), John Richetti, *Popular Fiction Before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700-1739* (1969), James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England 1750-1800* (1992), Robert Mayo, *The English Novel in the Magazines 1740-1815* (1962), and Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (1987), Siskin explores how the novel participated “in the increased proliferation and in the naturalization of writing” (156). Although there was a mid-century slump in the book business coinciding with a period of “profitless prosperity” (159 [Little’s term]) in the overall British economy, periodicals flourished, bringing fiction to more and more readers, before becoming concentrated at the end of the century in fewer magazines of wider circulation. The proliferation of periodicals heightened awareness of the Author (Siskin’s capitalization) in two ways: “Author-Before-Work,” a term drawn from Eliza Haywood’s statement in *The Female Spectator* that she prefers “to get as well acquainted as I can with an Author, before I run the risque of losing my Time in perusing his Work” (qtd. 162, Siskin’s italics), spurred critical commentary that created a following for individual writers; “Reader-As-Author,” the fictionalization of readers as participants in print-conversations with other readers and with magazine editors (who often wrote letters to the journal from imaginary readers, to encourage real ones to join in), helped to keep the magazines supplied with free content and aroused in readers the desire to read more novels and to become writers themselves. Without making clear that William Godwin’s 1797 essay, “Of History and Romance,” was not published until 1988 (when Maurice Hindle appended it to his Penguin edition of *Caleb Williams*), Siskin cites it as a landmark in freeing the novel from “the gender to which it was linked throughout the eighteenth century” and making it a respectable vehicle for serious writing, on a par with histories exhibiting what Godwin called “bold and masculine virtues” (quoted 171; Siskin’s italics, unattributed). In the same way that “poetry was lyricized, prose was novelized” (178), and as more novels came under critical scrutiny in periodicals, the encoding of certain forms of fictional characters’ improper behavior as foreign, particularly French, contributed to a sense of British national identity while at the same time laying the groundwork, in critical commentary, for the soon-to-emerge discipline of English literature.

The fourth section, “Gender: The Great Forgetting,” zeroes in on an overriding concern of the study: how did women participate in the proliferation of writing, how were they affected by it, and why has so much of their participation been forgotten? The question of why one writer in particular, Jane Austen, has not only been remembered but has become part of the curriculum in English literature leads Siskin into a sustained consideration of Austen’s relation to the discipline in which her work is studied. Back in the second chapter, “Engendering Disciplinarity,” Siskin had ar-

gued that modern disciplinarity "was not first constituted and then later altered by gender difference" but rather has "functioned from its inception to articulate and enact those differences" (55), beginning with eighteenth-century writings on education. Depth and narrowness, formerly cultivated as the alternative private sphere of studious women like Mary Astell, guided the selective pruning of writing in the reorganization of knowledge, work, and printed matter into higher and lower-status disciplines, professions, and literary genres—all of which worked to the advantage of men. Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which identifies men with the sublime and women with the beautiful, accelerated this reorganization of knowledge through "the celebration of intellectual labor, the specialization of that labor into increasingly distinct and thus potentially deep fields, and the construction and accessing of that distinctive depth through specialized uses of words" (70-71). (The weird notion that Longinus and Burke championed the sublime as a means of combating indolence and "making men work" is underpinned with drastically out-of-context quotations.) As these specialized divisions of labor became a "proliferation-through-limitation strategy," "culture" replaced "the sublime" as "the inclusive rubric for what had been legitimated" (71), making lines of division between disciplines appear to be natural while unintentionally perpetuating gender-related hierarchies. Culture became the eventual domain of the discipline of English literature, as taught and studied by academic professionals. Within this discipline, Austen has always been an anomaly: an early-canonized woman writer whose achievement in her genre (as considered in studies of the "rise" of the novel) resists categorization with that of Fielding and Richardson in one century or with Scott and Dickens in another—and now, when "Literature" has been knocked off its pedestal and swept into cultural studies, one who defies categorization as a feminist and challenges the disciplinary identity of all who try to classify her.

The case of Austen is instructive. Because Siskin gives sustained attention to Austen's situation and anchors his exploratory speculations in specifics, the section on Gender is his most persuasive and illuminating. In *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* Siskin had placed Austen, as a narrator of development, among the romantics; in this book, he investigates how it was that her innovations in the novel, her way of drawing readers into the interior lives of her characters, set the direction for the future of the genre, while the stylistic models of Fielding and Richardson became dead ends. Without quoting F. R. Leavis's 1948 statement that Austen was "the inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel," Siskin notes that what he calls "The Great Forgetting" of women writers (Austen excepted) became "The Great Tradition" in departments of English; Austen's acceptance by male critics of her own time signals a crucial moment when "some of the fundamental links between

women and the novel—links that we are only now recovering—were first detached, or at least obscured" (197). By placing Austen's work within the history of writing, rather than literature, Siskin reveals that the late eighteenth-century "takeoff in publication rates," especially in periodicals, made Austen's career and later reputation possible, both by "giving new value to the position of Author and by making that position more accessible to more people" (198). For Siskin's argument, it is somewhat awkward that Austen preferred to publish anonymously, but his point is still valid: Scott—for one—recognized her distinctive authorial hand in his (anonymous) 1815 piece in the *Quarterly Review* and praised her work as "new" and better than that of her contemporaries. The strangeness of Austen's publication history—writing prolifically in the 1790s but not publishing until the second decade of the nineteenth century, despite her desire to see her work in print—is made even stranger by her decision not to publish in magazines, a readily available outlet in which she could have maintained her anonymity. Siskin notes that by publishing in book form only, whatever her reasons may have been, Austen participated in "the historical transformation of the two-tier market [for fiction] into a hierarchical system of what we now know as high versus low culture," a development that "ushered in the disciplinary advent of the new category of Literature" (200). Her novels, in earning praise for what they did *not* include—Gothic claptrap that, according to the *Quarterly Review*, "should now be left to ladies' maids and sentimental washerwomen"—played "an unexpected role in the disciplinary exclusion of women and women's writing" (200). Siskin suggests that a major reason for Austen's early acceptance into the literary canon is that she helped to change writing from a threatening new technology to a reassuringly "natural," domesticated, and entertaining medium for portraying British life. For example, she was so good at putting her readers at ease as they read about the unsettling effects (on her characters) of too much romance-reading that—to the question raised in *Northanger Abbey* as to whether readers (especially young women) become what they read—Austen's answer, according to Siskin, is "Yes and no, but don't worry," signaling "a change in the status of writing from a worrisome new technology to a more trusted tool" (204).

But the development of an "Author-centered, gender-conscious economy of print" (215), as changes in copyright law and in the textual marketplace closed off opportunities for women writers to publish and to have their work known and discussed, led to "Authorial professionalism," which contributed to the taming of writing and the elevation of certain kinds of writing to the status of high literature; all this made possible the "remasculinization of British Literature at the turn into the nineteenth century" (216) and the academic institutionalization of the Great Tradition in the twentieth century. *The Edinburgh Review*, founded in 1802, "helped to masculinize the literary" by establishing an old-

boys' network of reviewers, interspersing reviews with "newly specialized treatments of traditionally masculine subjects, particularly economics and politics" (224) and replacing inclusive coverage of new books with fewer and deeper reviews of selected books. To elucidate the disproportionate impact of these developments on women writers in "the social life of texts," Siskin picks up the jarring term "reverse vicariousness" (217) from David S. Kaufer and Kathleen M. Carley's *Communication at a Distance: The Influence of Print on Sociocultural Organization and Change* (1993). According to Kaufer and Carley, this phenomenon allows even nonreaders to "positively register at social gatherings that they 'know of' the book without having seen or read it first hand" and keep up with the "vogue information of culture" that establishes membership in their peer groups. This "keeping up," Siskin observes, became "a very particular problem for a particular group at the particular historical moment that Authorial momentum began to turn Britain into an information culture" (218). Thus the forgetting of women writers "was neither causal nor natural; it was, rather, the result of what was reproduced, for whom, and how[;] . . . it was a matter of whose texts, read or even unread, did get talked about and reproduced and whose texts, unread or even read, slipped into silence and out of production" (218). How much deeper into silence, he might have added, risk slipping those texts, read or unread, that were never in the production system in the first place!

And so, after all, *The Work of Writing* will find its uses in Blake studies—at least as a contrasting backdrop for the kind of work Blake did, and as a lens through which his critical reception may be viewed. Siskin compellingly characterizes exactly the sorts of "writing" in which Blake, a dropout from print culture, chose not to participate, except as a professional engraver, and upon which, as a poet, he made scarcely a dent. Ardently and industriously engaged in his artistic vocation, in near-poverty and obscurity, Blake managed to slip through the tightening nets of disciplinarity, professionalism, and genre-divisions of his time. He never benefited, as a writer, from an influential contemporary's "Author-before-Reader" hype, buzz, or spin. To the extent that his poems "did get talked about" by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other poets, the conversations took place in private or through correspondence, with the single exception of a brief entry in *A Biographical Dictionary of the Living Authors of Great Britain and Ireland* (1816), while more substantial public comments on Blake's poetry, by a handful of memoirists and fellow artists, appeared mainly as adjuncts to accounts of his development as an artist. The proliferation of periodicals had absolutely no effect on Blake's literary reputation (T.G. Wainwright's promise in *London Magazine* [September 1820] of a forthcoming article by "Dr. Tobias Ruddicombe, M.D." on "Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion" never materialized). The only thing Blake himself ever published in a journal was an indignant letter to the editor of the *Monthly Magazine* (1 July 1806) in defense of Fuseli's painting of Dante's Ugolino.

As he noted in a letter of 1 September 1800 to George Cumberland (into which he copied a letter submitted to the *Monthly Magazine* in support of Cumberland's proposal for a national gallery of art), "I so little understand the way to get such things into Magazines or News papers that if I have done wrong in Merely delivering the Letter at the Publishers of the Magazine beg you will inform me" (Robert N. Essick and Morton D. Paley, "Dear Generous Cumberland: A Newly Discovered Letter and Poem by William Blake," *Blake* 32 [1998]: 5). Two and a half years later, in a letter of 30 January 1803, Blake boasted to his brother James that he had learned from Hayley "& his connexions & his method of managing" that "The Profits arising from Publications are immense," but if he really knew how to realize "almost certain profits" of "500 G." on a book "got out at the Expense of Ten pounds," he never put his scheme into effect. Blake's entire poetic output, whether produced in letterpress (the privately printed *Poetical Sketches*, the unpublished and unsold *The French Revolution*) or in self-printed, hand-finished limited editions, utterly eschews the "Authorial professionalism" and "historical connections between Authorship and economic change" (160) that Siskin traces in *The Work of Writing*. A case in point: on 25 April 1803, after three years of writing "from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will," Blake informed Thomas Butts that "an immense Poem Exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life all produced without Labour or Study." So it was not as a writer that Blake was eulogized in literary papers (e.g., the *Literary Gazette* of 18 August 1827, reprinted in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and elsewhere), but as an artist. Until the publication of Gilchrist's biography in 1863, as noted in G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s *Blake Records* (1969), his name was kept alive mainly in Allen Cunningham's *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1830).

Since 1830, the closing year of Siskin's book, the work of writing has continued to make short work of Blake the writer. When he finally gained recognition as a poet, late in the nineteenth century, he was unusually slow to benefit from the institutionalization of English literature as an academic discipline, and he has remained a similarly anomalous, out-of-the-mainstream figure in art history. His short-lived canonical status among the "big six" male English romantic poets, which was not attained until the late 1950s (after a long probationary period with Burns among the pre-romantics), was quickly challenged, in part on the grounds of gender, in the many waves of "writing havoc" that have washed over the disciplines of the humanities in the last 30 years. Now his space in the MLA annual bibliography appears to be shrinking, and it seems that fewer graduate students aspire to build their professional lives around him.

For some of these very reasons, however, the work that Blake executed in his experimental eighteenth-century technology of relief etching has not, even yet, been tamed or

naturalized; for all we know, it may prove impervious to the formidable cultural forces Siskin associates with the enterprise of "writing." Blake, of all writers, stands to benefit most from the ongoing boom in post-literary technologies, and Blake studies, as an academic endeavor, may have a good chance of surviving, even thriving, in the waning years of print culture. In the millennium just ahead, as discussed at the 1998 convention of the Modern Language Association and in *The Wordsworth Circle* 30 (1999), web-based electronic marvels like the Blake Archive (and its ever more dazzling reincarnations in technologies yet to come) will allow unprecedented numbers of the children of the future age to experience the thrills and threats of Blake's achievement—already, Internet users anywhere in the world can call up images from a wider range of illuminated writings in a shorter span of time than anyone, including Blake himself, has ever seen at one sitting before. For Blake's future readers and viewers, it is possible that the response to this exhilarating experience won't simply be more writing, in the form of yet more work-products. What if some of these readers should forego, however briefly, "the meer drudgery of business," as Blake wrote to Butts on 10 January 1803, and make the difficult choice, with Blake, to "follow the dictates of our Angels" and carry out "the Tasks set before us"? And what if a few, somewhere, someday, should actually heed Blake's call, in the Preface to chapter 4 of *Jerusalem*, to "expel from among you those who pretend to despise the labours of Art & Science" and decide to engage "openly & publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem"? Where would the work of writing be then?

Jason Whittaker. *William Blake and the Myths of Britain*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. xii + 215 pp. \$55.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER GOURLAY

This book, an under-revised 1995 dissertation, is not easy to read—or to review. Mr. Whittaker has intelligently considered the resources available up to about 1993, primary and secondary, on the important and complex subject of Blake's use of the poetic and mythic versions of British history and prehistory. Unfortunately, the result is little more than an index of what is already known, and even as such it will not be very helpful, either to beginners or those who have studied these materials extensively.

Part of the problem is that although Whittaker has read other scholars' work with enough penetration to know that not all of it is equally useful, he invariably assembles his discussions—they aren't arguments, exactly—out of contingent assertions culled from his predecessors, as if the

decontextualized sentences of David Erdman, Kathleen Raine, Edward Larrissy, Robert Gleckner and Don Cameron Allen were fully compatible bricks in a wall of Blakean science. As a result, bits from here and there mingle in an arbitrary stew of primary and secondary sources, made all the more bewildering because Whittaker often refers to writers by surnames only: one can easily determine whether "George" on page 170 is M. Dorothy George, Diana Hume George, or our poor George III, but by that time the point of the reference is lost. And because so much of the text is endnoted paraphrase and quotation, the reader must drop everything two or three times per page to examine notes and bibliography to divine what sort of spirit Whittaker is channeling at any given moment.

But the most important problem is that although he has done his homework, apparently understands the criticism he has read, is good at summarizing the main issues in extra-Blakean materials, and has the knowable facts straight, Whittaker doesn't show that he has yet figured out very much about Blake on his own: Blake's words and ideas are almost always seen through critics darkly, and when Whittaker directly addresses a Blake text or, very rarely, a picture, the results are often naïve. This is not a question of a flawed approach, a theory misapplied, or even critical misprision in service of an argument: Whittaker is willing (to a fault) to incorporate ideas from almost any source or point of view, and he does so with both authority and finesse, but never really gets around to creating his own intellectually useful account of Blake's historical mythtaking and mythmaking. This leaves a reviewer very little to praise or even argue with, since there is no explicit or even implicit theoretical position to examine and if there is a novel and coherent argument to debate it is buried somewhere beneath a drift of secondary sources. The book might be helpful as a review of the literature to someone who had not yet done any work on these issues (especially chapter 3, on Druids), but because Whittaker tends to be oblivious to incongruities and uncongenialities in critical arguments he is not an ideal synthesist or guide.

William Blake and the Myths of Britain exemplifies at once why dissertations are often published, and why they usually shouldn't be: most are undertaken as speculative exercises in dutiful plodding, and even if nothing very exciting comes of a given project, the plodder must push on grimly to the end, then polish the voluminous results to a deceptively high gloss. In this case the plodding is of the highest quality, the gloss is very high, and the consequence inconsequential.