

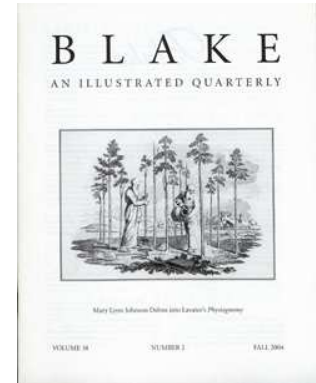
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Robert N. Essick, ed., William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

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by making Vala occupy the structural space attributed to Satan or Hell in influential epics like *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*." At the same time, however, since Blake has deconstructed the Heaven/Hell dualism in *The Marriage*, he "inadvertently encourages his readers to question the structurally similar Eternity/Nature dualism that haunts his own epics" (174-75). Hutchings goes on to point out that Vala's naming by others is an important part of her presentation, especially since the grossly unreliable Sons of Albion, as well as the self-absorbed Albion himself, are the ones who identify her as "Babylon" and "our Mother! Nature!" (E 163).

At the same time, Hutchings reads the Polypus as Blake's critique of "deep ecology." Just as the Polypus threatens to absorb all things and beings into itself, "too much identification with the external world can, in Blake's thought, lead to a harmful annihilation of the identifying self" (197). The Polypus becomes "a figure for the indissociate human" (199); paradoxically, by identifying too much with our environment, we lose ourselves and thus our ability to see that environment. Albion deteriorates when he anthropomorphically projects himself onto his natural surroundings: this denial of otherness makes relationship impossible. But so does the loss of self in the absorption of the Polypus, which again is not a natural product but a dark construction of the human will.

In the "Coda: Blake's Apocalypse, Druidism, and the Humanization of Nature," Hutchings resolves much of the lingering ambiguity over anthropomorphism and whether "humanizing" nature is a positive or negative process in Blake. Certainly, as he acknowledges, self-interested and instrumental readings and discourses of nature are ultimately destructive both for human beings and for the rest of the environment. On the other hand, the mutuality that characterizes the end of *Jerusalem* depends on recognizing the independent value of all things, that they are worthy of "conversing" (though he does not draw on that particular term). Hutchings concludes with the suggestion that when "Lion, Tyger, Horse, Elephant, Eagle Dove, Fly, Worm, / And the all wondrous Serpent ... Humanize" on plate 98 (E 258), they not only become human (as most readers have concluded) but make others humane in a "profound 'ministry of reconciliation'" (217).

In conclusion, *Imagining Nature* does more than fill a gap in Blake studies; it re-imagines nature in the context not only of Blake's work but implicitly of all human imagining. While a few points in the readings, as I have noted, seem stretched or loosely supported, the real value of the book rests not in such details but in its ability to see, as Blake would say, at once the Thistle and the Old Man. This book will change forever the way we read Blake's reading of nature.

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William Blake. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Ed. Robert N. Essick. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 2002. [11] + 78 pp. 11 color and 10 monochrome illus. \$21.95/£18.99 cloth.

Reviewed by CATHERINE L. MCCLENAHAN

With this affordable edition of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Robert Essick and the Huntington Library have made Blake's illuminated text and related visual material available in hard copy to a wide audience of Blake students, scholars and fans, and given easy access to one more copy to compare with those available on the electronic Blake Archive (copies a, A, C, J, F, G, and P). Based on the Huntington's copy (designated as copy E), this edition provides full-size color reproductions of all 11 plates, a printed version of this copy, bibliographic and textual notes, about 50 pages of detailed commentary that includes monochrome reproductions of pencil drawings from Blake's Notebook, and a bibliography of critical studies.

Visions could scarcely ask for a more experienced and informed editor. As Blake readers know, Essick is one of the world's experts on Blake's printing methods and visual designs and a noted scholar of Blake's writing. One of the editors of the Blake Archive, he has also edited or co-edited other illuminated books for the Blake Trust/Tate/Princeton series (*The Early Illuminated Books* and *Milton*), catalogues of Blake's separate prints and commercial illustrations, catalogues of the Blake holdings in the Huntington collection, and collections of essays on the relation of Blake's images and texts. Despite the relatively affordable price, there is nothing cut-rate about the look or feel of this volume: both are equally attractive, right down to the little motifs from the visual designs that are placed on the verso sides of pages that begin or end sections, the crisp, readable typeface of the printed sections, and the pleasurable feel of good paper stock.

Copy E compares interestingly with the copies available in the online Blake Archive, which vary significantly in color and color intensity from each other, even the four (a, A, C and J) published in the same year, 1793. The colors of this copy seem to include more blue and purple shades and sometimes more color shadings, as on plate 4, the first page of the poem proper. This edition makes it possible to see variations in Blake's script and ambiguities of punctuation marks, while the textual notes point out changes Blake made on the copperplate that would be hard to see in a reproduction. The printing is as clear as the low-contrast colors of ochre ink on buff pages can be, but since some of the lighter lines are hard to read, the inclusion of the printed text is helpful for less experienced—or just older—eyes.

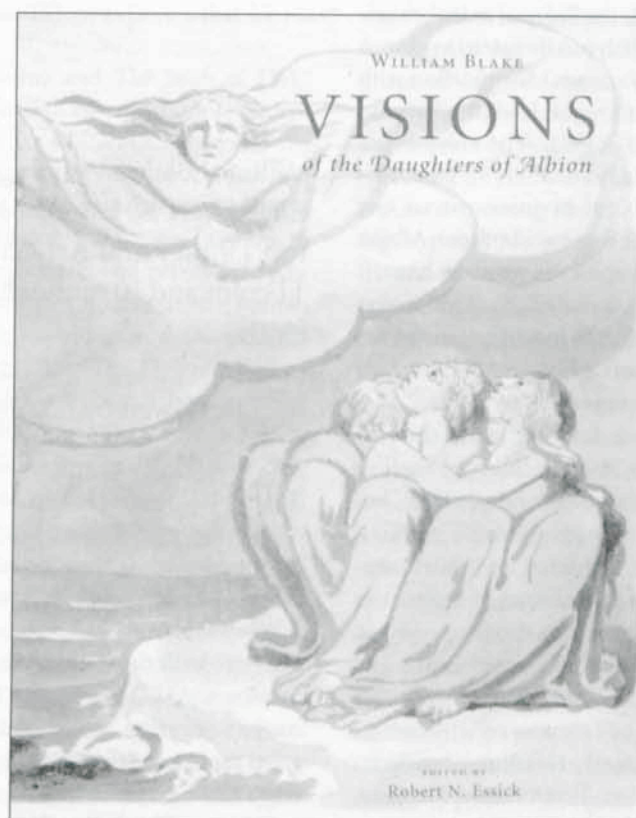
Essick's inclusion of the related Notebook drawings in itself makes this edition worthwhile, not just for Blake students or scholars but to anyone interested in tracing the evolution of a visual artist's ideas. Modern technology has made it possible to digitize photographs from the British Library and then manipulate these to retrieve pencil drawings that were written or drawn over in ink years later and to erase words that covered parts of these pencil drawings, as we can see in Erdman and Moore's facsimile of Blake's Notebook. But this edition saves readers an extra research step by including illustrations such as figure 2, which not only shows a drawing of a ring of dancers related to those on plate 2 of *VDA*, but also the caption underneath, a quotation from Milton's *Comus*, that was written over in the Notebook but which sets up a thematic link between the two works.

The commentary begins with a short, lucid discussion of Blake's background as a printmaker: how he invented his unique methods of illuminated printing, how these contrasted with conventional methods, and the advantages and disadvantages of Blake's methods for an independent artisan. Essick also surveys the works of illuminated printing published before *VDA*, setting up thematic issues and links between this work and its predecessors. This leads to an overview of Blake's common rhetorical strategies and thus to Essick's own rhetorical position. Noting the focus in much recent criticism of *VDA* on "precursor texts," Essick points to the consequent danger of being "led away from the texture of Blake's poet-

ry, as poetry" In contrast, Essick proposes "a rather old-fashioned solution": to work through this text (i.e., the Huntington's) "from start to finish, line by line when necessary" (26). His commentary will take "brief excursions" into historical issues or earlier texts that Blake echoes "when they assist understanding" (26-27). Aside from a somewhat curmudgeonly swipe at "modern interpreters" who overlook Oothoon's speech in 5:23-6:20, Essick's emphasis is fair, relevant, and especially helpful to newer readers of Blake's unique composite art or simply of poetry. Stuart Curran complained 30 years ago about the tendency of some Blake criticism to

"play for the big stakes and not fret about the pennies," imposing structures "on a generally resistant poem" (Curran 330), and while the critical paths we've followed in the meantime have been valuable, the complaint still has relevance. Essick's approach in this book enhances both aesthetic experience and intellectual analysis.

Readers who want more detailed historical, political and feminist approaches to *VDA* will find the bibliography a good place to start. Meanwhile, Essick's close attention to details can be as fruitful for experienced Blake readers as it is excellent training for newer ones. If one follows the commentary, flipping back and forth among its readings, the pencil drawings from the Notebook, and one or more



plates of Blake's text, even a reader familiar with this work is likely to notice something new or reconsider an earlier idea. This process can spur new observations even when Essick isn't pointing to them. For instance, when I turned back from the commentary to look at plate 7 again (instead of following the syntax of the sentence that runs from plates 6-7 in a printed text), the first four words of plate 7 and their punning relevance to the design just above really stood out. "Wave shadows of discontent" lies just beneath the picture of Oothoon, curving in a wave form above a huddled figure refusing to look up. Read aloud, the words sound like another voice encouraging her complaints against Bromion, Theotormon and the various oppressive systems they embody, a positive note in an otherwise gloomy situation. Other design details reinforce the slight note of hope. The huddled figure who chooses to be deaf and blind to her efforts (so probably Theotormon) is a closed, rigid rectangle except for the curve of the bowed head.

Although Oothoon arcs over him, apparently imprisoned in one of his "black jealous" waves (5:4), the shape of her body is a half circle that never closes, and the wave itself tapers to the beginning of a dynamic S-curve at its tip. So Oothoon's persistence in her "discontent" and continued struggles to articulate it to herself and others lead her to new insights. As Essick notes earlier, Oothoon is changing. Her language reaches "a new level of critical consciousness" and is "moving toward ... a philosophy of mind" in the "They told me ..." speech that begins at 5:30 (48, 49); Oothoon learns from her own efforts, as the other characters apparently do not.

Readers may also find themselves taking the lines of Essick's argument beyond the commentary. He calls our attention to the way facing pages (Blake's arrangement) interact visually, for example, and deftly sets up the suggestions of "lesbian sexuality" and other "transgressive" elements in the text and design of plate 3, "The Argument." Noting a page later that the two prostrate figures at the bottom of plate 4 are hard to identify with certainty, Essick observes the way these two figures echo the woman in *The Nightmare* and Bottom in *The Awakening of Titania*, two famous paintings by Fuseli. If Essick's observations on plate 3 are still in mind, however, a reader might also see the paired figures on both plates as female. Each design contains one small and one large human figure (arranged large, small, small, large). The sex of the larger figure in plate 4 is not definite in this copy, and its position is a near mirror image of the woman on plate 6 whose flesh is being rent by an eagle (Oothoon, presumably).¹ Interestingly, the smaller female figure on plate 4 is attached to a vine-like curve that echoes the curve of the vine on plate 3 from which rise "Leutha's flower" and the nymph that Oothoon alternately sees (4:6).

So while any user of this edition might multiply disagreements with Essick's readings in the commentary, the point is that he is not performing the kind of close reading that simply substitutes a critic's text for the author's or for a reader/viewer's. This edition assembles so much for its audience to use, and the commentary leads them to hold so many things in consciousness at once, that multiple interpretations and ambiguities should inevitably arise, whether the commentary points them out or not. Whatever readers' critical assumptions are, Essick's "old-fashioned" method can be productive and even exhilarating, since it really aims to stimulate and support their independent observations and interpretations. Individuals can use all the parts of this edition to help them

1. There is ambiguity about the sex of both the larger figure on plate 4 and the figure on plate 6. The size of the body in the former plate and perhaps the muscle definition suggest masculinity, but the pectoral muscles are not unlike breasts. The figure on plate 6 obviously connects with Oothoon's call for Theotormon's eagles to rend her flesh in the text (5:13), but the allusion to Prometheus seems inescapable. This blurring of gender markers seems characteristic of Blake to me (McClenahan 301-04, 312-14 and *passim*).

experience this beautiful and provocative illuminated book in new ways that would be difficult or impossible without it. The Blake Archive is an invaluable resource for us now. At the same time, interacting with a work that can be held in the hands differs from interactions with a work online, whether sensually, aesthetically or intellectually. So given the relatively affordable price for one of Blake's works in illuminated printing, teachers may want to give their students this experience in a Blake course or one on British literature, Romanticism or poetry. If an instructor had to select just one work of illuminated printing to order, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* could provide a valuable introduction to Blake's work, especially in the 1790s, but also to issues and problems of the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary period in England and Europe, or to trends and experiments in literature and the visual arts in the late eighteenth century. Others will want this edition for personal pleasure and use. Either way, it deserves a wide audience.

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Reviewed by DENA BAIN TAYLOR

In two companion volumes—"Wonders Divine": *The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Myth* and "Glorious incomprehensible": *The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Language*—Sheila A. Spector traces Blake's use of kabbalistic myth and language from his early prose tracts to his late prophecies. She argues that he gradually appropriated kabbalistic mythemes and linguistic manipulation, and that this is what enabled him to effect the transition from a conventional to a mystical mode of thought. Though the two books are structured in much the same way and advance the same overall argu-