



## R E V I E W

Sarah Haggarty and Jon Mee. *William Blake: Songs of Innocence and of Experience: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. x + 200 pp. £55.00/\$90.00, hardcover; £17.99/\$30.00, paperback; £16.99/\$29.99, e-book.

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1 THE subtitle of this overview of critical responses to *Songs* raises the questions, “Essential for what?” and “Essential to whom?” The book is not really right for begin-

ners trying to understand the *Songs*, since the poems themselves are barely mentioned, much less explicated; it isn't comprehensive enough to help scholars establish that what they want to say has not already been said; and it is a poor substitute for reading the critics it treats, because for the most part it characterizes and analyzes rather than epitomizes their approaches. Its two authors both write clearly and well, and they usually explain concepts and terms that would not be familiar to undergraduates, but the efficiently allusive prose is still likely to be over the heads of many of those seeking help reading Blake criticism. Thus the optimal audience for this book is small—perhaps panicky doctoral candidates preparing to cram for comprehensive exams or junior professors who have just been told that next semester's lecture course on romanticism will become an advanced seminar on the *Songs*. Several of my undergraduate students recently found the book in the library and used bits of it as if it were a typical reader's guide to the poems. In general they benefited from their exposure to it, especially in that it helped them to identify influential criticism to read without having to slog through the vast swamps of undifferentiated twaddle that turn up in a computer-assisted scholarly search. It can certainly do more good than Cliff's Notes (proposed motto: “For those who don't get it, by those who don't get it”) or the beckoning internet sites (for example, *SparkNotes* <<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/blake>>) that entice the Blake bemused into drinking the Lethe-like waters of complete bafflement.

- 2 The most useful chapter for those seeking a foothold in the *Songs* themselves is probably the first, which describes the general circumstances and processes of the composition and initial publication of *Innocence* and then *Experience*, but thereafter the book is more concerned with reception, reaction, editing, and republication—it is around rather than about the *Songs*. Chapters 2 through 5 review early readers' responses, concentrating on a decade or two at a time: Haggarty and Mee identify a few influential figures in a given period and briskly sketch each one's take on Blake and/or the poems (for many nineteenth-century readers Blake *was* the *Songs*), usually working off short quoted passages that better indicate how the writers approached Blake than what they said about his work. This historical review culminates in an extensive discussion of the contributions of S. Foster Damon, represented here as the figure who established Blake as an “academically respectable” (94) author, one whose works reveal both extensive ties to tradition and a vast system of original thought, two perennial favorite subjects of professorial explication.
- 3 With chapter 6, “The Post-War Foundations: System, Myth, and History,” the discussion begins to slow down and spread out as it recounts how academic critics seized upon the newly certified Major Author that Damon gave them,

beginning with Jacob Bronowski's romantic Marxist visions of Blake's oeuvre, and then the great triumvirate of Northrop Frye (emphasizing system), Harold Bloom (myth), and David V. Erdman (history). Haggarty and Mee explain these critics' distinctive interests, then suggest how their perspectives could (and did) harmonize, especially in the work of their numerous critical heirs. Chapter 7 covers several of that next generation of critics, especially Robert Gleckner, whose *The Piper and the Bard* was the first full-length critical treatment of the *Songs* as an independent and coherent work, followed by waves of ideologically and methodologically focused witnesses: feminists, historicists, Freudians, mystics, and more. Many of the earliest of these scholars bore well-marked volumes of Damon, Bloom, Erdman, and/or Frye in one hand and an edition of Blake in the other, and set to work refining, solidifying, and clarifying their panoramic insights. Others were more anxious about influences, repudiating the triumvirate's versions of Blake. Inevitably, given the size and scope of this guidebook, and of the subject, this chapter and those that follow are both partial and somewhat breezy in their coverage of the explosively expanded field, focusing on critics with novel and explicitly theorized approaches. That may be why Zachary Leader's *Reading Blake's Songs* (1981) is treated but not Robert N. Essick's modestly framed but masterful scholarly edition and facsimile of the *Songs* (2008) or Andrew Lincoln's well-illustrated edition in the Princeton/Blake Trust series of facsimiles of the illuminated books (1991). Indeed, although Haggarty and Mee acknowledge and discuss the role of nineteenth-century republications and facsimiles in shaping public understanding of the *Songs*, they pay little attention to the critical significance of textual/editorial matter and the quality of images of Blake's pages in currently available print editions of his work, such as G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s *William Blake's Writings* (1978) or the Mary Lynn Johnson/John E. Grant critical editions of *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (1979, 2008). Admittedly, not all aspects of all editions are original enough or coherent enough to constitute criticism. For example, Geoffrey Keynes's slight remarks in the immensely important Trianon/Orion/Oxford facsimiles of *Songs* were never very useful. On the other hand, Haggarty and Mee pay considerable attention to the critical significance of Erdman's heroic, if somewhat problematic, textual work. It's probably not fair to complain about other omissions in an overview that does not claim to be comprehensive, but I don't understand the absence of some works that foreground discussion of the illustrations to the *Songs*: for instance, Erdman's *Illuminated Blake* (1974) made the case for attending to the subtlest pictorial details in multiple copies, even if it also led to a lot of arbitrary over-reading, and, in a more judicious version of the same spirit, Grant's ideologically unclassifiable, minutely particular essays on Blake's words and

pictures are still worth reviewing before writing about any of the *Songs*.<sup>1</sup>

- 4 Chapter 8 is probably the one most likely to be widely influential, at least for a while, because it thoughtfully combines reasoned discussion of the fierce debates about Blake's material practices in producing his texts and images with an account of some of the partially corollary, largely theory-driven investigations of text, textuality, and image in Blake's work, many of which invoke the nitty-gritty of his publishing techniques. This chapter is no substitute for reading the relevant books and articles, but its overview of the relationship between these wildly heterogenous ways of thinking about Blake seems fair to all sides and likely to be a real help to those coming in late to this strange but very important conversation.
- 5 The book closes with the unfortunately titled "Worlding Blake Today: 'Past, Present and Future Sees' [sic]," which sketches what was most recently hot, welcoming scholars from the departments of Gender and Body Studies, Post-colonial Studies, and Ecocritical Studies to join the Blake Studies party (which, without departmental affiliation, they have long attended anyway). This chapter is particularly likely to be useful to undergraduates looking for a place to start reading Blake criticism, especially because these approaches are not only au courant but often fruitful when applied to the *Songs*, even by beginners; furthermore, they don't call for a personal supply of stopping varnish and nitric acid or seem to require that one preface every critical argument by tracking it back to its origins in the nineteenth century.
- 6 The universal format of these Palgrave guides to criticism of literary texts suggests a whiggish presumption that the secondary literature on a work forms a coherent and progressing whole, and that a tour pointing out the more salient bricks in the Wall of Secondary Literature would be just what every undergraduate needs to get started. I am somewhat willing to entertain the possibility that there might be authors out there somewhere who are susceptible to this approach, but Blake is not one of them. The back cover of this book proposes that it is "an invaluable resource for anyone who is seeking to navigate their way through the mass of criticism surrounding Blake's most widely-studied book." The implication that the critical literature is an obstacle to understanding Blake will resonate with anyone who has read large amounts of it: few critics read Blake's texts or study his pictures carefully, many do not read or study anything carefully, and too many read

1. See the checklist of Grant's work in my festschrift collection, *Prophetic Character* (West Cornwall: Locust Hill Press, 2002) xxi-xxvi.

Blake only in snippets found in other critics. Guidance at the Palgrave level of generality may suggest leading the uninitiated briskly through a circle of the deaf, who are discussing the reports of a committee of the blind, who may or may not have their hands somewhere on the Blakean elephant. It is easy to imagine a blandly even-handed account of the secondary literature on the *Songs* that would be valuable to few and essential to none. But this is not an even-handed survey, or a mindless echo of the critical cacophony. The authors are familiar with the pachyderm themselves, and they are fair minded and efficiently accurate in describing some of the most influential critical literature of the last two centuries. At the same time, they are not shy about taking sides, pointing out blind spots, or tipping idols. At their best (and throughout the book they are in alert good form) they go beyond summary to offer valuable second-order perspectives on the criticism they survey, tracing antipathies and affiliations among critics while at the same time contextualizing the work historically, intellectually, and (especially in the case of early criticism) biographically and even psychologically. I continue to wonder who might be the ideal reader for this book, but it is a creditable effort to map the terrain it undertakes to describe.