

William Blake *in Context*



EDITED BY
SARAH HAGGARTY

R E V I E W

Sarah Haggarty, ed. *William Blake in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xxii + 371 pp. £69.99/\$89.99, hardcover; \$72.00, e-book.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

ALEXANDER S. GOURLAY (agourlay@risd.edu) teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design.

1 AS often happens when Blake appears in a critical series that addresses many individual authors, this contribution to Cambridge's *Literature in Context* volumes inhabits its format uneasily. Blake was an exceptional character but no hermit—even at his most isolated, he was engaged in his communities and his times, and profoundly

aware of deep cultural history (and sometimes cultural futurity) in visual art, popular culture, politics, literature, theology, philosophy, the biological and physical sciences, and more, so there are certainly contexts aplenty in which to consider him. As Sarah Haggarty notes in her introduction (1), Blake's various identities—as verbal and visual artist, illustrator and original writer, engaged social critic and alienated crier in the wilderness—all demand consideration in profoundly disparate milieux. Blake's mental geography was untethered from both space and time, and he was as likely to attack, satirize, or parody as to harmonize with elements of any given context; even his allegories tend to operate in both hermeneutic directions, so it can be very hard to decide which contextual end is up. As a result, many of these essays are better described as topical overviews rather than expositions of Blake in context. And even when he can be treated in a well-defined context of some sort, one is soon acknowledging that Blake's place in and relationship to that particular set of phenomena are unique, and that the understanding gained by thinking about him in those specific terms is at once genuinely useful and yet ultimately both partial and evanescent, if not downright illusory.

2 As editor of this collection, Haggarty recognizes the categorical and theoretical complexities of the undertaking and has wisely determined not to worry about them too much. She has assembled an impressive array of Romanticists and Blake specialists, most of them wise veterans, to write almost two-score essays in four broad overlapping categories of contexts or quasi-contexts. The result is very successful overall, even if reading it straight through is a bit like working one's way through an encyclopedia from A to Z. The entries offer not only various contexts but also various (largely untheorized) conceptions of context itself. Most provide cogent, tactful reviews of insights from selected recent work clustered around recognized topics, and the quality of the essays is such that, for the next decade or so, I expect that readers will be peeking into the index and table of contents as the first step in exploring a new topic in Blake, or to remind themselves of other angles when a given critical approach is not helping, or to gather their thoughts before teaching a class. It will be particularly useful to beginners in Blake studies who need sound, authoritative generalizations about him, his work, and his times as a foundation for more particular discussions.

3 The first division of the book, "Life, Works, and Reception," features the most Blake-focused versions of context, including a brisk eight-page biography by Leo Damrosch; a sketch by Jon Mee of the various circles of friends, patrons, competitors, admirers, imagined readers, and incidental acquaintances who gathered around—and, in many cases, later drew away from—Blake at one time or another; and

short discussions, reviewing categories in Blake's oeuvre, of "Engraving" (Mark Crosby), "Illuminated Books" (David Worrall),¹ "Manuscripts" (Haggarty), "Book Illustration" (Luisa Calè), and "Painting" (Martin Myrone); these are followed by "Early Reception" (Sibylle Erle and Keri Davies, particularly good on female patrons), "Late Reception" (Jason Whittaker), and a judicious historical review by Morris Eaves of the Great Swamp of Blake studies, "Editing and Editions," admirably nondismal and alligator free.

- 4 "Part II: Form, Genre, and Mode," as one might expect, is somewhat more concerned with the ways Blake's work responds to non-Blake phenomena; edifying and thoughtful sections on "Comedy" (Fred Parker), "Prophecy" (Ian Balfour), "Rhythm" (Derek Attridge), "Songs" (Steve Newman), "Sound" (a particularly useful review by Michael D. Hurley of the aspects of Blake's prosody not covered by Attridge), "Sublimity" (David Baulch), and "System, Myth, and Symbol" (Tilottama Rajan) mostly address the way his work relates to these headings in the abstract rather than the response of Blake texts and pictures to any particular extra-Blakean context.
- 5 The last two divisions, "Part III: Creative Cross-Currents" (with eight dense chapters on such massive topics as "The Bible" by Steven Prickett and "Milton" by G. A. Rosso) and "Part IV: History, Society, and Culture" (including thirteen essays on such topics as "Animals" by Kurt Fosso, "London" by Saree Makdisi, and "Sex, Sexuality, and Gender" by Susan Matthews), are thoroughly Blake-centric but address contexts further removed from Blake himself. Some of these essays are barely long enough to get beyond superficiality, and some achieve depth by focusing on a subtopic: Rosso's seven pages, for instance, consider Blake's relationship with Milton mostly in terms of Blake's evolving responses to the earlier poet's engagement with *his* cultural and civil contexts. Those who have explored these topics for themselves will inevitably think of omissions large and small, but there are riches here; indeed, the accumulated expertise and high level of generality that prevail mean that throughout the book one encounters useful observations, modestly offered, that reflect insights gained by the authors' years of studying and writing about much more minute particulars. There are also critical juxtapositions that might not have come up in a narrower discussion, or one that defined context as the realm of "not-Blake"; Calè observes, for instance, that the format of the Job designs, with text surrounding an image, inverts that of Blake's Gray and Young designs, in which the design surrounds a block of typographic text (64).

1. In listing Blake's poetry in conventional typography (not his topic), Worrall omits *Poetical Sketches* and "To the Queen" (35).

- 6 If one is hoping for a treasury or even an index of heretofore unrecognized intertexts or startlingly relevant historical phenomena, however, one will be disappointed. This book will be useful to scholars, but the reader for whom it will be most appropriate is one who needs a well-informed answer to the question, "What do I absolutely need to know about this, or what's the consensus on this?" If one wishes to learn more about these topics one will find leads in the "Further Reading" section but neither a comprehensive bibliography nor many examples of contextual texts or images.² Nevertheless, the collection has already proven its value; in the week since I finished reading it, I have already quoted Makdisi in a class on Hogarth and Blake—"London was . . . in Blake's lifetime a city of scavengers and beggars, a city of those living precariously on (or over) the margins of civilised life" (279)—and recommended Calè's essay to someone. In the future, I expect I will regularly refer stumped students to a chapter or two, hoping to provide a view of the lay of the land sufficient to get them started.

2. There are illustrations in the book, but except for a print by Basire cited by Crosby, all are Blake works.