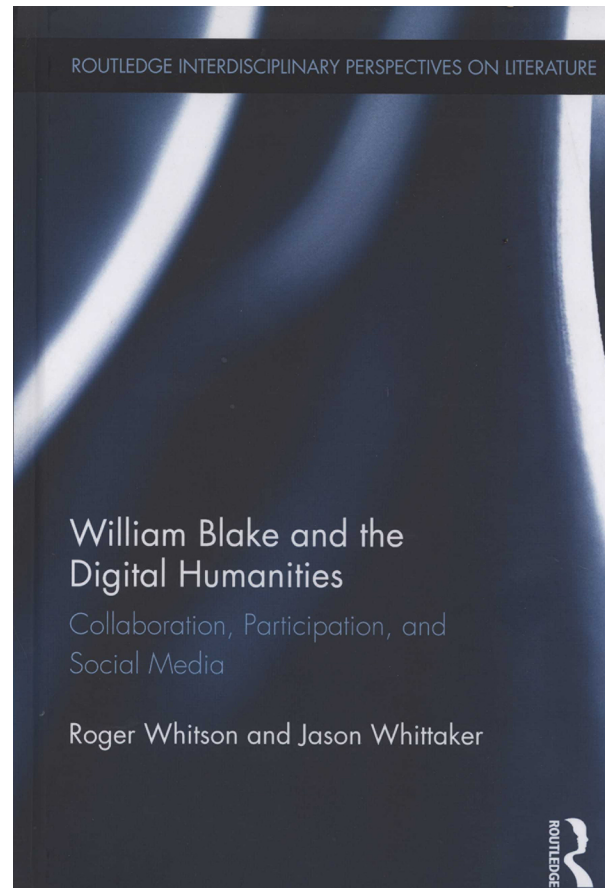


Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker. *William Blake and the Digital Humanities: Collaboration, Participation, and Social Media*. Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Literature. New York: Routledge, 2013. xii + 212 pp. \$145.00/£90.00, hardcover; \$48.95/£28.00, paperback (also available as an e-book).

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- 1 WILLIAM Blake's work has inspired a range of popular responses, from science fiction and comic books to films and popular anthems. "What," ask Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker, "do all of these references, adaptations, and transformations of Blake's work add up to?"
- 2 Taking this question seriously demands, in Whitson and Whittaker's estimation, "a truly social and digital media approach to Blake studies—one that can extend his influence beyond the literary approaches to his work and embrace the grassroots media ecosystem emerging in the early twenty-first century" (5). *William Blake and the Digital Humanities* sketches the outline of just such an approach. Drawing on trending topics in media studies and theory, Whitson and Whittaker chart new directions for the study and teaching of Blake, not just as an author but as what they call a "virtuality," following Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Levi Bryant: the "condition under which different Blakes are produced and reproduced" (28). Thus "William Blake" inheres not only in his verse but in the many "critical, editorial, and creative" manifestations that circulate in the participatory social network that signifies him as an authorial figure whose meaning is always coming into being. Inspired by Blake's own prophecies, the authors dub these collective creative acts—the process of generating actual Blakes from this plane of virtuality—"zoamorphosis" (5).
- 3 The turn to virtuality as a theoretical touchstone signals Whitson and Whittaker's broader shift away from reader-



response approaches and toward an interest in fandom's role in shaping literary history. The first chapter lays the groundwork by investigating the many "virtual Blakes" reproduced in print culture through editions of his work. Beginning with Rossetti and his associates, the earliest editors of Blake were amateurs and devoted fans for whom editing was a labor of love. As the authors point out, these editors had "few qualms in explicitly rearranging and organizing Blake's texts in line with their own systems and ideological conceits" (38), systems that continue to shape how we read his work today. By comparing the history of the maligned early print editions to the development of digital archives, including the *William Blake Archive* and the 2011 Blake's Notebook app from the British Library, Whitson and Whittaker consider the ongoing role of gatekeeping in Blake editing and in doing so challenge the field of digital humanities to rethink the role of social media and collaboration in electronic archives.

- 4 The second and third chapters take up adaptations of "The Tyger" and the lyric extract from *Milton* popularly known as "Jerusalem," respectively, to demonstrate zoamorphosis in action. As early as Gilchrist's *Life*, readers have been actively "remixing" Blake's Tyger, transforming it in their own

image. Rather than disparaging these revisions, Whitson and Whittaker point to them as examples of how Blake's often cryptic language inspires its audience's refusal "passively to accept the fixed meaning of the poem as transmitted from expert readers," as well as of the reader's willingness to seek meaning in creation, rather than simply reception (53). The popular history of "Jerusalem" presents a more political case study. Taken up as a jingoistic hymn in the First World War, linked to the suffragettes, and adopted by political radicals on all sides, Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry's "Jerusalem" hymn shows how audiences coproduce meaning through social, collective acts of reading and co-optation. The authors conclude that "zoamorphosis means treating *all* Blakean objects seriously, not simply those produced by Blake" (71), and caution critics against empty appeals to higher authority when choosing to engage certain objects rather than others.

- 5 The fourth chapter applies these lessons to pedagogy. The difficulty of teaching Blake's notoriously obscure later prophecies, especially using a typical close-reading model, presents "an opportunity to rethink Blake's role in humanistic education" (91). Digital tools are, the authors argue, uniquely positioned to respond to this need by offering instructors a suite of creative, collaborative, and "zoomorphic" platforms on which students may begin to form a critical relationship to Blake's work. Drawing on examples from his own teaching, Whitson demonstrates how creative digital assignments not only transform his students' understanding but also have led him as the instructor to rethink literary history as a "dynamic ecology" (104). As instructors search for new ways to connect the literary past to our own moment of media in transition, this pedagogical intervention is timely.
- 6 The last two chapters turn to the broader interpretive network in which "virtual Blakes" are reproduced and circulated. Today, this network is online. Connecting quantitative methods to television and fandom studies, the authors show that Blake is a "true mass media phenomenon" (24), indeed has become an industry, generating much-beloved and widely circulated quotes and images. Whitson and Whittaker argue that this "everyday Blake" contrasts with the relative scarcity of the text assumed by traditional literary methods. The final chapter extends this observation to an examination of folksonomic engagement with Blake on *Wikipedia* and *Flickr*. Linking these readings to earlier chapters, the authors suggest that Blake's presence in new media challenges Jerome McGann's social text theory, since the social text now constitutes a vast and rapidly evolving network of objects and relations (140). Indeed, this network may be the longest-lasting archive of Blake's work. As Whitson and Whittaker conclude,

Authorial networks survive neither because of an innate genius that carries them through the ages nor because they are archived by academic critics who want to preserve the social text of the Romantic period. Blake is archived by billions of tiny acts of tagging, often by people and machines who don't know Blake and could care less about his work. Most of these acts disappear or are drowned in the flood of information that circulates on the Internet. In other words, Blake survives because other actors invent new spaces for him by perceiving him differently. (159)

- 7 As should be evident from this summary, students of Blake will find much to admire in Whitson and Whittaker's book. Its readings are wide ranging and novel, drawing from examples as various as *Twitter* quotes and World War I-era hymns to show the significance of Blake's "virtuality." The diversity of its methods further demonstrates the value of collaborative authorship in action, as Whitson and Whittaker complement and synthesize each other's knowledge. By linking new media to a deeper history of print editions and adaptations, they avoid hazardous claims about the novelty of new media while nonetheless delimiting differences across platforms. These differences demonstrate the manifold creativity of readers in the nearly two centuries since Blake's death, a creativity that, the authors argue, academics should take up in their criticism.
- 8 This call for creativity, threaded throughout the book, points to perhaps its most significant statement: that a corpus as diverse and difficult as Blake's demands from its readers something different—different theories, different methods, different pedagogy. Digital platforms are the space in which that difference can now be fully embraced. As Whitson writes on teaching Blake, through creative digital assignments "my students became more comfortable with provisional interpretations that did not give a final answer but rather played with a system that was already in the process of transformation" (104). This experience "suggests that in order to take full advantage of the networking possibilities in the digital humanities, literary studies should switch its focus from teaching a canon or a history to teaching a form of participatory engagement with literary culture" (114). By arguing for a creative approach, Whitson and Whittaker contribute to the growing numbers who advocate a more critical, qualitatively focused digital humanities that engages design and artistic fields.
- 9 Lurking behind this suggestion is much bigger question: what role can or should literary historians and critics play in the changing landscape of the humanities? Creative response and critical engagement, though related, are not coterminous interpretive acts. It is not clear that those trained as literary critics are prepared to teach or evaluate the former, nor is the professional institution of literary criticism prepared to embrace it as the basis for tenure and

promotion (although both of these facts may be slowly changing). What Whitson and Whittaker envision requires a ground-up retooling of “criticism” as such, and thus a more vigorous and thorough defense of it than they offer in this book. Amid the descriptions of *Wikipedia* edits and the history of the “Jerusalem” hymn, one wishes that a deeper connection were made to Blake’s work—to how all these “virtual Blakes” transform Blake’s ability to speak to the present. That audiences do something other with Blake’s work than critics is not, ipso facto, an argument against traditional criticism and pedagogy as such. If anything, the proliferation of Blake in digital spaces points to the ongoing need to teach audiences critical close-reading skills, so that readers can better discern the signal from the noise in the glut of text that floods the web.

- 10 It is beginning to sound as if this reviewer values expertise over amateur engagement, which is not the case. Whitson and Whittaker passionately demonstrate why students of Blake need to take more seriously fan studies, media studies, and the potential insight that these fields offer into the afterlife of Blake’s work. At the same time, attending to these fields necessarily invites deeper questions than this broad, wide-ranging book is prepared to answer. Whitson and Whittaker begin to light the path toward a twenty-first-century model of humanities education; it remains up to others to step forward.