



Susanne M. Sklar. *Blake's Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvii + 310 pp. £74.00/\$135.00, hardcover.

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1 EVERY reader brings his or her own strengths to Blake's *Jerusalem*. Susanne Sklar's strength lies in her biblical and theological background, and in *Blake's Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body*, she identifies an extensive range of biblical references and echoes in Blake's masterpiece, while she also embeds the poem in the context of various eighteenth-century social and religious movements, including Freemasonry, Moravianism, and the Messianism of Joanna Southcott. Sklar also wants to use the notion of "visionary theatre" to show that *Jerusalem* can be read both synchronically (holistically, like a painting) and diachronically (for its story and plot). However, she is more successful at deploying the biblical and theological context than with applying the visionary theatre aspect, and the result is a discussion without a clear overall thesis.

2 It is worth noting at the outset that Sklar uses copy E of *Jerusalem* as the base text for her reading, rather than the more commonly used copy A. As most readers know, *Jerusalem* exists in two forms: copies A, C, and F exhibit one sequence of plates in chapter 2, while copies D and E exhibit another. For many years, David Erdman's edition of Blake's work has been the standard critical text, and since he uses the A-C-F sequence, most discussions of *Jerusalem* have been based on that. However, twenty years ago, Joseph Viscomi showed that the copy D-E sequence is in fact Blake's final intention for the poem.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the ready availability and authority of Erdman's edition have meant that most work on the poem is still based on the A-C-F sequence. Thus Sklar's decision reflects a shift in the textual assumptions underpinning critical approaches to the poem. This shift has been encouraged by the increasing availability of facsimiles of copy E, both in the Blake Trust edition of 1991 and in the online *Blake Archive*. Indeed, Sklar suggests that the reader keep the facsimile open while reading her commentary. This advice is useful because she makes more effort than most to integrate interpretations of the illuminations with the interpretations of the text. Also, much of her commentary refers to conversations she had about the illuminations with other scholars while working with copy E itself at the Yale Center for British Art.

3 The book opens with an introduction that includes what is now a fairly standard review of the literary criticism of *Jerusalem*. She covers most of the important critics (Ellis and Yeats, Gilchrist, Damon, Frye, Erdman, Wittreich, Mitchell, Paley, Doskow, Witke, and Dortort), as well as some more theologically oriented writers such as J. G. Davies and Thomas Altizer, and a good number of others. After the introduction, the book is divided into two major parts: Part I: Perspectives, Characters, Settings, and Part II: The Commentary. Part I introduces the notion of "Vision-

1. Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 339-41.

ary Theatre” and the related issue of “Dramatis Personae” before focusing more specifically on “Jerusalem: Her Character and Context,” “*Jerusalem’s* Jesus,” and “Shifting Settings—Building Projects.” Part II offers a chapter-by-chapter discussion of Blake’s poem, leading up to an “Encore” that somewhat belatedly returns to the issue of the synchronic reading of *Jerusalem*.

- 4 Part I sets up an admirable context that promises much for the more detailed reading of the poem. The strengths here lie in the extensive detail that Sklar brings to the context she creates for the poem. For example, like Morton Paley and Vincent De Luca, she makes much of the influence of Joseph Mede’s *Clavis Apocalyptica* (*Key to the Revelation*) on *Jerusalem*, partly by way of Milton. Paley cites in general terms Joseph Wittreich’s work on Mede’s influence on Milton, but Sklar includes the juicy tidbit that Mede was “one of [Milton’s] Cambridge tutors” and that *Clavis Apocalyptica* was published “during Milton’s second year at Christ’s College” (22). Similarly, while the influence of Freemasonry on Blake has been discussed by earlier critics such as Stuart Peterfreund, Sklar emphasizes the influence via Blake’s master during his apprenticeship, James Basire, noting both the assertion by Hamill and Gilbert that “Basire was ‘certainly a member of the Craft’” (although she admits to having found “no documentary evidence to support this”) (36) and the fact that the dedication and consecration of the Freemasons’ Tavern and Hall were “done with pomp and circumstance directly opposite Basire’s studio and home on Great Queen Street” (37). In her examination of the character of Jerusalem, Sklar compares her to Christ, while also creating a context for Blake’s depiction that includes Jacob Boehme’s Sophia and the evangelist Southcott. In discussing Blake’s Jesus, she examines the similarities and differences between Blake’s poem and Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, the epistles of St. Paul, the Moravian Church, and the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg.
- 5 It is in Sklar’s focus on visionary theatre that her book holds the most promise. The synchronic readings that have dominated criticism of *Jerusalem* for years commonly invoke the notion of “visionary theatre” as it was applied to Revelation by David Pareus and Mede in the seventeenth century, but these approaches are now being called into question by a variety of critics (including myself). Sklar states early that “visionary theatre allows us to engage with Blake’s composite art both sequentially and synchronically” (3). This effort to bring the synchronic and diachronic readings into interplay is an important focus for future discussions of *Jerusalem*: it has become increasingly clear that the synchronic approach does not address important issues in the poem, such as what constitutes a synchronic fragment, or why Blake oscillated between two different sequences in chapter 2. Nonetheless, the synchronic readings cannot simply be dismissed, and at least early in her book, Sklar tries harder than most to bring the synchronic and diachronic possibilities of *Jerusalem* into proximity. Moreover, she rightly argues that the emphasis on visionary theatre should draw the reader’s attention to issues of character, motive, dramatic scene or episode, and setting, elements often ignored in the drive to read *Jerusalem* as a set of synchronic fragments of a single event.
- 6 Despite Sklar’s intent to engage the poem both sequentially and synchronically, her discussion in part I of the characters and their relationships tends to collapse Blake’s time scheme in a way that finally misrepresents the drama and action of the poem. For example, she describes the “erotic spirituality” of Jesus in *Jerusalem*, saying that Jerusalem (the character) “flies into the arms of her bridegroom, who makes her his wife (J20:35-41), and they experience ‘holy raptures’ on their heavenly couch in their ‘secret chamber’ in Spain, spreading joy throughout the world (J79)” (107). Sklar is certainly correct that Blake connected eroticism and spirituality, and the two quotations she cites are textually accurate, but those quotations come from scenes at opposite ends of the poem. Moreover, her description ignores the dramatic context because the actions she specifies do not happen in the narrative present of the poem. On plate 20, Jerusalem does say that “The Lamb of God . . . made me his Bride & Wife” (20.39-40), but this statement occurs in the middle of a scene in which Jerusalem and Vala are talking about sin, guilt, and forgiveness, including the latter’s response to what may have been a rape by Albion, as Jerusalem describes to Vala how he “rent thy Veil,” yet “thou forgavest his furious love” (20.36-37). Similarly, in the second scene noted by Sklar in this passage, Jerusalem does describe her love with the Saviour, but again, that scene is not in the narrative present. Instead, on plate 79 Jerusalem describes her situation in terms recalling Ezekiel’s account of the Babylonian exile, especially Ezekiel chapter 33, in which he reports the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem’s statements depict that time when she was happier, before the destruction of the city and the exile of the people. Within the context of the poem, Sklar’s statements about these relationships focus on the lost past and a possible future, but not the situation that confronts Blake’s characters in the drama of *Jerusalem’s* visionary theatre.
- 7 The problem is that Sklar lacks an adequate working definition of “visionary theatre.” She devotes an early chapter to “Visionary Theatre—Apocalyptic Images,” in which she brings together with Pareus and Mede the book of Revelation, musicals, alchemy, Boehme, Freemasonry, and Blake’s oft-noted reference to “Sublime Allegory” (see his letter to Thomas Butts of 6 July 1803) to construct a web of possible connections and influences. However, she is more interest-

ed in the “visionary” than the “theatre.” She is more concerned with the possibility of seeing past, present, and future all at once (22) and with the characters as “windows to eternity” (43) than with identifying theatrical scenes that unfold a plot in a narrative present. Following the chapter on visionary theatre, the bulk of part I is largely a matter of definitions, using Jerusalem, Jesus, and Blake’s cosmology to introduce key terms and motifs in the poem. That makes a good introduction, even though there is little consideration of the details of the development of the drama. We expect that those details will come in “The Commentary” of part II.

- 8 Unfortunately, they do not. Part II should explain how the concept of visionary theatre helps the reader to identify and interpret individual scenes and their interrelationships. Instead, the concept mainly serves to authorize a variety of theatrical metaphors (overture, encore, curtain call). Ideas about dramatic context, characterization, and motive introduced in part I, ideas that should be clarified and crystallized in their application to the sequential details of the poem, are left vague and ill defined. In part II Sklar provides summaries of what the characters say without much attention to who is speaking to whom, where, when, and why. In part I, following the four-point outline of Revelation suggested by Pareus, Sklar does say,

When I apply these “vision-divisions” to *Jerusalem* I see the structure of its story: Chapter One depicts the calamity of Albion rejecting the Saviour’s song and Jerusalem’s love; in Chapter Two, Albion’s cities, friends, and immortals offer comforts; in Chapter Three, calamities amplify ... and in Chapter Four, the Spectrous Selfhood, or “Anti-christ accursed” (J89:10) is overcome. (21)

She repeats this outline several times throughout the book, but we hardly need Pareus, Mede, or any of the modern critics she mentions to grasp this general chain of events. When Sklar gets down to the particulars of the drama, she divides *Jerusalem*’s chapters 1 and 4 into six scenes, and chapters 2 and 3 into seven scenes (plus a preface and “interval” for each chapter), but she does not explain her rationale for these divisions, nor does she consider more than in passing how one set of events relates to the ones that come before and after it. Part II is basically a paraphrase of the actions described by the characters in the text; it is not an analysis of those conversations as dramatic events.

- 9 Sklar provides a fairly detailed sequential summary of the poem, but she does not explain what defines the dramatic scenes she uses in that summary. Without a sense of what constitutes a scene change, she fails to consider how the action of the drama develops. For example, she offers fairly extensive discussions of the final scenes in Beulah in chapters 1 and 2 of *Jerusalem*, but she makes no comment on the

similarity or difference between the cry from Beulah asking the “Lamb of God” to “take away the imputation of Sin” in chapter 1 (25.12) and the cry from Beulah in chapter 2 for the “Lamb of God” to “take away the remembrance of Sin” (50.24, 30). Similarly, she does not comment on the increase in the arrogance and power of the Spectre evident in the change from his self-identification—“I am your Rational Power”—in chapter 2, where he is merely “Worshipd as God” (33.5, 18), to his claim in chapter 3 that “I am God” (54.16). It is in these sorts of progressions that the details of *Jerusalem*’s unfolding drama are most evident. Thus she dismisses as “banal bickering” the important scene in chapter 4 in which the problems of jealousy finally infiltrate into Los’s own family, despite the fact that the scene parallels Jerusalem’s taking of the foaming cup from Vala and immediately precedes Los’s consolidation of error that culminates in the awakening of Albion. That scene is not banal; it is the climax of the poem.

- 10 Sklar’s book is a valuable resource for the “prophetic, poetic, and historical sources” (43) informing *Jerusalem*; I would add theological sources as well. But the book is also a missed opportunity to tell us something even more valuable about the structure of Blake’s masterpiece. Sklar does stipulate at the beginning of her part II, “I am not *arguing* that *Jerusalem* is visionary theatre or creating a theory about it; I am using this notion as an approach to the text, an imaginative way of reading that clarifies how characters, settings, imagery, and action interrelate” (148). I’m just not convinced that’s enough. Her theatrical metaphors do (or should) carry meaningful implications for the text to which they are applied. Why is “visionary theatre” a better way to approach the poem than some other? I’m still not sure.