

G. A. Rosso, *The Religion of Empire: Political Theology in Blake's Prophetic Symbolism*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016. Pp. 274. £54.44. ISBN 9780814213162.

Chris Bundock and Elizabeth Effinger, eds., *William Blake's Gothic Imagination: Bodies of Horror*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. Pp. 297. £80. ISBN 9781526121943.

G.A. Rosso in *The Religion of Empire* argues that 'Blake's early and sustained interest in empire cannot be understood apart from his lifelong immersion in religion' (1). At the heart of Blake's 'multifaceted symbolism' is Rahab, an amalgamation of 'two differently gendered biblical figures', who first 'enters the narrative in revisions to Night VIII' (55). To determine the religious and political dimensions of Blake's apocalyptic symbolism and language Rosso grounds his rich and rewarding readings of the long prophecies in biblical scholarship as well as critical works on Blake's reinterpretation of the Bible: 'Rahab shows that Blake did not retreat into an isolated, apolitical mysticism or gravitate toward a pro-imperial missionary Christianity in the second half of his career' (19).

Chapter 1 is on Rahab and symbolic networks of the dragon-harlot combination, originating in Old and New Testament books. Rosso analyses Blake's adaption of biblical sources, exploring in detail the connections that can exist between historical events and biblical accounts. He notes 'Blake is acutely aware of Christianity's tense relationship with the Roman Empire, which speaks to his own tense relation to the British Empire (36). Chapter 2 situates the analysis in the manuscript of *Vala or The Four Zoas*, where Rahab becomes part of the story of Jesus (59). Rosso discusses the figure's new symbolism (hermaphroditism), agency and (visual) presence (73-74, 79-80) to determine its complex meanings (Rahab has a 'mystery' written on her forehead, 70), while paying close attention to eschatological and political resonances (61ff, 70, 83, 86ff) and, of course, Blake's gendering.

In Chapter 3, which interprets the Bard's Song (*Milton*), Rosso examines Blake's response to Milton, the English Reformation and Deism, analysing Rahab's relationship with Satan more broadly through Blake's treatment of female characters and feminine qualities in characters (95-96, 109, 111-14). Building on feminist criticism, Chapter 4 explains the relationship between Rahab and Ololon (Rahab's eternal counterpart) in terms of the concept of the 'twofold emanation'. Aligning these with Boehme's 'Sophia-Wisdom' (127) and Neoplatonic and Gnostic traditions, Rosso uses moments of realization in the text (130-31, 144, 146) to investigate Blake's take on Milton's legacy (124, 134, 137): '*Milton* shows that Rahab bedevilled Milton and Milton comes to recognize her as an aspect of his selfhood [...]. Milton's view of gender and apocalypse' is transformed by Blake (156).

Chapters 5 and 6 trace sexual meaning, biblical allusion, theological implication and political relevance of the role, presence and transformation of Rahab in *Jerusalem*. First, via weaving imagery (veil, nets, threads of narrative and point of view) Rosso links several of the female characters or emanations to explore questions of gender, identity and sexuality, converging in the relationship between Jerusalem, Vala and Rahab. Within in the context of *Jerusalem* the latter 'appears' (i.e. manifests) as 'Vala's temporal incarnation' in chapter 3 (158). Again, Rosso offers compelling readings of texts and images, emphasizing the importance of Rahab while dismantling Blake's (alleged) sexism. Chapter 6 culminates in the analysis of the language and religion of empire, Rahab symbolism and Blake's 'apocalyptic approach' and attack of British imperialism (198). Rosso discusses Rahab's connections to Irish nationalism through the figure of Erin (204-07) as well as Elizabethan ideological and empirical ambitions ('Bacon-Newton-Locke', 208), the 'Trojan myth' (221, 227) and

Jehovah's covenant to stress: 'Jerusalem's nationalist symbolism and universalistic language from part of the central dynamic of the poem and are contested at every level, most fully and clearly in the titular heroine's relationship with her archrival and oppressor Rahab' (232). This beautifully written, very confident and accessible book gives substance to the fact that Blake grew up reading the Bible.

According to *William Blake's Gothic Imagination*, it was Martin Myrone's exhibition – *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination* at Tate Britain in 2006 – which, in the words of the editors, Chris Bundock and Elizabeth Effinger, created the first opportunity 'to read Blake and the Gothic in terms of each other' (16). The chapters, which establish the main contemporary influences, pose questions about style to investigate what in Blake can count as Gothic, naturally return to Blake's creation myth as well as the various depictions of his monsters. Blake's alliance with the Gothic tradition extends to both early and late works and Blake, it turns out (just like Ann Radcliffe in response to Burke), envisaged his own version of the Gothic.

Chapters in Part I position Blake's writing style within the eighteenth-century Gothic Revival. David Baulch, who is interested in difference and repetition (as a Gothic trope), defines Blake's Gothic as 'Living Form': as 'without a stable structure, codified laws, or political programme or permanent spiritual destination' (53). Baulch examines the versions of 'Death's Door' and concludes that this image's 'multiplicity' makes *Jerusalem* a 'Gothic epic' (58). Kiel Straub revisits the discussion of Vala-turned-Rahab. This figure is 'in part a critique of [the] conservative aspirations of the Gothic Revival' (67), which Blake understands as aspirations of 'certainty and control' (68) and Straub calls 'basic Urizenic' strategies (73). Consequently, it is the continuity of terrible events – Rahab, who is "Moral Virtue" and "Mystery Babylon the Great the Mother of Harlots" (71), gets 'initiated into the service of Urizenic empire' (74) – that cause Gothic emotions in both Los and the reader (78-79). Claire Colebrook turns to the Kantian sublime to discuss point of view and absence of absolute experience in Blake. She frames her discussion of multiplying lines and voices with Deleuze's concept of "'impossible" worlds' (86) and analyses the infinite 'Gothic structure of Blake's worlds' (88). Blake's counter-Gothic sublime, she concludes, creates a world where 'composition [...] is not so much the capacity for delineation and difference, but for variation and indifference' (103).

Part II has chapters on 'misbegotten' bodies and Gothic conditions of corporeal existence. In Chapter 4, Jason Whittaker maps Blakean inspiration alongside a fascinating discussion of Lovecraft's influence on Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*. The film disappointed fans and critics (121, 124), but, as Whittaker shows, it is the Gothic potential of Scott's sources that enables a complex, Gothic relation between science and religion (113). It is the non-human and soon-to-be decapitated android David who captures Whittaker's attention: 'Unlike his immediate human creator, it is the posthuman android who is able to see the potential of heavenly host in the alien dark angel rather than a source of guineas' (125). Moving from conceptual to physical horror, Lucy Cogan contextualizes the deformed bodies of Blake's creation myth through Burkean fear-mongering and William Hunter's obstetrics. These bodies are monstrous, due to their graphic explicitness, but they effect horror as well as parody. Cogan also compares Urizen's attitude towards corpses to Frankenstein's but shies away from calling Urizen, who is a 'monstrous living-corpse' (141), a Zombie. The implications are teasingly suggestive for the relationship between Blake's creator figures. Stephanie Codsi, on the other hand, makes a case for the theatricality of Blake's horror by focusing on the performativity of acts of dissection. She makes a case for satire and links back to *An Island in the Moon* as well as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Codsi contextualizes Blakean Gothic with Lewis's *The Monk*, Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* and Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Part III develops the Gothic body-theme through analyses of images and topographies. Peter Otto, in his ‘archaeology of the present’ (165), superimposes close readings of the scenes and modes of creation in plate 11 (copy A) from *Urizen*, plate 8 (copy B) from *Song of Los* and the frontispiece of *Europe*. He argues that Blake’s combination of creation with violence is a Gothic response to the French Revolution, while suggesting that Blake considered the devastating impact of the guillotine (182). Focusing on the symbolism of ‘sexualised [underground] settings’ (190) Ana Elena González-Treviño re-reads *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* to uncover parallels between ‘mystical threshold’ moments (199) of Thel and Othoon and figures from German fairy tales, Greek myths as well as the Gothic ‘damsel in distress’ (195).

The chapters in Part IV home in on the Gothic treatment of self-formation, desire and sexuality. In Chapter 9 Mark Lussier presents Blake as utterly Gothic. Lussier theorizes Blake’s Gothic aesthetics and its unconscious ‘gaps’ through Deleuze and Lacan as well as the Gothic’s relationship with Romanticism. Lussier enables the dark, psychological undercurrents of Blake’s visual imagination to surface in his wonderfully insightful interpretation of the title-page and frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (230). Chapter 10 is on *Visions*, James Graham’s electric celestial bed and horror. Connolly not only finds sexual aggression in Oothoon’s Gothic victimhood, she also turns Oothoon into an overly keen sex therapist. The resonances between Graham and Oothoon’s attitudes towards sexual liberation are striking and this is not the only revelation; Connolly’s reading of Theotormon, ‘the quietest of the poem’s trio’ (238), gives this character a diagnosis (impotence). Connolly’s provocative re-examination of relationships in *Visions* shifts the blame from Bromion on to Oothoon, thus turning her into another mouthpiece of ‘Romantic’ ideas of sex and sexuality.

William Blake’s Gothic Imagination is more than it promises to be – a ‘major scholarly study focused on Blake’s intersections with the Gothic’ – it is a landmark in Blake scholarship. While many of us may be familiar with Blake’s popular reception, reading Blake’s art through the lens of the Gothic is a relatively new and rewarding critical undertaking.

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