

Diane Piccitto, *Blake's Drama, Theatre, Performance and Identity in the Illuminated Books*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014. Pp. vii + 241. £55. ISBN 9781137378002.

Michael Farrell, *Blake and the Methodists*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014. Pp. x + 259. £55. ISBN 9781137455499.

Blake has long been considered a transformative figure and two recent monographs seek, in differing ways, to investigate how his multimedia creative output draws on and reinterprets the cultural, artistic, and theological milieu of the Romantic period. Following recent scholarship on Blake and theatricality, most notably Susanne Sklar's *Blake's Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre* (Oxford, 2011), Diane Piccitto's timely study of theatricality and identity in Blake's illuminated books takes the frequently rehearsed phrase from *Jerusalem*, 'Visionary Forms Dramatic' literally, to consider Blake's poetry as 'dramatic performances of identity that create an active spectatorship' (1). There is a tradition of examining and reconfiguring Blake's works through the lens of theatre. Within the academy, scholars often discuss performativity when analyzing Blake's mythopoetic system and the vast cast of characters that populate this system. Beyond the academy, Blake's works have been and continue to be appropriated and adapted for performance; from the Job ballet and flag-waving patriotism of Last Night of the Proms, to digital platforms such as YouTube, Vine, and Tumblr. As Piccitto observes, there is 'an impulse to view [Blake's] works dramatically and put them on stage' (11). In terms of Blake's 'works', Piccitto is most interested in the illuminated books because their particular format emphasizes the interplay between the verbal and visual thus possessing the 'ability to transform the senses' (1). For Piccitto, the unique combination of image and text constitutes a dramatic performance in form, content, and reception.

In her first chapter, Piccitto grounds her claim that the illuminated books should be considered as 'dramatic theatre' (35) by situating Blake in the historical context of debates about popular theatre during the Romantic period. These debates centre on two types of dramatic performance and their corresponding effects on the audience: the anti-theatricals advocated 'the private reading of a text' that, following Lessing, privileges word above image to feed the individual reader's imagination, and the theatricalists who championed the 'communal experience of seeing a text physically manifested' (25) as a vehicle for self knowledge. Despite Blake's frequent lauding of the imagination, Piccitto situates him on the side of the theatricalists because the illuminated books actualize the imagination via text while the images 'offer interpretative potential' that does not 'restrain the text' (27). Piccitto goes on to argue that theatricality is central to Blake's narratives, particularly his Prophetic poems which frequently comprise 'a number of performances and dramatic moments', 'the interactions and dialogues of several characters', who are often visually depicted 'in the middle of an action', and are driven by a narrative voice that operates 'more like a chorus' (35/6). Connecting Blake with his contemporary, the playwright Joanne Baillie, Piccitto also argues that Blake's conception of the role of the prophet as a social figure and prophecy as a public function is analogous to Baillie's socially-inflected view of the dramatist. The chapter closes with a detailed and often compelling reading of *America a Prophecy* that draws on the textual and pictorial variances between copies to argue that as specimens of dramatic theatre, the illuminated books construct a 'Blakean spectatorship' (52).

In the second and third chapters, Piccitto explores this idea of spectatorship through the critical lens of Brechtian alienation and the ‘medieval experience of spectacle’ to argue that in his illuminated books Blake ‘manipulates the tension between alienation and immersion in order to provoke a transformative experience in his spectator’ (53). To distinguish her claim from similar arguments, Piccitto also draws on the artistic principles Blake sets out in his description of *A Vision of the Last Judgment* to posit the idea that engagement with the illuminated books prompts ‘an actual recreation of the world the text presents’ (57). Deploying a liberal dose of Althusser, Piccitto uses *The [First] Book of Urizen* as a case study for a discussion of identity formation and the genre of melodrama. In her final chapter, she fruitfully analyzes how Blakean identity is bound up with performativity in *Milton*.

While many of Piccitto’s arguments are presented with nuanced close readings there are some curious claims, such as when she stresses that the differences between copies of illuminated books are part of their theatricality, although such a reading necessitates Blake’s ‘audience’ (both then and now) having access to more than one copy. Piccitto also likens theatrical performances to the trade of engraving because they share the same qualities of being ‘unique, evanescent, experiential, and unrepeatable’ (42), which seems to misunderstand the not unimportant reproductive feature of engraving. Fortunately, these are minor quibbles in what is a worthy addition to our understanding of Blake’s relationship to a particular cultural context.

Michael Farrell also revisits familiar contextual territory in *Blake and Methodism*. As the title indicates, Farrell is concerned with tracing where aspects of Blake’s thought overlap with what was the largest dissenting religious group in Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As previous scholars have recognized, there are a number of congruities between Wesleyan Methodism and Blake, including his use of ‘Methodist hymns as a model for his poetry’ (3). Following on the heels of Jennifer Jesse’s *William Blake’s Religious Vision: There’s a Methodism in his Madness* (Lexington Books, 2013), Farrell’s premise is that contrary to earlier views of Blake as a lone voice crying in the theological wilderness, Blake operates in ‘the same doctrinal territory’ (2) as Wesley.

Farrell’s study is, in part, a corrective to E.P. Thompson’s dismissal of Wesleyan self-denial as an influence on Blake, providing a more balanced consideration of both flavours of Methodism, Wesley and Whitehead, and how they intersect with Blake’s own belief system as set out in the illuminated books and a number of paintings and engravings. In his first chapter, Farrell addresses the established notion of Blake as something of a magpie or, to rehash Levi-Strauss’s term for reuse, ‘bricoleur’, repurposing particular elements of discursive practices ‘to fashion an alternative discourse of opposition’ (19). Drawing on the work of Jon Mee and Leslie Tannenbaum, Farrell takes the concept of bricoleur to not only describe Blake’s use of Christ as a typological exemplum to be followed by Blake and his readers, but as the very act of reading and re-writing. Here, Farrell claims, we can see an instance of overlap between Wesley and Blake, for ‘Wesley, too, was a bricoleur in his role as prolific author and publisher of existing work’ (24).

In subsequent chapters, Farrell provides extremely helpful contexts, ranging from the Moravian origins of Methodism (Chapter 2), including a discussion of Blake’s mother’s connections with the Fetter Lane congregation; the theological writings of Wesley (Chapter 3), the literary culture of the period (Chapter 4) and the influence of Moravian and Methodist hymnody on Blake’s poems, particularly *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Chapters 7 and 8 are devoted to two of the authors and the works that Blake and Wesley had in common,

bringing to light some intriguing correspondences between Blake's pictorial treatment of, and Wesley's commentary on, Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

In his final chapter, Farrell analyzes various Methodist strains that appear in Blake's work and letters during and after the crucial 1800–1804 period. As has long been recognized, Blake's three-year sojourn on the Sussex coast working for William Hayley and his return to London mark a distinct shift in Blake's thought. For Farrell, elements of this transition, as evinced in Blake's language, is 'typical of the Evangelical Revival' (162). While Farrell is wise to play down any suggestion that this transformative period signals a conversion to Methodism, there are several references in Blake's writings to Methodism's fundamental tenets as they relate to the importance of the imagination and spiritual sensation for Blake. As in the earlier chapters, Farrell does not always cover new ground here, but he does provide a series of useful contexts to demonstrate that Blake was sympathetic to Wesleyan Methodism. Perhaps where this book is strongest, however, is in showing areas where Wesley and Blake differ, such as their respective soteriological notions. By revealing these overlaps and differences, Farrell suggests some of the complexity of Blake's engagement with the various theological practices of the period and, as with Piccitto's book, provides a welcome addition to Blake scholarship.

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