

**Saree Makdisi, *Reading William Blake*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 150. 31 b/w illustrations. £32.99. ISBN 978052128414.**

Saree Makdisi's latest volume opens with a bold assertion: he is 'not sure that William Blake would have liked the idea of this book' (1). From the very outset, it is evident that Makdisi is not only well-versed in Blake's words and works, but that he is acutely attuned to his infamous spirit of defiance – especially in relation to the suggestion that Blake explicate his works. On 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 1799, Blake had penned a letter to the Reverend Dr John Trusler in which he had declared: 'That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care'. As Makdisi rightly emphasises, Blake 'certainly thought his work needed no explanatory introduction' (1).

Yet, on the contrary – and, even, in the spirit of Blakean contraries – Makdisi also highlights the fact that Blake's works and ideas have a 'reputation for difficulty' (1). I have certainly encountered high numbers of university students (and, indeed, several tutors) in recent years who are wary of attempting to write about or to teach Blake's works in a formal context. Finding a foothold in Blake's rich, dense, colourful and complex mental landscape can easily feel like an impossible task. As such, Makdisi's book offers an invaluable resource: a clear, accessible, friendly tour through Blake's world and words, structured by seven key concepts.

I am taking care, here, not to use the word 'guide' in relation to Makdisi's book. He emphatically declares that 'What I want to offer in the present volume...is neither a guide or companion to specific poems, images, books or other works by Blake'; it is 'absolutely not a decoding manual claiming to provide the definitive reading or explanation of this or that character, line, image, or reference in Blake's work' (2). Rather, Makdisi advises the reader that 'the discussions I provide here are intended to help you develop your own readings and interpretations of Blake's work' (2). The discussions that follow are framed in seven thematically-focused chapters: 'Image', 'Text', 'Desire', 'Joy', 'Power', 'Time', 'Making'.

One of the main strengths of Makdisi's book – and a key reason as to why its approach is so clear and effective – is that the parameters of the project have been so carefully chosen. Makdisi anchors each of the chapters in a close reading of a poem from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, given that it is 'both accessible and widely available – and is also by far the most likely text with which any student of Blake will begin' (5). Additionally, Makdisi notes that 'the book is devoted specifically to Blake the author and printer of illuminated books (and to some of the major themes running through the latter)' rather than to 'Blake the painter of watercolours and temperas, or Blake the intaglio engraver of his own masterpieces' (2).

This is not to say, though, that the boundaries between the chapters themselves are distinct, and with good reason. Almost all of the chapters include copies of Blake's plates, and the interdisciplinarity of Makdisi's approach exemplifies a key skill that is required in order to access Blake's works. Makdisi's discussion of 'harmonious symmetry' (116) in Blake's works in relation to the poet's method of printmaking with copper plates is particularly fascinating. Moreover, while the *Songs* are understandably the primary focus of the volume, Makdisi artfully manages to tease out connections with and discussions about Blake's wider corpus. I was especially delighted to see that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is afforded considerable attention. Makdisi goes as far as to describe this text as 'the single most emphatic expression of the mode of reading and textual politics with which all of Blake's works experiment to a greater or lesser degree' (48). Even some of Blake's densest works – his 'prophetic books', such as *Milton* and *Jerusalem* – are discussed lucidly and in some detail in Makdisi's short book.

Personally, I would be eager to read a subsequent volume which adopts a similar approach to Blake's longer works. It is entirely understandable – and effective – that Makdisi has elected to focus upon *Songs* in the first instance for the purpose of acquainting his readers with Blake's key concepts and approaches. I for one, though, would be very keen to see how Makdisi goes about approaching Blake's densely mythological works and prophetic books. In the meantime, though, I will certainly be including *Reading William Blake* on my reading lists for students.

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