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A possible new path for Blake studies: a review of *William Blake's Manuscripts*

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For decades, Blake studies have focused their attention on the relation between text and image, which is vital to so many of Blake's works, particularly the so-called illuminated books. The name is taken from what Blake terms "Illuminated Printing" (Blake 1988, 693). An engraver by trade, he created "a method of Printing both Letter-press and Engraving in a style more ornamental, uniform, and grand, than any before discovered" (Blake, 692). His creations using this method organically merge text and image, as in, for instance, the famous poem "The Tyger:"

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Figure 1 – “The Tyger:” Songs copy Y, object 36



Source: *The William Blake Archive*

While it is almost impossible for us nowadays to neglect the visual aspect Blake imprinted on his illuminated books, for a long time during the history of the editorial transmission of his *oeuvre* this was necessary, due to, among other causes, technological limitations that made it too expensive to reproduce these illuminated books accurately. This led to an editorial history marked by the separation between text and image, which impacted the reception of Blake's works, with most of its exegesis based solely on the textual aspect.

By the 1970s, scholars started to understand more clearly that this separation neglected a vital part of Blake's peculiar output, what became known as *Blake's composite art*, in the aftermath of the book by W. J. T. Mitchell (1978). The problem was that technology still did not permit a thorough investigation of the illuminated books, as scholars became interested in the method of creation of these books, as well as the differences between the different copies. *The Illuminated Blake* (1974), a large and expensive volume edited by David V. Erdman, brought one copy of each illuminated book in black and white and became the standard facsimile edition. Scholars needed, however, colored, highly accurate photographic facsimiles of every extant copy of every illuminated book, something not feasible in a printed edition.

By the early 1990s three Blake scholars, Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, started a partnership that created the means for the much-needed facsimile edition.

miles to be available. In 1996, *The William Blake Archive* (from now on, *Archive* for brevity) was the digital edition resulting from this partnership. Aware of the needs of Blake studies, including the needs of their own influential scholarship, the editors started by providing access via the Internet to some copies of the illuminated books. This was to be extended through the years to include more and more copies, as well as, later, other works by Blake. Since then, the *Archive* has become a vital tool for students and scholars to approach Blake's *oeuvre*. As access to it is free, the invaluable resource proved a means for the academic community around the world to engage with Blake's composite art in an unprecedented way. The focus of attention became, more than ever, the illuminated books, their peculiar use of text and image, the differences between copies, i.e., the sort of scholarship that builds on influential works by the editors of the *Archive*.

Perhaps, indeed, the focus on the illuminated books became excessive, neglecting other aspects of Blake's *oeuvre* such as the MSS. The novelty of the possibilities the *Archive* provided was soon broadened to other areas. Blake's MSS, however, only started to appear in 2010, and the two most important ones, *VALA, or The Four Zoas* (from now on *VALA*, for brevity) and Blake's Notebook, were only published in late-2017 and mid-2018, respectively. Unlike other MSS, however, to this day they do not bring a diplomatic transcription.

This introduction is intended to make the reader perceive how pertinent and timely the volume *William Blake's Manuscripts: Praxis, Puzzles, and Palimpsests*, edited by Mark Crosby and Josephine A. McQuail (2024) is to Blake studies. It brings new paths away from the illuminated books' centrality, focusing instead on the many extant MSS Blake wrote. The chapters by different scholars build on recent scholarship, as well as on the facsimiles provided by the *Archive* (which already provides access to every major MS Blake wrote), to offer new ways of analyzing and understanding Blake's MSS.

This does not entail a movement back to an earlier state of Blake studies, when the MSS were analyzed to decipher Blake's thinking and complex mythopoeia. Nor are these new scholarly efforts carried out mainly to produce reading editions of the MSS, also a common way of approaching them, as Mark Crosby and Josephine A. McQuail state in their introduction to the volume (2024, 7). Instead, throughout the chapters contemporary theoretical approaches are used to tackle crucial and still debated issues, such as the status of the MSS in Blake's *oeuvre*, as well as his "scribal practices"—when, how, with what intention, did Blake write his MSS (Crosby and McQuail, 9-10).

The volume is divided into three parts. The first, **Scribal Praxis**, includes five useful and refreshing chapters for students and scholars seeking new approaches to Blake. The posthumous text by the influential Blake scholar G. E. Bentley, Jr., "Blake and 'the Wondrous Art of Writing': Letter Faces, Letter Formation, Capitalization," analyzes

Blake's calligraphy, both in MSS and the illuminated books, including his odd use of capitalization, italicization, changing writing styles, etc. Though sporadically bringing examples, Bentley's chapter is mostly a call for further research and includes in this respect an appendix that brings lists of variations in calligraphy throughout Blake's *oeuvre*. Angus Whitehead's chapter works similarly, but focuses instead on Blake's letters. His approach treats the letters not as a secondary source useful to corroborate a certain reading; instead, his idea is that the letters should be treated on their own, to understand the circumstances of composition, as well as Blake's unique approach to the epistolary genre (Whitehead 2024, 67).

In her chapter, Elizabeth Potter deals with another category of Blake's MSS: the marginalia. Building on material cultural studies, Potter criticizes the way marginalia is usually treated by scholars: similar to the letters, they tend to be disregarded and at best mined for quotations supporting a certain reading. Through a brief analysis of Blake's annotations to *The Works of Joshua Reynolds*, she mentions the different periods Blake revisited his annotations, disregarding some of them in later periods, or instead corroborating them by writing in pen over the earlier pencil text. This sort of analysis enriches our understanding of Blake's relationship with Reynolds's thought, and one expects that further study of Blake's marginalia in this vein will further enlighten our understanding of his reading practices.

The second part of the volume, **Palimpsest**, brings chapters dealing with a single MS, *VALA*. As we know, it brings a myriad of revisions, sometimes occupying a large bulk of the page. They also bring illustrations and undecipherable sketches. Because of these complexities, scholarship on *VALA* was traditionally preoccupied with how one should edit and read the text.

In her chapter, Silvia Riccardi focuses on the illustrations, mainly analyzing how the print proofs of Blake's engravings for *Night Thoughts* present in some of the pages of the MS dialogue with the text they encompass. This kind of analysis is indeed much needed, as it has been done to the illuminated books. Riccardi, however, seems to conflate illuminated printing with Blake's engraving technique, treating the conjunction of the print proofs of *Night Thoughts* and the text of *VALA* as analogous to a plate of the illuminated books. While this ignores the peculiarity of relief-etching, it is symptomatic of how Blake studies still do not agree as to what *VALA*, was it to be finished, would be—an illuminated manuscript, an illuminated book, or a book merging text and image as it was traditionally done in the period, e.g., the *Night Thoughts* volume which Blake was producing concomitantly to writing *VALA*. Although in need of refinement so as to better identify the differences between illuminated and other kinds of printing, the kind of analysis carried out by Riccardi is crucial, among other things, because it can shed light on this issue.

The last two chapters of the second part are strangely technical, as they bring elements of digital humanities associated with the hard sciences that are not familiar to

literary scholars. Even though they read somehow awkwardly, these chapters bring what is the most exciting research being done on VALA. Michael Fox discusses his involvement in the editing of the transcription of VALA for the *Archive*, which is currently being prepared. The MS brings too many revisions and textual cruxes to be editable in markup language traditionally used in digital editions. The alternative is the use of graph-based databases. Fox explains how this is being carried out. This new possibility, he convincingly argues, will open new ways of reading VALA, and is capable of affecting every new scholarship (Fox 2024, 228). The chapter by Oishani Sengupta et al. also delves into digital humanities, explaining how a partnership between the *Archive* and the *Lazarus Project* can shed light on some undecipherable portions of VALA. While the results are not ideal—because, among other aspects, the technology used was calibrated for written artifacts of earlier times—the authors mention changes in the method that will probably yield more significant results. We can only hope that these projects are successfully carried out soon.

The third and last part of the volume, **Puzzles**, brings more traditional interpretative essays, focusing on other MSS. This includes two chapters on *An Island in the Moon* (from now on *Island*, for brevity), one on the character Oothoon, and the other on an MS not by Blake, but which brings an essay on him. From these, Joseph Fletcher's approach to *Island* is particularly enlightening. Building on the scholarship he carried out in his PhD dissertation, Fletcher explains the MS not through the usual link made by Blake scholars with Menippean satire, but instead with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural philosophy. Jason Whittaker's chapter, on an MS by the British novelist Sheila Kaye-Smith (1887-1956), has a crucial point for anyone working with Blake's influence on later writers. As he analyzes Kaye-Smith's MS "William Blake & The New Jerusalem," it becomes clear that how she understood Blake is highly indebted to the 1904 edition of Blake's works by W. B. Yeats she owned. With Whittaker showing how she mimics in many ways Yeats's paratexts of this edition, his chapter is a reminder of the need to understand the influence of Blake on writers by analyzing what these writers *believed* Blake was about, a belief constructed through the editions and critical texts they had access to.

Overall, *William Blake's Manuscripts* does bring refreshing paths for Blake studies, and fortunately for people like me—a scholar from the Global South—the means for such studies are at this moment easily available in the *Archive*. The hope is that this kind of study may enrich our understanding of Blake and his vast *oeuvre*, away from the centrality of the illuminated books in recent scholarship. This should not be seen as a questioning of the aesthetic merits of these books. Instead, I would say that, by looking away for a moment, we may build more knowledge about other works on their own terms, and can later, if we want, go back to the illuminated book with refreshed eyes. As for readers interested in other authors, this may show how the free availability on the Internet of facsimiles—be it of first editions, MSS, etc.—can be a vital way of expanding our understanding of them.

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