

R E V I E W

Erasmus Darwin. *The Botanic Garden*. Ed. Adam Komisaruk and Allison Dushane. 2 vols. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. Vol. 1, xiv + 404 pp.; vol. 2, x + 236 pp. £270.00/\$350.00, hardcover; £243.00/\$315.00, e-book.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

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1 **B**LAKE evidently read parts of *The Botanic Garden* by Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles, and certainly helped to illustrate it. The most striking verbal and picto-

rial responses in Blake are found in the *Songs*, *The Book of Thel*, and other early works, but if we count faint echoes of Darwin's peculiar hybrid of natural science and poetry, his influence can be detected even in late projects, like *Jerusalem*. In Blake's distinctive appropriative procedure, images were often derived from verbal sources and vice versa, as in the title page of *Thel*, in which he draws on Darwin's Ovid-based account of the apparent sexual destruction of Anemone, the windflower, by Zephyr, the west wind.¹ Darwin, who represented his philosophical garden as a war zone in which the competition between good and evil powers is mediated by vegetable eroticism, kept his moral, erotic, scientific, and poetic sensibilities segregated, even while deploying them simultaneously. As a result, it is difficult to read *The Loves of the Plants* as an expression of a coherent worldview, much less as an updated Book of Nature; whereas that medieval doctrine held that the natural world encodes Christian truths, for Darwin the mechanisms of natural phenomena are the tenor, not the vehicle.

1. See my appendix.

Blake seems to have rejected some implications of Darwin's multivalent metaphors, but he was clearly taken by the erotically charged neomythic elaborations on natural phenomena. Other writers and thinkers found and transmuted this material in their own ways; Darwin's influence pervaded the intellectual life of his times, turning up in unexpected forms and in surprising contexts. Positive and negative references and reactions to his (originally anonymous) poetic works appear in the public and/or private writings of many other notable intellectuals. It's not surprising that he was a friend of Benjamin Franklin, or a founder of the Lunar Society, but he was also a teetotaler, a feminist of sorts, an ardent abolitionist, and claimed to be an M.D. (he had a substantial practice, if not a degree). Further, he dabbled in both liberal and radical politics, befriended and advised technologists and industrialists, and contributed significantly to most domains of scientific inquiry in his day (and, of course, he provided much of the groundwork for his grandson's theories).

- 2 The most basic function of a scholarly edition is to make an uncommon text more available. Early printings ("editions" doesn't quite apply—see below) of *The Botanic Garden* are not particularly rare: my unsystematic impression of the market is that copies of the two volumes are widely offered, and further, that most surviving volumes are in good condition (both suggesting that the work's initial explosive popularity was short lived). If Blake owned a copy, it has not turned up, so he may have read it to tatters, or, more likely, he simply remembered broad outlines of a prepublication manuscript or borrowed a copy of the published work (most of the recognizable echoes in Blake of Darwin's forgettable verse are general, and none is a direct quotation). Furthermore, there is a very good one-volume facsimile edition with an introductory essay by the monarch of Darwin studies, Desmond King-Hele, that is nearly as satisfactory for readability as the original (Scolar Press, 1973). And for those who aren't fussy, book-search sites are glutted with offers of abominable print-on-demand "editions" of one or both volumes; these are derived from assemblages of digital page images that vary in quality and completeness.
- 3 Perhaps because Darwin's verse is clogged with multisyllabic Latinity and insipid even when it is trying hard to be sublime, much of the literary scholarship to date has dwelt on contemporary reactions to him by actual poets. The apparatus in this edition is more focused on identifying Darwin's diverse sources (his borrowings range from subtle allusion to shameless plagiarism) and somewhat less on revealing overarching themes and ideas. As one might expect, Darwin's literary appropriations are predominantly from the usual classical authors (especially Virgil and Ovid) or their more recent neoclassical imitators, even

while alluding to phenomena far outside the customary domain of literary reference.

- 4 As a physical presentation of Darwin's work, this edition is more difficult to read than most of the originals or the Scolar facsimile: the two new volumes are considerably smaller; the "eclectic reading text" (based on the first printings) is set in smaller type; and the images, though good, are reduced in scale. But there are many other reasons why a scholarly edition is welcome, especially one that adroitly navigates the many editorial pitfalls and dilemmas. The publication history of *The Botanic Garden* is complicated, to say the least, but if one is patient one can determine from the bibliography that, say, three editions of volume 2, *The Loves of the Plants*, were published anonymously before volume 1, *The Economy of Vegetation*, appeared, which ensured mismatched pairs in the libraries of those who bought *Loves* first. Further, booksellers apparently sold arbitrary combinations of volumes 1 and 2, some bound together, even when copies with matching dates were available. Early copies of *The Botanic Garden* are handsome quartos with large type for the verse, profusely (and variously) illustrated with images ranging from emblematic frontispieces and visionary scenes by Fuseli and others to dry botanical prints, scientific illustrations, diagrams, and charts. (Blake's chalcographic contributions to the book are not his greatest commercial work; he probably didn't engrave any of the technical illustrations, but he collaborated with Fuseli on a memorably sublime vision of the "Fertilization of Egypt," and also drew and engraved faithful images of the reliefs on the Portland Vase, the subject of a major excursion in volume 1.) In addition to the images, the selection of which varies from one printing to another, Darwin's obsessive-digressive intellect led him to stuff the poetic text with ludicrously thorough "Philosophical Notes" cross-correlated with other notes, appendices, indexes, and tables, along with "Argument" and "Interlude" sections. These notes and other adjunctive material are so plentiful and so much more spirited than the precious pseudo-Popean couplets of his verse that it is clear where his greatest interest and talent lay.
- 5 Editorial presentation of a text is usually governed by an implicit or explicit rationale that determines the level of sophistication in the notes and other guides, as well as the aspects of the text that are mapped in the apparatus. As editors, Komisaruk and Dushane are careful, thoughtful, and evidently well informed in the many fields of knowledge that the text demands, but Darwin's own array of supplemental materials is so diverse, unpredictable, and extensive that the whole defies the kind of systematic editorial supplementation that a particular audience could count on to supply a particular kind of information.

- 6 The introductory biographical and contextual matter provided here is efficient, if not very adventurous. Because neither textual nor editorial notes are signaled in the text, readers should be in the habit of checking for both species (as well as Darwin's supplementals), lest they miss important unsought information. It would be beyond the power of editing to make such a warren of versified, illustrated, and annotated biopoetic miscellanea easy to manage, but the Komisaruk/Dushane edition is nevertheless a thoroughly creditable performance.

Appendix: Darwin's Anemone and Blake's Thel

- 7 Recognizing elements of Darwin in Blake's work is not usually essential to understanding the latter; even when his debt was substantial, Blake often changed so much that familiarity with his source adds little to the reader's experience, and by shifting from textual to pictorial imagery and vice versa, he further obscured the appropriation. In some cases Blake appears to have treated Darwin's works as repositories of raw semiotic material, rather than coherent cultural artifacts. Even though it seems likely that both parody and irony are involved in his responses to Darwin, there are no explicit mentions of Darwin or *The Botanic Garden* anywhere in Blake's writings that could help readers to recognize references.²
- 8 The passage in *The Loves of the Plants* (canto 1, lines 283-312) relating the love life of the anemone was especially rich for Blake. Anemones, like other plants with showy flowers, are actually pollinated by insects, but Ovid and other classical sources describe spring winds opening and then destroying the anemone blossom (the name means "wind-flower"). Darwin's primary narrative begins with images of cold and lonely Anemone as a virgin female, associated with tears, paleness, and pearls, pining limply for the warmth of the spring air:

All wan and shivering in the leafless glade
The sad ANEMONE³ reclin'd her head;
Grief on her cheeks had paled the roseate hue,
And her sweet eye-lids dropp'd with pearly dew.

Her lament, which follows, represents a garden world poised between the cold, heavy, evil Fiend of Frost, who is associated with Earth and Water, and hot, spirited Zephyr,

2. For an attempt at characterizing Blake's view of Darwin, see Ya-Feng Wu, "Blake's Critique of Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden*," *Wordsworth Circle* 50.1 (2019): 55-73.

3. A footnote (beginning "Many males, many females") describes the botanical properties of the anemone blossom and provides a relatively unpoetic account of its relationship with the wind.

aligned with Air, Fire, and such phenomena as amorous aggression, poetic seduction, and cherubic inspiration:

"—See from bright regions, borne on odorous gales,
"The Swallow,⁴ herald of the summer, sails;
"Breathe gentle AIR, from cherub-lips impart
"Thy balmy influence to my anguish'd heart
"Thou, whose soft voice calls forth the tender blooms,
"Whose pencil⁵ paints them, and whose breath perfumes;
"O chase the Fiend of Frost, whose leaden mace
"In death-like slumbers seals my hapless race;
"Melt his hard heart, release his iron hand,
"And give my ivory petals to expand
"So may each bud that decks the brow of spring,
"Shed all its incense on thy wafting wing!"—
To her fond prayer propitious Zephyr yields,
Sweeps on his sliding shell through azure fields,
O'er her fair mansion waves his whispering wand,
And gives her ivory petals to expand:
Gives with new life her filial train to rise,
And hail with kindling smiles the genial skies.

At first the attentions of Zephyr seem straightforwardly benign, but shortly after "fond" Anemone achieves the pinnacle of beauty and sexual maturity, the "rude" wind tears away her beautiful petals and apparently destroys her:

So shines the Nymph in beauty's blushing pride,
When Zephyr wafts her deep calash⁶ aside;
Tears with rude kiss her bosoms gauzy veil,
And flings the fluttering kerchief to the gale.

Darwin's narrator doesn't miss a beat, and blithely compares the exposed sexual structures that remain—stamens and pistils—to fashionable revelers crowded in a carriage with the top down:

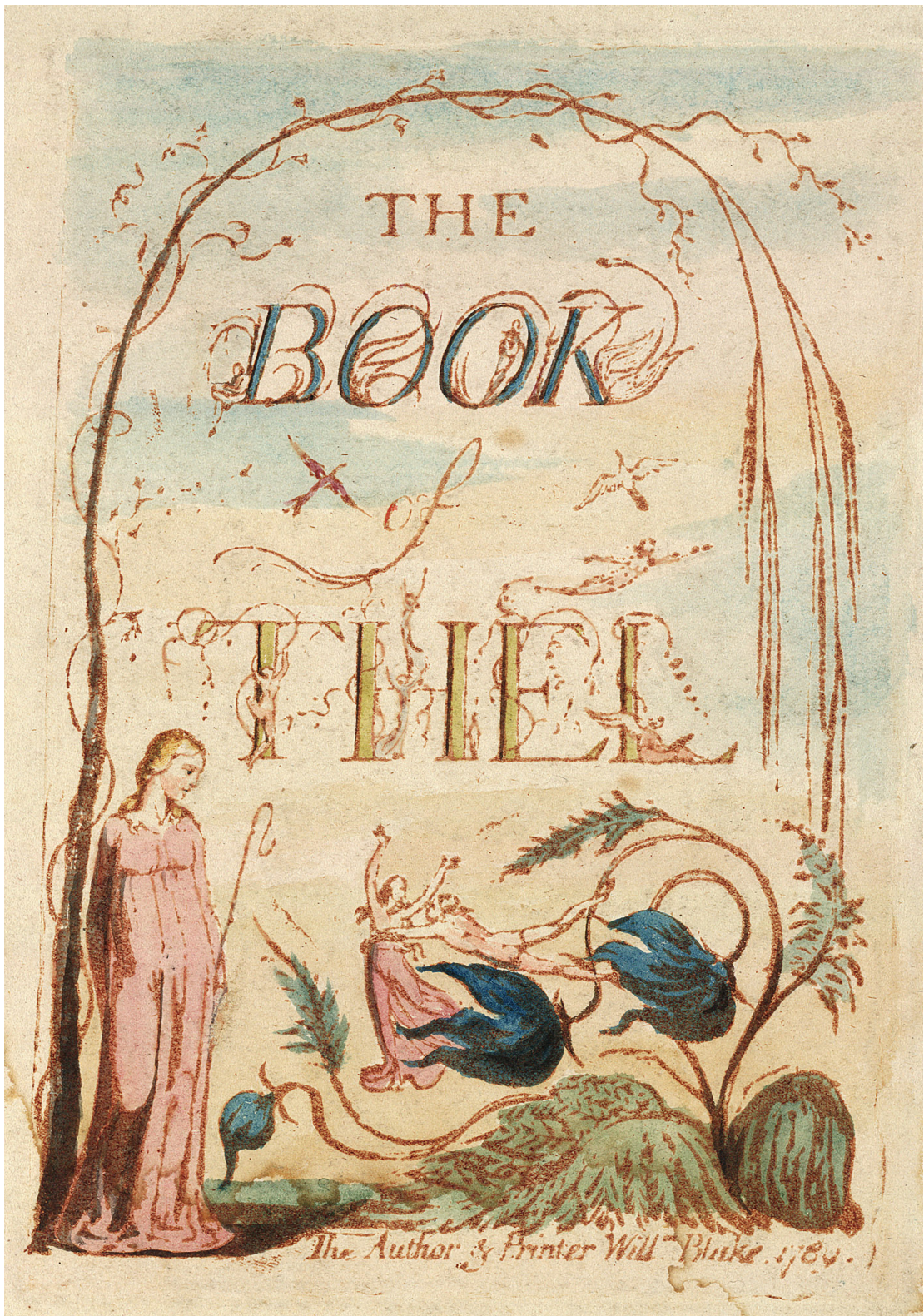
So bright, the folding canopy undrawn,
Glides the gilt Landau o'er the velvet lawn,
Of beaux and belles displays the glittering throng;
And soft airs fan them, as they roll along.

- 9 Some evidence of Blake's debt to this text is distributed throughout *The Book of Thel*: like Miss Anemone, Thel is a pale and pearly virgin in a universe divided between seductive, fiery sky-males and cold, damp, terrestrial females, for instance. The most substantial borrowing is in the image on the title page, even if there are many turns in the road from one to the other. Many of the botanical narratives in

4. At this point Darwin provides an extensive note about the "conformity" of the advent of the swallow and the flowering of the anemone, together with a long list of similar relationships.

5. A small paintbrush.

6. A large hood.



The Book of Thel copy E (composed 1789 and printed c. 1789), title page. 15.5 x 10.7 cm. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Tinker +271.

The Loves of the Plants include accurate, detailed engravings of floral specimens, but the anemone is not among those depicted. Blake must have done some independent research on the appearance of *Anemone pulsatilla*, the species he chose for his image: it is scrupulously correct in leaves and blossoms, though the plant as a whole is artificially “posed.” In creating his picture, he paid careful attention to Darwin, but revised the two-level narrative into a single story. He then combined the emblem he had derived from Darwin with another, more familiar pictorial motif, the subject known as “*Et in Arcadia Ego*,” in which a shocked Arcadian (often a shepherdess) contemplates a newly discovered tomb, skull, or other emblem of mortality.⁷ The anemone that replaces the usual reminder of death in Blake’s title page is an ingenious invention in the Darwinian ero-botanical idiom, even if it follows the story of Darwin’s flower maiden only loosely. Blake omitted from his emblem the chilly Fiend of Frost and warm humanoid Zephyr (who may have inspired Luvah elsewhere in the poem), but the image shows the effect of the powerful wind rippling blossoms and blowing some of the leaves of the anemone from right to left, even while indicating by the other leaves that the plant is passive unless externally motivated. He also consolidated the anemone maiden and the “many males, many females” in Darwin’s landau into two anemone spirits, one male and one female. The nude male, presumably representing windborne pollen, rides the breeze impetuously out of the right-hand flower (his left toes are inside the petals) to strip the static flower maiden, who throws up her arms in the gesture associated in art with rape victims. These two active flowers are “opened” (to use a term from Swedenborg), or “expanded” in Darwinese, in contrast with the limp, unopened bud next to Thel.⁸ In combining “*Et in Arcadia Ego*” with the new pictorial subject, “Love and Death among the Anemones,” adapted from Darwin, Blake created an emblematic title page that introduces the epistemological thematics of the poem: innocent quasi-Arcadian Thel sees the flowers, but her morose attitude indicates that she discerns only examples of evanescent beauty, not the agitated sexual encounter enacted by the flower spirits.⁹ The division of awareness in-

verts that of the Arcadians of “*Et in Arcadia Ego*,” for whom sex is old hat but the thought of death, and concomitant guilt, are novelties. By adapting Darwin’s verbal images and incorporating them in a familiar visual context, Blake assembled a richly articulate compound emblem that silently suggests that at this point Thel sees the beautiful beings around her dying gently and pointlessly, but is oblivious to both the vicissitudes of sex and the reward of an afterlife.

7. See Alexander S. Gourlay and John E. Grant, “The Melancholy Shepherdess in Prospect of Love and Death in Reynolds and Blake,” *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 85 (1982): 169-89, and Gourlay, “Iphigenia in England: A Postscript to ‘The Melancholy Shepherdess,’” *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 86 (1983): 223-26.

8. The buds and flowers recall a similar device in many copies of the title page of *Songs of Innocence*, where four unpicked apples on the large tree appear to correspond to the four most prominent virgins: the two children, the maid (a sort of shepherdess), and the lonely shepherd in the foliage/lettering who blows his horn in another geographical dimension.

9. Compare her listless posture here to her depicted reactions to human forms of other entities.