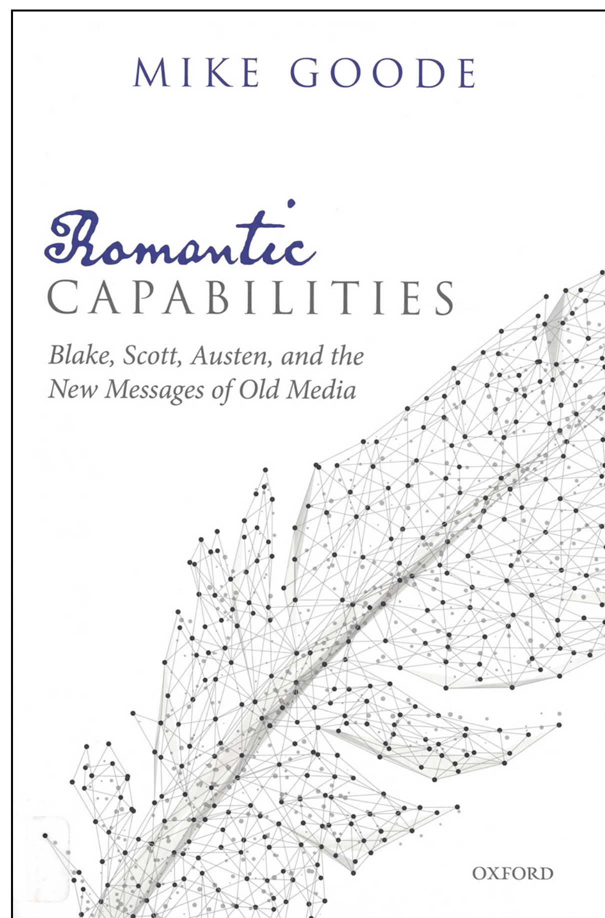
R E V I E W

Mike Goode. *Romantic Capabilities: Blake, Scott, Austen, and the New Messages of Old Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. xvi + 302 pp. £77.00/$99.00, hardcover; also available as an e-book.



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1 MIKE Goode's *Romantic Capabilities: Blake, Scott, Austen, and the New Messages of Old Media* is an engaging and sophisticated extension of "Blakespotting," his 2006 *PMLA* article in which he argues for texts' "latent meaningfulness," a latency that reveals their "potential energies in other times and places" ("Blakespotting" 771). *Romantic Capabilities* further theorizes that core idea by bringing together insights from media studies with insights from literary studies to discuss a text's "behavior" as it moves forward from its time and place of origin, interpreting its later behavior as a sign of its latent potentials at the time of composition. For this reason, Goode's analysis of a literary work's future behavior differs from a reception history: reception histories usually emphasize human agency, what people do with texts in their afterlives, while Goode emphasizes the agency of the text, which is why he frames his discussion in terms of the text's latency or potential energies. In other words, inherent features of the text present at the time of composition influence, at least to an extent, how the text behaves in the future, outside of its original context. *Romantic Capabilities* does not reduce literary studies to media studies, or media studies to literary studies, but "seeks to open Romantic studies and media studies out to one another in order to generate insights of interest to both fields" (5). This opening out includes a resistance to defining media behavior only in terms of the text's new medium, a resistance that takes the form of a commitment to close reading: "This book is committed to the idea that techniques of close-reading language and form matter to any discussion of how a text behaves and how much its behavior in a particular case has to do with what it says" (14).

2 Goode elaborates three propositions that serve as "central methodological premises" for his work in this book: "hypermediacy tends to be meta-mediacy," "media behaviors reopen archives," and "media behaviors were once virtual" (18, 19, 22). He believes that these propositions contribute to the development of "a new historicism that more closely joins together literary and media studies" (18). This new historicism shouldn't be understood as a continuation of, say, Greenblatt, but as another new historicism that differs from work identified as such in the past. "Hypermediacy tends to be meta-mediacy" describes a process by which media tend to reproduce themselves in other media (hypermediacy) that then leads to a consideration of the medi-

um itself as media (meta-mediacy). According to Goode, this process is important not only for understanding the behaviors of texts in different media, but also for understanding the text in its original context, which explains his view of his work as a new historicism. “Media behaviors reopen archives” emphasizes the “portability … of forms” (19)—in other words, once a work from the past is appropriated in the present, the formal nature of that work reactivates the features of that form in the present. A work’s formal structure encodes its latencies for future use. “Media behaviors were once virtual” draws from “Deleuze’s concept of the generative ‘virtual’ component that exists in and is a part of all that is real, including forms” (22). This concept eradicates the usual line between the “actual” and the “possible” by arguing that the possible must be in the realm of the real—otherwise it could never become actual. Rather than juxtaposing a nonexistent possible with an existent actual, Deleuze bridges the gap between existence and nonexistence with the “virtual,” or a reality waiting to be actualized. For Goode’s purposes, then, the key concept is that “things exist virtually for some period of time, or in isolated spots of time, before there is any actual historical manifestation of them” (24)—hence, a justification for the latencies of texts.

3 Goode works out these propositions through two chapters on Blake, one on Scott, and two on Austen. The two on Blake are divided between written texts, specifically the Proverbs of Hell (chapter 2, “Blakespotting”), and visual texts (chapter 3, “The Joy of Looking: What William Blake’s Pictures Want”). Chapter 4, “History in Three Dimensions: Panorama, Stereoscopy, and Scott’s Novel Perspective,” elaborates on the way that the translation of Scott’s visually oriented novels into panoramas and stereographs “offers insight into how Scott’s writings formally generated, and lent themselves to, a sense of visual immersion” (102), so that the chapter examines how the new media provoke fertile examinations of their texts. Chapter 5, “Letters from Austenland: The Designs of Fanfiction” explores the “truth universally acknowledged that every single person with the good fortune to recognize this line must be in want of its perpetual rewriting” (171). Goode argues that Austen’s fanfiction is different from other fanfiction because “these alternate universes are understood to have been actually present at some point, such that their cultural distance is historical rather than metaphysical or future-speculative” (176), in opposition to more common fanfiction about alternate universes that fans never believe existed. As a result, Austenian fanfiction “actualizes potentials latent within the medial forms of the novels themselves” (181), potentials that wouldn’t be actualized until after the creation of Austenian fanfiction. The sixth and final chapter, “Capability Jane: The Ecological Designs of Austenian Realism,” engages English landscape gardening as well as the relational ecosystems present in *Mansfield Park*, a culture that exists “not just *within* a discrete natural geography but as *integral to* that geography” (234, Goode’s emphasis).

4 His reading of Blake’s proverbs and visual images focuses on “Deleuzian ‘lines of flight’” (45), a metaphor that emphasizes the departure or even escape of textual elements from the original text. He engages the ways that fragments of Blake’s texts and images reappear in later media and are verbally and visually quoted outside of, and often without regard for, their original context. Chapter 2 begins with a correction of a claim of his from 2006 that Blake’s proverbs appeared in Trump Tower. He had misread a *New Yorker* article describing these proverbs in a luxury penthouse in the Time Warner Building; since the article was reporting on a public relations feud between Trump Tower and the Time Warner Building, it mentioned both. Jennifer Davis Michael caught the mistake during the 2016 election cycle and pointed it out in “Blake, Trump, and the Road of Excess: An Urban Legend” (*The Millions*, 16 June 2016), which was then taken up in a discussion on NASSR-L on 18-19 June 2016. But Goode’s larger point about the reinterpretation of the proverbs “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” and “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough” remains: whatever limitations they have in the Proverbs of Hell, in a Manhattan luxury condo they sound like a “hedonist manifesto” (37).

5 Goode is not interested in a historicist correction of misreadings of these Blake proverbs, but in how the proverbs function as “meaning engines seeking out end users,” given their propensity to go viral in the current sense of the term (40). In this case, the new contexts don’t activate new meanings in the proverbs; instead, the proverbs activate dormant potentials in new contexts. Goode argues that this behavior belongs to the nature of proverbs as proverbs: they are written to be quoted outside their original context. The existence of Blake’s proverbs as proverbs is particularly important: by calling them proverbs, he’s ascribing them to an unknown or anonymous source, as opposed to aphorisms, which are sayings by an individual author or speaker. Since he calls these sayings proverbs, then says that they were “collected” by a narrator traveling through hell, Blake subverts then-current legal systems dependent upon ascription to an author. In this way, he insulates himself from any charges of sedition in 1790s’ England while still saying what he wants to say. Ultimately, Blake’s proverbs function like “worms” in both the digital and earthly senses as they “circulate … more rhizomatically than can be mapped” (63). They are capable of “rewiring the thoughts and wants of the individual users who converge with them,” making “suddenly visible certain complexities of the world, a world

made still-more-complex on account of their very passage through it" (63).

6 While Goode constructs his argument from a number of names familiar to Romanticists and Blake scholars, mentioning authors ranging from Frye, Erdman, Worrall, Raine, and Mitchell to Roger Whitson, Tilottama Rajan, Jason Whittaker, Andrew Burkett, Mark Lussier, Ron Broglio, and Marcel O'Gorman, his readings of Blake feel new and original. I feel like I'm learning a different way to read texts, almost backwards through the telescope, but the object is brought closer rather than pushed farther away. On the other hand, my inner literary historian is dying to have his say on two points. First, Goode insists that no reader existed at the time of the production of Blake's works who could ever have "encounter[ed] more than a portion of his [Blake's] poetic output over the course of a lifetime" (44). He asserts more than once that the works were unavailable "*as* an oeuvre to any reader or set of readers" until very recently (44, his emphasis). He is right, given how limited Blake's print runs were, until he applies his observation to any single reader—because he's excluding Blake himself as a reader of his own work. I don't mean to invoke the author here as an authoritative arbiter of meaning, but as the only reader to whom the various repetitions within visual and verbal texts would be accessible, so that Blake's oeuvre was an oeuvre to Blake himself while he was producing it. This point is worth making because Goode is careful to make plausible, historicized, and well-argued claims about Blake's possible intent for the proverb form later in the chapter, and because he intends his reading practice to reflect not only on the form in its present use, but also on how the form's present use sheds light on its potentials in its original context. According to Goode's own argument, Blake himself matters, and for that reason, the proverbs' lines of flight could be within Blake's corpus as well as an escape from it.

7 My second quibble is very likely the result of the first: I wanted, as part of Goode's many close readings of a variety of Blake's proverbs, at least a mention of the bigger picture in which they are set. He does provide the narrative frame of an unknown author walking through hell, like Dante, collecting the infernal wisdom of hell through its proverbs. But he ignores the larger conceptual frame that encompasses so many of Blake's works, a frame that Blake refers to as the "two contrary states of the human soul" on the title page of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and that appears in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as the juxtaposition of angelic with devilish subjectivity. One point that Blake makes from beginning to end is that of individual point of view: it is not just a matter of what the proverb says, but of who is saying it. In other words, he calls them proverbs "of hell" for a reason. When Goode reflects on the number of different ways that "The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship" can be interpreted (55), he focuses on unifying interpretations, as if the proverb were elucidating a single principle. But because it lacks a verb, it is open to a wide range of interpretations, all dependent not only upon the verb chosen but also on tense. Perhaps the point of this proverb, and many others, is not to articulate a single principle, but to emphasize how different kinds of subjectivities can perceive the same object very differently? Nests, webs, and friendships all enclose things, but a bird's nest nurtures her young while a spider's web catches victims. The difference is not necessarily in the object, but in the individual using it, so that when the proverb concludes "man friendship," we're encouraged to understand that friendship with some men can be like a nest, while with others it can be like a web. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, this commentary culminates in an argument between an angel and a devil that results in the marriage promised on the title page: the angel and devil merge into one. That fusion of points of view exists outside the text in the person reading it, whether that person is the author of the text or another one of its readers. In these cases, I wanted a little more close reading from Goode.

8 These quibbles do not detract in any way from the strength of Goode's argument throughout the book or in this chapter. The proverbs' various flights and ensuing behaviors outside the time and place of their composition still demand attention, as does his way of understanding them. I'm describing what I wish were added to the chapter, even if only in two or three qualifying sentences. I suspect that Scott and Austen scholars will find Goode's work on those figures similarly engaging and similarly challenging. Goode provokes argument in the best possible way and, in the process, opens up the field of literary studies to new possible readings.

Works Cited

Goode, Mike. "Blakespotting." *PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 769-86.

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