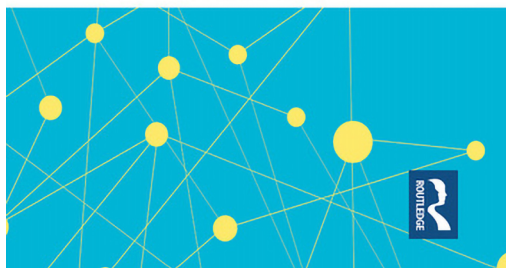




SEXUAL PRIVATISM IN BRITISH ROMANTIC WRITING

A PUBLIC OF ONE

Adam Komisaruk



R E V I E W

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MARSHA KEITH SCHUCHARD is an independent literary historian who has recently published the books *Masonic Rivalries and Literary Politics: From Jonathan Swift to Henry Fielding* (Amazon/Gauthier Pierozak Editeur, 2018) and *A Concatenation of Conspiracies: "Irish" William Blake and Illuminist Freemasonry in 1798* (Plumbstone Academic Press, 2021).

1 ADAM Komisaruk examines "the varieties of erotic experience in an age of revolution" (1), covering British writings from c. 1780 to 1830. He posits an overriding theme of the relation between "sexual privatism" and "the

public sphere," and he cites most of the theorists (Habermas, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Laqueur, Sedgwick, etc.) whose ideas have long dominated such discourse. He organizes his study "according to some different sexual 'publics' in the period: legal treatments of rape, sodomy and adultery; high-profile sex scandal; population theory; and club culture" (7). While a large part of his narration focuses on these modern theoreticians, he also includes thematic readings of imaginative literature by Mary Hays, William Beckford, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Erasmus Darwin, and finally William Blake. Though the early chapters contain much (sometimes too much) background information on the laws of rape, land enclosure, criminal conversation, and Malthusian economics, the later chapters provide readings of literary texts that are more relevant to Blake studies (Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, Shelley's *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, and Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*).

- 2 In chapter 6, "Love among the Ruins," he argues that Richard Payne Knight and his "erotic antiquarianism" emerged within a "province of polite connoisseurs" who maintained a "strangely orthodox agenda" (154-58). Though Blake was familiar with their work, he differed from their "anti-populist bent" (159). Placing the supposedly radical Darwin in this conservative province, Komisaruk discusses Blake's illustrations to the Portland Vase in *The Botanic Garden* in the context of the exploitative capitalism of Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood (170-75). Characterizing *The Economy of Vegetation* as an "encomium to industrialization," he interprets Darwin's "erotic cosmology" as an attempt to "sublimate the ontologically and socially destabilizing effects of sexuality itself."
- 3 Of most interest to Blakeans will be Komisaruk's analyses of the erotic drawings in *The Four Zoas*, in which he draws upon and argues with the earlier explications of Peter Otto's *Blake's Critique of Transcendence: Love, Jealousy, and the Sublime in "The Four Zoas"* (2000) and "A Pompous High Priest: Urizen's Ancient Phallic Religion in *The Four Zoas*" (2001), and of Christopher Hobson's *Blake and Homosexuality* (2000). Though he finds Blake's eccentric and religious complexity especially difficult to define within his private-public thesis, his willingness to confront the intellectual contradictions and gender confusions in the artist's controversial (and often effaced) erotic images is provocative: "Priapus should not be conflated with Jesus, even in Blake's syncretic myth; but in a sense he serves as a trial run for Jesus, in that he is both necessarily embodied and a staunch reminder of bodily limitations" (185). Komisaruk's subtitle, "A Public of One," sums up both the possibilities and reductionism of placing such an iconoclastic visionary as Blake within a modern theoretical framework, but he earnestly takes on the challenge.