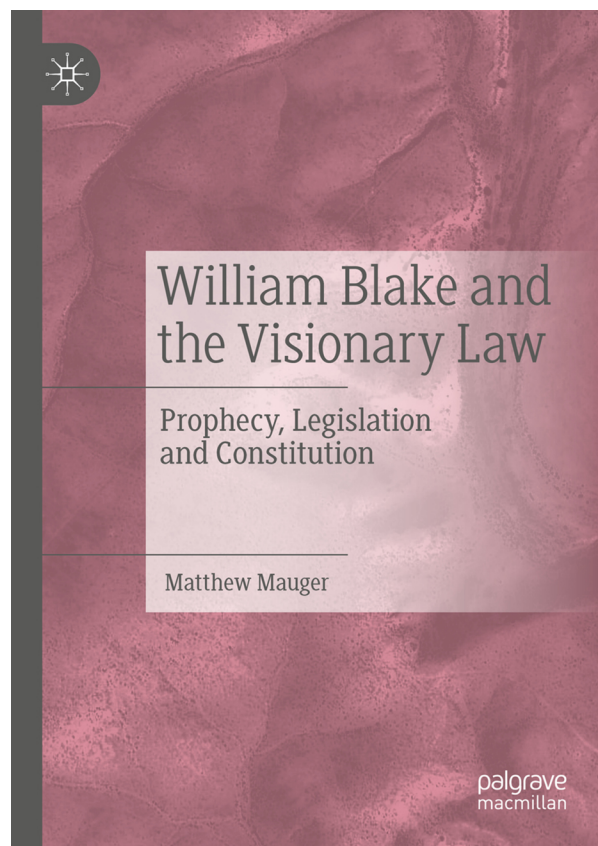


Matthew Mauger. *William Blake and the Visionary Law: Prophecy, Legislation and Constitution*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan-Springer Nature, 2023. xiii + 231 pp. £99.99/\$119.99, hardcover; also available in paperback and as an e-book.

Reviewed by David Worrall

DAVID WORRALL (david.worrall@ntu.ac.uk) is Emeritus Professor of English at Nottingham Trent University. He is editor of *The Urizen Books* (1995), and (with Steve Clark) co-editor of *Historicizing Blake* (1994), *Blake in the Nineties* (1999), and *Blake, Nation and Empire* (2006). He was principal investigator (2004–06), with Keri Davies, on the AHRC project that helped uncover Blake's Moravian heritage and (with Nancy Jiwon Cho) on a charity-funded project (2010–12) identifying Dorothy Gott, the prophetic author who—like the Blakes—attended the 1789 Swedenborg conference. His monograph, *William Blake's Visions: Art, Hallucinations, Synaesthesia* (Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science, and Medicine), was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2024.

1 IT is perhaps a bit disconcerting to find “antinomianism” resurfacing in the mid-2020s. Matthew Mauger's *William Blake and the Visionary Law: Prophecy, Legislation and Constitution* presents the thesis that “sustained interest in the antinomian resonances of Blake's corpus effectively distracts us from his consistent aspiration for the law as a framework which affords protection for Humanity against incoherence, dissolution, and despair” (8). This modification signals his point of departure from Jon Mee's *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (1992), Saree Makdisi's *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (2003), and G. A. Rosso's *The Religion of Empire: Political Theology in Blake's Prophetic Symbolism* (2016), the leading exponents of tracing antinomian ideologies in Blake. Although Mauger proposes a distinctive path, these critics are referenced so frequently in *William Blake and the Visionary Law* that the book seems almost in constant dialogue with them.



2 An immediate problem, however, is to work out exactly what antinomianism was (or was not). Mauger elects not to use citations such as one in the *OED* (from David Hume), “Antinomians ... insisted, that the obligations of morality and natural law were suspended,” a quotation that provides the gist of the term's meaning. Of course, for some scholars, antinomianism's original sin is that it is not a word that Blake ever used in his extant writings. The concept's ultimate critical progenitor in modern times was A. L. Morton's *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (1958), a work founded on tracing similarities between Blake's rhetorical stances and English seventeenth-century Levellers, Ranters, and Muggletonians. Morton was part of a wave of British postwar Marxist critics that included the historians Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson. As Mauger comments, however, Morton “was unable to establish direct connections between these groups and Blake's own world” (4). And neither has anyone else. The journalist Henry Crabb Robinson, the only person known to have interviewed Blake face to face about his religious beliefs, told Dorothy Wordsworth in 1826 that his were “a strange compound of Christianity Spinosism [*sic*] & Platonism.” Crabb Robinson knew what an antinomian was but apparently did not think that the description applied to Blake. Mau-

ger's consideration of Blake's degree of proximity to "antinomian dissent," "dissenting culture," and "radical dissenters," terms used frequently in the book, takes no account of the possible relevance of his mother's connection to the Moravians, a belief community that had austere dress codes and restrictions on marrying out.

- 3 Mauger provides a significant clarification of his own position with respect to antinomianism by recognizing an important insight in Jeanne Moskal's often overlooked study *Blake, Ethics, and Forgiveness* (1994). Moskal writes that "antinomianism, interwoven with law, consistently represents the obverse image of the system it seeks to escape" (quoted on p. 8), a crucial corrective providing Mauger with "critical authority" for his own study. In one of her essays—pre-dating Mee's influential usage of the term—Moskal describes even more provocatively the central conundrum that "antinomianism remains a parasite on the host of law."¹ For the reader of *William Blake and the Visionary Law*, Moskal's vivid analogy of 1988 may help to grasp the idea that Blake's impulse toward antinomian radicalism was tempered by the necessity of having laws stable and flexible enough to protect the Human Form Divine.
- 4 Blake's paintings are largely missing from Mauger's account, although there is a fascinating exploration of the biblical theme of adultery that includes a discussion (with a black-and-white plate) of the Butts watercolor *The Woman Taken in Adultery* (c. 1805). One would have loved to have had a systematic interrogation of how Blake handles figures such as Moses or Solomon, not to mention the notorious lawbreakers who crop up in the Visionary Heads. Otherwise, the book follows a straightforward chronology of Blake's writings, from *An Island in the Moon* to *Jerusalem* and covering just about everything else in between, including the ever-daunting terrain of *The Four Zoas*. Chapters 1 and 2 are largely introductory, contrasting the case for antinomian rebelliousness against the bedrock legal constitutionalism embodied in William Blackstone's four-volume *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69). Mauger returns several times to one of Blackstone's striking analogies for English law, "We inherit an old Gothic castle, erected in the days of chivalry, but fitted up for a modern inhabitant. The moated ramparts, the embattled towers, and the trophied halls, are magnificent and venerable, but useless" (quoted on p. 21). These Gothic edifices are "moated" and "embattled" by legal, statutory, and constitutional challenges that antinomianism spurns yet depends upon for ideological focus. Or, as Mauger puts it in what one might call law's eternal existential conundrum, the Gothic

1. Jeanne Moskal, "Forgiveness, Love, and Pride in Blake's *The Everlasting Gospel*," *Religion and Literature* 20.2 (1988): 19–39 (on 26).

castle "might have been erected 'in days of chivalry,'" but it is now "fitted up for a modern inhabitant" (23). His strategy throughout is to chart Blake's relationship to religious, legal, and legislative codes, guided by the poet's "innate antinomian suspicion of constraining legal frameworks that ordain limits for behaviour, knowledge, sensory engagement, and imaginative potential" (210).

- 5 The book's principal hermeneutic technique is close reading, involving a myriad of elegant nuances largely beyond the scope of this review. Sometimes, however, Mauger provides a helpfully panoramic sweep: "In *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*, the mythology that Blake has introduced in *The Book of Thel*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* develops into a cosmology, an account of the development of a human world called into being through an act of legal definition" (92). At a more detailed level, according to Mauger, the symptomatic antinomian "stony law" that Orc "stamp[s] to dust" in *America a Prophecy* is considered something less than a positive revolutionary activity: "Orc's fires burn down the ancient constitutions, his violent attacks will 'stamp the stony law to dust,' but they propose no apparent alternative, no basis upon which the 'right' of a new social organisation might be based" (101). Drawing on a later period of Blake's writings in analyzing the closing plates of *Jerusalem*, Mauger argues that the poem's culminating "Covenant of Jehovah" is "a dispensation based on community and shared humanity rather than self-indulgent individual antinomian sovereignty" (196). Both examples seem to imply reversions toward a civic mean of harmony, but without Blake's having identified any "new social organisation" to maintain community survival.
- 6 If the specifics of the *Visionary Law* subtitle may prove elusive to some readers, the mythological layers of London in *Jerusalem* are tantalizingly described: "The London that coalesces within the poem is nevertheless inconstant and evolving, a space over which the core protagonists fight for constitutional control in their desire to build—or to corrupt—Jerusalem" (197). As Mauger points out, "It is clear that the city that has taken shape within London is very far from the elegant symmetry of Jerusalem" (198). In this amalgamation, London as Jerusalem/Babylon/Golgonooza is a city whose "core protagonists fight" in spiritual—and perhaps borderline civil—war, although without the constitutional or legislative center that visionary law might require. Instead, as he concedes, "Amid the prophetic exuberance of the poem's account of Humanity's recovery, the poem pointedly withholds any kind of 'legislative programme' for this visionary law. To do so would be to contradict Blake's vision of prophetic legislation, to lay down a set of architectural drawings for Jerusalem which would lead humanity back to the destructive cycles which are so

compelling in his long poems” (210). After so much strenuous close reading, some might be disappointed with the flatness of the conclusion: “As we have seen, law is a broad and flexible category for Blake, and he moves sometimes dizzily between associations with constitutional texts, moral frameworks, the laws established through natural philosophical enquiry, secular laws established across centuries of customary practice, Parliamentary statute, and biblical law” (210).

- 7 Mauger’s references to “secular laws . . . , Parliamentary statute, and biblical law,” approximated through the example of Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, are not without their own problems. Some of the demarcations that he makes are difficult to recognize. The book does not always sufficiently simplify the basics. The major challenge that the eighteenth-century legal system faced was that, while there existed a body of English common law that had coped quite well in less sophisticated ages—for example, when adjudicating property theft or crimes of violence—it was geared much less well toward things such as promissory notes on contracts or cases where natural and civil rights were not self-evidently tangible. Trying their best, judges attempted to identify what they called the *equity* in the case—that is, they sought to find the principle of justice residing in common law that could be legitimately extrapolated to cover the challenge of novel legal cases coming to the courts as by-products of Britain’s imperial and commercial expansion.
- 8 Blake was both directly and indirectly affected by developments in contemporary legislation aimed at surmounting the limitations of the ancient common law. One such issue was the copyright of visual images. The Engraving Copyright Act (1735; 8 George 2 c.13), originally promoted by William Hogarth, meant that all Blake’s commercial engravings had to be “Truly engraved, with the name of the Proprietor on each Plate, and printed on every such Print or Prints.” This included his independently issued plates, such as “Ezekiel” (c. 1794/1825). Hogarth’s Act affected him throughout his working life. When in 1826 he sold “The Plates & Copy-right of Job” (E 779) to John Linnell he would have needed to understand both the benefits of retaining copyright title and the implications of selling it. However, eighteenth-century English case history encompassed matters of much greater significance than copyright. Arguably, the case of the century was *Somerset v. Stewart* (1772), the decision on a habeas corpus brought to King’s Bench concerning James Somerset, a Black man living in London whom Charles Stewart alleged was his slave. William Murray, Lord Mansfield, found in Somerset’s favor: “The black must be discharged,” he ruled. Presumably, when Blake wrote “The Little Black Boy” (1789) or engraved Stedman’s *Narrative, of a Five Years’ Expedition*

(1796), the Somerset judgment was somewhere in the back of his mind. By contrast, struggling to find the equity of slavery in common law, Blackstone changed his opinion several times in successive editions of the *Commentaries*. It is difficult to conceive of any historical version of Blake in which he would not have been interested in copyright law or the implications of the Somerset judgment.

- 9 The issue is not that Mauger does not refer to these cases but, rather, that their presence in the legal record illustrates the challenges that Blake, along with the rest of the population, faced in trying to absorb their implications. Indeed, Mauger is even a bit hard on himself in his conclusion about *Jerusalem*: “The narrative of law constitutes, in my view, a tenuous fabric that connects Blake’s cosmology with that of early nineteenth-century Britain, and instruments [*sic*] the psychogeographic layering of Golgonooza, Babylon, Jerusalem, and London which is a striking feature of Blake’s final long poem” (211). As his book overwhelmingly persuades us, law is not merely “a tenuous fabric” but a concern that was a constant presence in Blake’s consciousness, possibly somewhat diaphanous in its tangibility but certainly encompassing. The strengths of Mauger’s considerable sensitivity and insight into Blake’s writings are perhaps best seen in his account of the final two chapters of *Jerusalem*, where the emergence of a continuously rebuilding Golgonooza, almost as if it were a parliamentary legislative assembly constituted by the Human Form Divine, seems a possibility Blake was reaching toward. In all these arguments, the book is thoroughly up to date in its critical sources. Indeed, this secondary scholarship, and Mauger’s use of it, are wonderful reminders of the continuing attractiveness of Blake to scholars of outstanding critical caliber.
- 10 As a challenging excursion tracing a single theme across virtually the totality of Blake’s writings, Mauger’s *William Blake and the Visionary Law: Prophecy, Legislation and Constitution* is an invigorating exploration of a significant subject viewed from an entirely unfamiliar perspective.