

Joseph Black et al (eds.) *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature. Volume One: The Medieval Period*, 2nd ed. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2009. Pp. 857. £34.95.

Joseph Black et al. *British Literature A Historical Overview: Volume A*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2010. Pp. 232. £14.95.

The Broadview Anthology. Volume One: The Medieval Period is an impressive edition that brings together a wide range of relevant material in an accessible and user-friendly format. As the first in a series of six volumes to be revised for the anthology's second edition, this volume focuses on the literature of the Middle Ages and boasts a diverse collection of texts from the sixth century to the late fifteenth century. A particular strength of the work is its ease of access, as it offers students a degree of flexibility by combining print-based material with additional texts available via the anthology's website, a resource which is very much considered to be 'a component of the anthology itself' (*The Medieval Period*, xxi). To accompany the anthology or, perhaps to stand apart from it, Broadview have also published *British Literature: A Historical Overview, Volume A*. This work is directly born out of the *Broadview Anthology* and reproduces the general introductions to the first three volumes.

On reading the general introduction to *Volume One: The Medieval Period*, it becomes clear why Broadview deemed it worthwhile to reproduce the material independently in *British Literature: A Historical Overview*. The major strength of this introduction lies in its excellent overview of the medieval period, as it imparts the necessary background knowledge that is essential for any student new to medieval literature. For instance, the general introduction describes in detail such early events as the cause and effects of the Germanic invasions, the subsequent rise of Christianity and the importance of the monasteries in England and Ireland. Moreover, in its section on the later Middle Ages, the introduction also explores such pivotal issues as the myriad effects of the Norman Conquest, the complicated relationship between church and state, and the rise of devotional literature. As a result of this breadth of information, the introduction addresses the historical, social and political contexts which form the backdrop to the literature of the period and thus prepares the reader for the selection of texts that follows. Indeed, by adopting this interdisciplinary approach, Broadview not only prompts the reader to consider the 'reciprocal relationship of text and context' (*The Medieval Period*, xxxi), but also, through its thought-provoking style, it encourages the student to question the wider implications of this: 'So the questions we might ask as we approach these texts involve less what

they “are” than what they “do”, what they might mean not only to their imagined original audience(s) but to us, and how the meaning might change as our knowledge develops’ (*The Medieval Period*, xxxi). This accessible tone of approach is highly effective, as it ensures that the introduction delivers a wealth of important information in an engaging, rather than overwhelming, style that is sure to appeal to students. We may note that the introduction’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity and accessibility is further reinforced by the inclusion of a large number of black and white images, as well as nine coloured plates, which present a variety of relevant examples from the contemporary visual arts, such as the Chi–Rho monogram from the Book of Kells and the stained glass of Canterbury Cathedral. While more direct engagement could perhaps be made with the coloured plates, the black and white images are well integrated and certainly add tangibility to the issues being discussed.

The Medieval Period should also be commended for its impressive range of texts, as it combines those works which are essential reading for the student new to medieval literature, such as *The Dream of the Rood*, *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with some lesser-known material that will attract readers who are already well versed in the writings of the period. Although, as is understandable, the volume devotes much attention to the canon of male medieval authors, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, it also acknowledges the important contribution made by female writers and thus includes translations of the *lais* of the French poet Marie de France, as well lengthy extracts from the devotional writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. In contrast to the first edition of the anthology, the revised version of *The Medieval Period* is marked by a number of changes in terms of content, as it now includes a lengthy passage from the *The Ruin of Britain* by Gildas, as well as the Old English *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt*. Additions have also been made to the anthology’s collection of Middle English, as it now boasts the Prologue and Passus 18 of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (the B text), Book 5 of John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, and, adding to its sizeable collection of works by Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parliament of Fowls*. In addition to the new works included in the printed edition, extra material has also been added to the anthology’s website component. For example, among this new material is an early extract from *The History of the Britains* by Pseudo–Nennius, the Old English *Life of Saint Margaret*, and a number of poems composed by the fifteenth-century Scottish Makers. These works are presented, edited, and glossed to the same high standard as those in the printed edition and, although only available online, are listed on the contents page of *Volume One* to encourage the

reader to view the printed book and the online component as a single work.

The presentation and arrangement of the texts in the anthology is clear and accessible. In order to aid understanding and make the reader's progression through the text more logical, the texts are ordered chronologically. Each text is prefaced by a short introduction, which provides important background information about the text, its content and, where known, its author. These introductions are particularly useful, as they not only allow the reader to engage with the work that follows, but also build on the information offered in the volume's general introduction by discussing such issues as genre and literary conventions. For example, the introduction to the *Life of St Mary of Egypt* provides a concise account of hagiography, while the introduction to *Sir Orfeo* offers a discussion of the Romance genre and the origins of the Breton *Lai*. The presentation of the texts themselves is clear and easy to read, as each text is arranged in two columns across a single page. This format proves beneficial for the anthology's collection of Middle English material in particular, as it allows the original text to be displayed either with glosses or, for those texts written in a more difficult dialect of the language such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with a Modern English translation. Although the original Middle English text is generally provided for the later works in the collection, there are some notable exceptions: for example, the passages from *Piers Plowman*, and the works by Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe are presented in Modern English only. The decision to provide the reader with only a Modern English translation of some works is even more apparent in the collection of Old English texts, where the original text is never included. This is perhaps a little disappointing, as it denies the reader the opportunity to appreciate the language of the originals and thus prevents them from considering the relationship between language and meaning. Nevertheless, in spite of this discrepancy, the Modern English translations of the Old English texts are accomplished and reliable; indeed, the excellent translations provided by R.M. Luizza are particularly worthy of mention. It should also be noted that all of the translations are supported by detailed footnotes that engage with the Old English and thus they perhaps go some way to redeem the lack of the original text.

Among its collection of texts, the volume also includes a number of discrete 'Context' sections which focus on 'particular topics or themes' and are 'presented independently of any particular text or author' (*The Medieval Period*, xix). The three 'Context' sections offered in *Volume One* explore 'The Crisis of the Fourteenth Century', 'Love and Marriage

in Medieval Britain’, and the ‘Religious and Spiritual Life’. Each of these sections begins with a concise introduction and is accompanied by a range of black and white images to support the content; for instance, the discussion of Celtic Christianity in ‘Religious and Spiritual Life’ provides a number of images from the Book of Durrow, the Lindisfarne Gospels, and the Book of Kells (cf. *The Medieval Period*, 629–30). The collection of texts within each ‘Context’ section should be praised for its variety, as the material ranges from political texts, such as ‘The Laws of Æthelbert’ in the discussion of ‘Love and Marriage’, to a copy of the Apostles Creed and an extract from St Anselm’s *Proslogian* in ‘Religious and Spiritual Life’. As a result, the ‘Context’ sections provide the reader with a greater understanding of the social and historical issues of the period and thus reinforce the anthology’s emphasis on the relationship between text and context. In addition to this focus on historical context, the anthology also offers the reader more detailed information about particular texts or authors through its ‘In context’ feature. These sections are ‘included with a view to setting their texts in their broader literary, historical, and cultural contexts’ (*The Medieval Period*, xix). For example, a glossary of proper nouns and a number of genealogical tables accompany *Beowulf*, while for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a copy of the Celtic legend *Fled Bricrend*, which is a possible source for *Sir Gawain’s* Beheading Game motif, is provided.

The accessible layout and thought-provoking style that characterises the *Broadview Anthology* is, as we would expect, also encountered in *British Literature: A Historical overview, Volume A*. As noted above, this work reproduces the introductions from the first three volumes of the anthology with the aim of providing ‘a wealth of helpful background information’ (*Historical Overview*, 7). These introductions are arranged into three discrete sections and, along with the medieval period, focus on the Renaissance and the early seventeenth century, and the Restoration and the eighteenth century. In each case, the introductions retain the anthology’s overall emphasis on interdisciplinarity by discussing ‘the social, the political, and the economic with the literary’ (*Historical Overview*, 8) in an engaging style. Indeed, particular highlights in the introductions to the second and third volumes include the discussion of the myriad causes of the Reformation in England (cf. *Historical Overview*, 77–86), as well as an engagement with the importance of print culture in the discussion of the Restoration period (cf. *Historical Overview*, 180–88). Collected together in the same volume, the comprehensive and detailed nature of these introductions means that *British Literature: A Historical Overview*

serves as a helpful and accessible student handbook that can stand independently as a useful resource in its own right.

Together, both *Volume One: The Medieval Period* and the *Historical Overview* provide the reader with a comprehensive survey of literature, while also encouraging them to consider the contexts which informed a text's production. By delivering this wealth of information in an accessible and thought-provoking way, Broadview have produced two volumes that will undoubtedly prove to be invaluable to any student new to the study of literature.

Natalie Jones

Jonathan Roberts. *Wordsworth. Blake. Religion.* London: Continuum, 2010. Pp. 144. £16.99.

Jonathan Roberts's unusually punctuated title announces his desire to challenge scholarly conventions and boundaries. It is an ambition which is fully realized in this study. *Blake. Wordsworth. Religion.* is difficult to categorise even within the terms of the interdisciplinary series of which it forms part. The book combines literary and religious enquiry, as is fitting for Continuum's excellent *New Directions in Religion and Literature* series, but it consciously declines to do so in any consistent or reliable way. The *Religion* of Roberts's title is a slippery matter. It is not in any substantial sense historical. The material religious contexts which influenced the poetry of Blake and Wordsworth have absorbed much critical attention of late, but this is not Roberts's focus, and the most significant work in this area (Keri Davies and Marsha Keith Schuchard's discoveries concerning Blake and the Moravians; Richard Rix's account of Blake and radical Christian culture; Stephen Gill's study of Wordsworth's adoption as a 'spiritual power' by his Victorian readers) finds reference only in an endnote. Nor is Roberts's attention to religion primarily theological, despite a brief and perceptive discussion of biblical allusion in Wordsworth and Blake. And although the book promises at intervals to use Blake and Wordsworth to probe contemporary controversies over the truth or falsity of religious conviction, it would be overly confining to describe this as a dominant theme.

If Roberts's object is neither substantially historical criticism nor theological enquiry, no more can it be said that he reads poetry for its aesthetic qualities: 'conclusive close readings', he argues, descend into a kind of 'foundationalism' (5) which we would do well to avoid. The