

Robert D. Denham. *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World*.  
Charlottesville and London: University of  
Virginia Press, 2004.

It is almost guaranteed that when a person opens up a new book on Northrop Frye, he or she will end up learning something that they did not know before. This is a remarkable thing that seems to be true in many senses. Picking up this book by Denham, the reader unfamiliar with Frye may feel thrown in at the deep end, and it is here, at the deep end, that one needs to learn to swim—fast—or end up sinking. At the other extreme, the seasoned Frye scholar finds that she will always go away with something new. This may be some little nugget of information that she can squirrel away in her cache of biographical facts, but chances are that it will be something a lot more profound. Frye's genius seems always able to provide her with some fresh insight into literary, cultural, or philosophical puzzles, whether she is rereading Frye or reading another commentator's book about him. When the book in question is authored by someone who has devoted his life to Frye studies, then that insight proves to be a most valuable addition to her understanding of Frye. When the author is the world's foremost Frye scholar—and in the case of Robert D. Denham I feel that this title would not be contested by many—it also provides an opportunity for reflecting on how an immersion in Frye can radically and permanently effect one's thought patterns forever.

Here, as in all of Denham's writing on Frye, the reader sees a powerfully erudite mind at work. He demonstrates a dazzling breadth and depth of religious, philosophical, and literary knowledge rivaled by few except Frye himself. However, anyone who is familiar with Denham's earlier writings on Frye will find a different emphasis in his latest book. Many of Denham's earlier works were attempts to explicate the complex and convoluted typologies, schema, and methods outlined by Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, often using page after page of mind-blowing diagrams and tables to do so. In *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World*, the reader immediately notices how there are markedly fewer diagrams and tables, although a strong sense of cycles, quests, and dialectics of heaven and hell still permeates every page. In this book, it is not the typological superstructure but the religious base that is the goal of Denham's quest. This is because Denham's emphasis falls not on *Anatomy of Criticism* but on Frye's early book on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, and on his later writings on religion. Thus Denham has come to realize that the

typological superstructure is not the purpose of *Anatomy of Criticism* but the means by which its spiritual goal may be attained.

Certainly, there is enough evidence in Frye's biography and throughout his writings to demonstrate that religion was important in his life and in his work. What Denham is trying to do in his new book is to show how religion was not just important to Frye but was the very essence of his work. Denham makes the simple but to my mind truthful statement that we cannot really understand Frye if we do not understand the religious vision that drove him and that saturates all of his writing. Denham is also correct to point out that startlingly little work on Frye directly addresses this religious base or essence. Thus, Denham's book begins to fill a serious and surprising gap in Frye studies, as its prime function is to make clear the religious ideas that can be found throughout Frye's writing. Denham's book is not an assessment of the greatness or limitations of Frye's thinking so much as an attempt to read Frye on his own terms. Its aim is not a contextual or biographical reading but a much more necessary and deceptively straightforward thing: understanding.

Denham's book derives from his recent editing of Frye's private notebooks, journals, diaries, and letters. On its most simplistic level, it serves as a documentary of what Frye was reading, and when. As such, it provides a commentary on Denham's edited collections that have proved such an invaluable recent contribution to Frye studies. Throughout, Denham refers to those notebooks that he has already published and to notebooks in the process of being edited and yet to appear in print. These are all immaculately referenced, so that readers with an inclination to do so can locate the exact passages in both the published and yet-to-be-published material. As well as providing a commentary on the significance of passages from these private, personal, and ephemeral writings, Denham's book stands on its own as an explication of Frye's religious ideas. The reader gets an uncanny feeling that she is reading along with Denham, over his shoulder, as it were, as he reads and interprets Frye, watching as Frye's ideas take shape over decades of private and published writings. Thus we see Frye making a note as a student writing in the 1930s and how he is still tussling with this idea well into the 1980s. For Frye, a chance encounter with a particular book, or a particular chapter or phrase, or even a word in a book would act as a seed of an idea that often possessed him for the rest of his life.

Denham backs up each instance with quotations from the notebooks, and with cross-references to Frye's published works, charting an idea or word from its first appearance in the notebooks and through into the published works. As Frye's ideas are often revisited or reworked, the reader

can see a distinct connection, if not an entirely clear line that runs between the source of an idea and its synthesis by Frye into something new. This is about as watertight an instance of validity in interpretation as one might wish for; any tighter, and one runs the risk of making overly simplistic pleas for what influenced Frye. Such reductionist reading would do a disservice to Frye's prolific output and is, in any case, a method that Frye would never advocate. Denham is fully aware of this possibility and successfully avoids any instance at which an accusation of reductionism might be leveled. My own personal preference is that Frye was not so much influenced by what he read as he was recognizing, or re-cognizing that which he already knew, on some deeper intuitive level. In any case, Denham does not waste time agonizing over what exactly comprises influence. Similarly, he does not attempt to define ineffable words like "spiritual" or "religious." Instead, these words function like  $x$  in mathematics—as flexible terms that we can use to test the "truth" of each statement while each statement leads us a little closer to discovering what  $x$  might be.

Denham describes how Frye's notebooks functioned as laboratories for the working out of his ideas. They are filled with aphoristic writings that average about seventy-five words apiece. It will not come as any surprise for students of Frye to hear that a coherent pattern underlies these fragments. Denham reveals how Frye's writing, public and private, is manifest as separate parts, yet each part is a facet of the whole of Frye's output, each facet reflecting the whole, and its many parts, like a gigantic web of jewels. This recalls to us one of the most important paradoxes in Frye's work, that of unity and diversity, where each part intimates the larger whole, itself made up of diverse and distinct entities. This paradox is present in Denham's book as he recognizes the religious vision that unifies Frye's work while appreciating that this epiphany is only accessed through years of careful and detailed study. Denham's book consists of three sections: "Exoterica," "Esoterica," and "Word and Spirit." Ideas that seem to originate in a Christian context but also interpenetrate with Buddhist and other Eastern religions comprise the "Exoterica." The "Esoterica" consist of mystical, alchemical, and New Age thought stemming from a host of sources which Denham calls "zany" and which Frye himself refers to several times as "kook books." The final twenty or so pages distil all that has gone before, in order to reveal the religious essence within Frye's writings. This Denham calls "Word and Spirit," a title that demonstrates how the spiritual goal of *Anatomy of Criticism* is revealed through diligent study of the words that comprise it. It is nearly thirty-five years since Denham first picked up *Anatomy of Criticism*. It seems that Denham's study of Frye has

itself been a quest romance, progressing through the labyrinthine schema toward this, the anagogic reading.

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Patricia Demers. *Women's Writing in English: Early Modern England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. \$32.95.

Patricia Demers's *Women's Writing in English: Early Modern England* sets out to provide a substantial introduction to the rapidly expanding field adduced in its title. It succeeds admirably; the book should prove useful to students gaining their first exposure to early modern women writers and, thanks to its incredible breadth, will provide helpful leads for more experienced scholars as well.

The book is divided into three large sections. In the first, Demers seeks to capture the life experience of early modern Englishwomen as well as their textual lives, so to speak. Addressing subjects including women's education, pamphlet controversies about women, childbearing, and marital practices, the section ranges widely but is succinct enough to be of value in the classroom.

In the second section, the largest of the book, Demers addresses what she calls the genres of early modern women's writing. As she conceives them, these genres are quite loose, and occasionally Demers tries to force connections between writers where there are few useful ones. More often, however, Demers rightly allows for the extreme flexibility of the very concept of genres in the English Renaissance, and that flexibility in turn works to women writers' advantage, as when she addresses not simply plays or what might be thought of as conventional drama "categories by which women writers are decidedly disadvantaged" but chooses instead to discuss women writers' use of "drama and the dramatic" construed more widely. Demers's subsection on translation is particularly adept, highlighting a demanding skill too often rendered a subsidiary or lesser literary form in traditional literary taxonomies. Although readers may quarrel with some of her interpretive claims (Anne Lock, for instance, gets rather short shrift), the section as a whole provides a very useful framework for further work on women's translations. There are some minor errors in the book's genres section over which one might quibble. For instance,