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N O T E

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So ill-known was Blake among his contemporaries that few had even heard that he was a poet. Of those who had heard of his poetry, most probably agreed with The Antijacobin Review, which wrote in 1808:

Should he again essay to climb the Parnassian heights, his friends would do well to restrain his wanderings by the strait waistcoat. Whatever license we may allow him as a painter, to tolerate him as a poet would be insufferable.¹

As a consequence of this antipathy and obscurity, there is rarely any question of Blake's authorship of a given work, since almost all that survive are either in his own hand or printed by his own unique method of Illuminated Printing. Blake's works have often been suppressed, distorted, "improved," and misunderstood, but heretofore we have not been troubled with the problem which arises among more popular authors, of having the works of other men attributed to him. His obscurity has had at least this advantage from the scholar's point of view.

However, an apocryphal Blake poem has recently been noticed in a review published just over a century ago. In his 1863 biography of Blake, Alexander Gilchrist had quoted a number of Blake's doggerel poems from his Notebook expressing his resentment against his erstwhile patron William Hayley:

ON H[AYLEY] THE PICK THANK

I write the Rascal Thanks till he & I
With Thanks & Compliments are quite drawn dry.

Thy Friendship oft has made my heart to ake:
Do be my Enemy for Friendship's sake.²

One of Gilchrist's anonymous reviewers was W. M. Tarrt, who claimed that he had "met Cromek in 1808, as the guest of [Fuseli's patron] Mr. Roscoe at Allerton, and knew him afterwards."³ Tarrt is generally highly unsympathetic--"To enter upon a minute criticism of his [Blake's] poetry would be a mere waste of time"--but he does present one point of interest. In reference to "the trashy doggerel" which Gilchrist printed, such as that about Hayley quoted above, Tarrt said:

The best specimen, in this way, was circulated (and attributed to Blake) in the first decade of the present century; but it is not republished by Mr. Gilchrist.

¹Anon., "The Grave . . . illustrated . . . [by] William Blake," The Antijacobin Review and Magazine, XXXI (1808), 225-234; see Blake Records, 1967, p. 206.

²A. Gilchrist, Life of William Blake, ed. R. Todd, London & New York, 1942, pp. 196, 197.

³Anon., "'Pictor Ignotus,' A Biography," New Monthly Magazine, CXXX (1864), 309-319, revised in Tarrt's Essays on some Modern Works, London, 1876, Vol. II, pp. 192-215.

"Tickle me," said Mr. Hayley,
 'Tickle me, Miss Seward, do;
 And be sure I will not fail ye,
 But in my turn will tickle you.'
 So to it they fell a-tickling.

'Britain's honour! Britain's glory!
 Mr. Hayley that is you.'

'The nine muses bow before ye!
 Trust me, Lichfield's swan, they do.'

Thus these feeble bardlings squand'ring

Each on each their lavish rhymes,

Set the foolish reader wond'ring

At the genius of the times!"⁴

Though the reciprocated admiration between Hayley, the hermit of Felpham, and Anna Seward, the Swan of Lichfield, must have been known and amusing to Blake, no verses remotely like these have been attributed to him by anyone else, and the verse style seems quite alien to him.

Fortunately, however, we have something more to go on in defending Blake from the allegation of authorship of these verses than mere stylistic disparities. The central quatrain of the poem has also been attributed to William Lort Mansel (1753-1820), the epigrammatical Bishop of Bristol.

Mansel's poem is a series of couplets:

"Prince of poets, England's glory,
 Mr. Hayley, that is you."

"Ma'am, you carry all before you,
 Lichfield Swan, indeed you do."

"In epic, elegy, or sonnet,
 Mr. Hayley, you're divine."

"Madam, take my word upon it,
 You yourself are all the Nine."⁵

Unfortunately the scholar who quoted these lines did not indicate their date or derivation, and I have been unable to discover a contemporary source for them. Probably they were current before Miss Seward died in 1809.

The light-hearted merit of the lines, combined with contemporary topicality, explains easily enough their currency about 1808. Their misattribution to William Blake may perhaps have occurred during his lifetime, but it seems more likely that it is a trick of an old man's memory writing fifty-six years after the events he recalls. Whether the lines are most interesting for what they tell us of William Blake, William Hayley, William Mansel, W. M. Tarrt, or the Swan of Lichfield, Tarrt was surely right in thinking that they deserved no more than a footnote. Their interest for Blake lies not so much in the plausibility with which they may be attributed to him as in the fact that a contemporary thought it worth fathering such by-blows upon him.

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⁴When the article was collected in book form, the introductory paragraph was retained but the verse itself was omitted.

⁵The Private Letter-Books of Sir Walter Scott, ed. Wilfred Partington, London, 1930, p. 215; in deference to the necessities of scansion and rhyme, I have taken the liberty of altering the penultimate line from "word for it."