

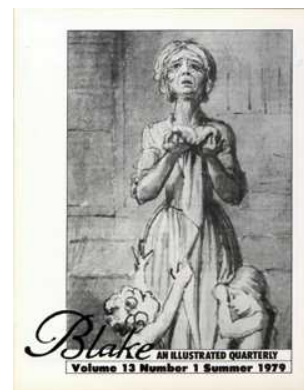
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Robert F. Gleckner

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I have been able to locate only one impression of the frontispiece in its rectangular form as published by Eaton, in a copy of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin's *Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark . . . second edition*, London: Printed for J. Johnson, St. Paul's Churchyard, 1802 (PML 46004). Traces of glue on the frontispiece suggest it was inserted in this copy, rather than being an integral part of the book; I have been unable to locate another copy in the New York area. I would therefore appreciate hearing from any reader able to locate the appearance of the portrait in its rectangular form.

PRIESTLEY AND THE CHAMELEON ANGEL IN THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

Robert F. Gleckner

In the final "Memorable Fancy" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake created a mini-seriocomic dramatic scene between an Angel and a Devil, in which he himself acts as both narrator and participant. The essentials of the scene are well known and offer little difficulty of interpretation. The Devil begins, without apparent provocation or occasion, by identifying man and God--"for there is no other

God" (Plate 23). The Angel, apoplectically changing color, responds that God is "One," unique and separate from men who are "fools, sinners & nothings." Then follows the oft-quoted Devil's diatribe on how Jesus Christ, who is the "greatest man," systematically broke the ten commandments rather than, as the Angel insisted, giving "his sanction" to them: "I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments." Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules," he concludes (Plates 23-24). The Angel, evidently convinced, embraces the flame of fire in which the Devil stands and is "consumed" to arise "as Elijah"--that is, like Elijah in the fiery chariot. The "Memorable Fancy" concludes with the transfigured Angel ("now become a Devil") reading "the Bible . . . in its infernal or diabolical sense" along with the speaker (presumably Blake) whose "particular friend" the Angel has now become. This "sense" of the Bible the speaker will deliver to the world, "if they behave well" and, whether the world "will or no," "The Bible of Hell" itself, which the speaker says he has ready (Plate 24).

The Angel's embracing the flame of fire, of course, is his embrace of the Devil "in" the flame of fire with which the Memorable Fancy begins--and hence the corrosive melting away of apparent surface (Angel) to display the infinite (imaginative man-prophet Elijah) "which was hid." The embrace may be seen, then, as paradigmatically or symbolically a marriage of heaven and hell as well,¹ though such an interpretation of the entire Memorable Fancy ignores the fact that Blake does not conclude the passage with this metamorphosis: the Angel-become-Elijah becomes in turn a Devil and the speaker's "Particular friend." Some sense, I think, may be made out of this apparent confusion--or even self-contradiction--by turning our attention to the extraordinary, and to my knowledge as yet unexplained, chameleon-like mutations of the Angel in response to the Devil's opening words: "The Angel hearing this became almost blue but mastering himself he grew yellow, & at last white pink & smiling . . ." The standard readings of this passage are notably unhelpful. Nurmi supposes, not without justification, that the Angel "almost allows himself to indulge in infernal wrath" but masters himself to regain "the vapid sweetness of his piety."² Erdman sees the Angel as "frightened" and "violently upset";³ and others merely describe the change as chameleon-like. In a passing reference Hazard Adams, to some extent echoing Bloom's essay on *The Marriage*, comes closest to the essence of the passage, attributing to Blake's "comic disdain" the Angel's "turning the colors of the spectrum."⁴ While this is spectroscopically incorrect (and there is little doubt that Blake knew the spectrum), it is the right idea here.

A passage in Joseph Priestley's *The History and Present State of Discoveries Relating to Vision, Light, and Colours*, published in two volumes by Joseph Johnson in 1772 and very possibly known to Blake, seems curiously apropos.⁵ Boyle, Priestley writes, noted that change of color "is the chief, and sometimes the only thing by which the artist regulates his process" in the preparation of

"tinctures." One major instance of this sort of change is

the method of tempering steel for gravers, drills, springs, &c. . . . First the steel to be tempered is hardened, by heating it in glowing coals, and not quenched as soon as taken from the fire, but held over a basin of water, till it pass from a white heat to a red one, when it is immediately quenched in cold water. The steel thus hardened will, if it be good, look whitish, and being brightened at the end, and held in the flame of a candle, that the bright end may be about half an inch distant from the flame, it will swiftly pass from one colour to another; as from a bright yellow to a deeper and reddish yellow, from that first to a fainter, and then to a deeper blue; each of which succeeding colours argues such a change made in the texture of the steel, that, if it be taken from the flame, and immediately quenched in tallow, whilst it is yellow, it will be of such hardness as fits it for drills; but if kept for a few minutes longer in the flame, till it burns blue, it becomes much softer, and proper to make springs for watches; which are, therefore, commonly of that colour. Lastly, if the steel be kept in the flame after the deep blue has appeared, it will grow too soft even for penknives. (I, 141-142)

Had Blake indeed seen the passage he certainly would have been interested in Priestley's references to tempering steel for gravers and penknives, and to the artist's preparation of his colors. But the idea of the relative hardness of steel when exposed to "a flame of fire" may well be at the base of the Angel's color transformation in *The Marriage*, since the sequence of color changes Blake invents for him is precisely the opposite of that produced by the tempering process Boyle and Priestley speak of. Thus the Angel's first reaction is submissive, so powerful is the Devil's flame: that is, he turns "almost blue" (my emphasis), the degree of softness fit for watch springs and perhaps even that deeper blue which indicates Priestley's ultimate malleability ("too soft even for penknives"). But "mastering himself" the Angel recovers his imperviousness, changing from blue to yellow to "white pink & smiling." The effect is precisely that of the quenching action in Priestley's passage and, accordingly, with hardened, steely self-righteousness the Angel delivers his attack on the Devil's "idolatry"--thus reassuming "the vanity to speak of [himself] as the only wise" (Plate 21).

The Devil's exasperated response to all this Blake interestingly couches in the metaphor of wheat and chaff, with the clear implication that chaff will remain chaff whatever one does to it: *this* fool, even if he "persists in his folly," will not become "wise" as the Proverb of Hell promises. Yet this Angel is no mere chaff. His doors of perception cleansed by the Devil's corrosively prophetic utterance, he "stretched out his arms embracing the flame of fire & he was consumed and arose as

Elijah." Like Christ he acts from impulse, not from rules. In Priestley's terms he has not only reached the malleability of blueness but has become molten--in precisely the same sense that in the fourth chamber of the "Printing house in Hell" the "Lions of flaming fire [were] raging around & melting the metals into living fluids" (Plate 15). The mere change of color, Priestley reminds us, does

not always denote any great difference in the internal structure of bodies; yet he [i.e. Boyle] was induced to think that it was often an indication of considerable alterations in the disposition of their parts, as appears, he says, from the extraction of tinctures, wherein the change of colour is the chief, and sometimes the only thing by which the artist regulates his process in their preparation. (I, 141)

Tempering, then, is an insufficient apocalypse: no amount of alteration in the disposition of parts transforms error into truth, finiteness into the infinite, the fool into the prophet.

That brings us to the conclusion of the Memorable Fancy: "This Angel," the speaker tells us, "is now become a Devil" and moreover his "particular friend." So anticlimactic does this "resolution" seem that it has been adduced as evidence of what Nurmi calls the "tentative apocalypse" of *The Marriage*.⁶ In the total context of the work, however, it may be argued, more persuasively I think, that the Elijahs of *this* world, like the "I" of the entire Memorable Fancy, appear to this world as Devils. Imaginatively they are, I suggest, those "living fluids" which melt apparent surfaces away, or which analogically discover the "infernal or diabolical sense" of the Bible which is to be prophetically revealed to "the world . . . if they behave well"--i.e. if they continue in their angelic ways (the tongue-in-cheekness of the phrase adapting this world's language in the same manner as the new Devil assumes conventional shape and the Bible of Hell parodically worldly status). In *A Vision of the Last Judgment* Blake wrote: "whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual."⁷ The embrace here and the Angel's embrace of the fire are the same; and if he arises as Elijah rose, he also arises as Elijah--as, that is, Blake's symbolic figure of Elijah in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* who "comprehends all the Prophetic Characters."⁸ The Memorable Fancy as a whole, then, concluding *The Marriage* proper, enacts an individual last judgment which prelude leads to, while appropriately symbolizing, the totality of last judgments that is the apocalypse of "A Song of Liberty."

In her recent essay, "Blake and the Symbolism of the New Iron Age," Eileen Sanzo calls our attention to Blake's mythologizing of his own age as the archetypal iron age: "Urizen writes with 'his iron pen' in 'books of iron and brass,' the Bible and all law rigidly interpreted." Apocalypse thus comes about, fittingly, by a "marriage" of Urizenic iron and the fire of Los's furnaces, the

iron age "alchemized into the new golden age" in Blake's imaginative version of the industrial blast furnace.⁹ The last Memorable Fancy of *The Marriage*, then, may be seen profitably as one of Blake's earliest efforts (if not the earliest) to incorporate "the symbolism of the new iron age," of which Priestley had to be considered one of the high priests, into his art.

¹ Frye calls the episode "orthodox theology" (*Fearful Symmetry* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947], p. 196), and Bloom extrapolates on this: "The Angel teaches light without heat [i.e. without energy]; the vitalist--or Devil--heat without light; Blake wants both, hence the marriage of contraries" ("Dialectic in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960], p. 80). Erdman, however, cautions against too readily identifying the embracing figures on the title page of *The Marriage* as male or female, heaven or hell, angel or devil (*The Illustrated Blake* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1974], p. 98).

² *Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell"* (Kent: Kent State Univ. Press, 1957), p. 58.

³ *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, rev. ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), p. 177.

⁴ *William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963), p. 293.

⁵ The evidence that Blake had actually met Priestley is shaky. We know from letters and diaries that "more or less frequent guests" of Joseph Johnson included Priestley (from the 1770's to 1793), and we can "assume that Blake sometimes attended Johnson's conversational Tuesday dinners in the early '90s" (Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*, p. 156). The two may have met there. If only because of Priestley's connection with Johnson--and given Blake's intense interest, even early, in matters of vision--Priestley's book almost surely would have attracted the poet's especial attention. Erdman also notes that the will-o'-the-wisp-like light in "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found" was a "phenomenon in which Priestley was greatly interested" (*Prophet*, p. 126n). As a matter of fact there is a long section on the ignis fatuus (which, Priestley notes, Newton in his *Opticks* called "a vapour shining without heat") in *The History and Present State of Discoveries Relative to Vision, Light, and Colours* (1, 579-84). Donald D. Ault, in his *Visionary Physics* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), cites Priestley's two-volume work several times, though without indicating whether he believes that Blake had seen it. Morton D. Paley has argued that Blake knew Priestley's *Matter and Spirit* (*Energy and the Imagination* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970], pp. 8-10, 66-67). And, finally, it is still possible, though less acceptable these days, to see Priestley behind the character of Inflammable Gass in *An Island in the Moon*.

⁶ *Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell"*, p. 61.

⁷ D. V. Erdman, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 551.

⁸ *Poetry and Prose*, p. 550.

⁹ *The Evidence of the Imagination*, ed. D. H. Reiman, M. C. Jaye, B. T. Bennett (New York Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 1-11. The quotations are from pp. 8-9.

BIFOCAL

Cruciform poles recede into the distance
 excoriating the sky with tuneless wires
 whose parallels intersect at Golgotha
 or Golgonooza, infinite or inane;
 someone reins in her white geese from my gander
 and green shoots brave the alley of gabled brick
 where night has slain the chameleon-tinctured sun
 who daily grows like what he feeds upon.

Time was once that chameleon
 and we were slain in the valley of Megiddo
 then swiftly rose like love on a green meadow
 where small birds hovered on impromptu wings
 or else resumed their pleasant parleyings
 while every stone shone like a thousand suns.

Warren Stevenson