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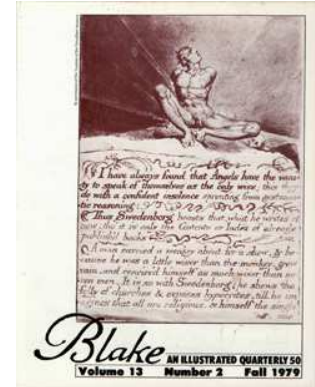
# BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## Charlotte Smith, William Cowper, and William Blake: Some New Documents

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# CHARLOTTE SMITH, WILLIAM COWPER, AND WILLIAM BLAKE: SOME NEW DOCUMENTS

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**A**lthough her reputation is somewhat diminished now, Charlotte Smith was the most celebrated novelist in England in the early 1790s. Like George Romney, John Flaxman, William Cowper, and William Blake, Mrs. Smith was one of a number of writers and painters assisted by William Hayley in various ways. Mrs. Smith met Cowper at Eartham in 1792, and the events of that friendship have been chronicled.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Smith never met William Blake, and only one excerpt from a letter linking them has previously been published. In this note, I should like to provide some additional information on Mrs. Smith and Cowper, but I shall as well cite three unpublished excerpts from her correspondence in which she comments on Blake.

In an article of 1952, Alan Dugald McKillop provided an excellent account of Charlotte Smith's letters.<sup>2</sup> In the course of that essay, McKillop notes a facetious and denigrating remark of 20 March 1806 (Huntington) about Hayley's *Designs to a Series of Ballads* (1802) and *Ballads* (1805) which includes a comment on William Blake: ". . . & at his [Hayley's] strange tho benevolent fancy of writing such very sad doggrell, for the purpose of serving a Man, who might be any thing than an engraver. . ." <sup>3</sup>

There is a more substantial reference to Blake in a letter to the same correspondent, Sarah Farr

Rose, of 25 April 1806 (Huntington).<sup>4</sup> As before, Mrs. Smith is complaining about Hayley's neglect of her.

I lose a great part of the regret I might otherwise feel in recollecting, that a mind so indiscriminating, who is now seized with a rage for a crooked figure-maker & now for an engraver of Ballad pictures (the young Mans tragedy; & the jolly Sailers Farewell to his true love Sally)--I dont mean the Hayleyan collection of pretty ballads<sup>5</sup>--Such a mind, can never be really attached; or is the attachment it can feel worth having--

The "crooked figure-maker" is probably a reference to Flaxman and his hunch-back; despite the disclaimer, the engraver is more than likely to be Blake.

Recently, three previously unknown Charlotte Smith letters were discovered in Brantford, Ontario, and these letters, acquired by the Research Collections division of Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University, supplement the references to Blake in the Huntington collection and contain as well a significant reference to Cowper.

The McMaster letters are of 9 September 1802, 9 February 1803, and 19 February 1803; all three signed autograph letters are addressed to Samuel Rose (1767-1804), Cowper's friend and correspondent, and the lawyer who defended Blake against the charge of sedition at Chichester in 1804. Rose apparently acted as Lord Egremont's London agent in handling Mrs. Smith's affairs. Although the Huntington owns a dozen letters to his wife, Sarah, from Mrs. Smith,<sup>6</sup> they have only a single letter to Rose himself of 11 September 1803, and there do not seem to be letters to Rose in any other collection.

Despite what might be termed worldly success, Mrs. Smith's financial and family difficulties made her of a melancholy cast, and she and Cowper recognized in each other in 1792 a shared response to the vanity of human wishes. Mrs. Smith's dedication of her poem, *The Emigrants* (1793), to Cowper is beautifully expressed and touching, and she notes the "force, clearness, and sublimity" which allows Cowper to give "dignity and effect" to "the most familiar objects."<sup>7</sup> In her letter of 9 September 1802, she refers to the "two Letters of Mr Cowpers which he honored me with some years since --".<sup>8</sup> It is her letter of 9 February 1803, in which she movingly reflects on Cowper's death, which has the most significant material; she has just received the first two volumes of Hayley's *Life of Cowper* (1803).

Allow me also to beg (for the same reason) that you will make known to Mr Hayley my gratitude for the Work I so earnestly wish'd to see, and which arrived here on Tuesday--I have only had time to read the dedication & some pages of the first volume--My spirits I hope will serve me to go thro it in the course of the next three or four days--Yet it is not a book (relating as it does to such a person)--which can be read, at least I cannot read it, without a variety of sensations that, no other book in the World can excite--  
Alas! for the friends I have lost--for the days that are gone!

Earlier, in the same letter, Mrs. Smith refers to a possible commission for Flaxman and goes on to make inquiries for an engraver for the plates she intended for *Conversations Introducing Poetry* (1804).<sup>9</sup>

I am afraid of addressing myself to Mr Hayley now on any subject whatever--I have not been favored with any answer to the Letters I took the liberty to address to him under cover to you--which related to information my daughter<sup>10</sup> desired me to obtain of Mr Flaxman, relative to the means of sending over a small Marble tablet or urn to Barbados inscribed to the Memory of my unfortunate Charles<sup>11</sup> -- Perhaps however he has been so good as to send an answer to Miss Smith--My present purpose is, to enquire, whether there is not an ingenious Engraver who executed certain plates for a small work of

Mr Hayley's relating to Animals.<sup>12</sup> I know not what it is as I have never seen it.

In the McMaster letter of 1803, Mrs. Smith simply inquires about an "ingenious Engraver" whereas in the later Harvard and Huntington letters of 1804 and 1806, the references to Blake are clearly hostile. This change is probably due in large part to the fact that by 1804 Mrs. Smith was fully aware of the extent of Hayley's patronage of Blake at Felpham from 1800-1803, and she had obviously heard of Blake's trial at Chichester.

The McMaster letters demonstrate further the omnipresent patronage and involvement of William Hayley in the careers of some of the most gifted writers and artists of his age. They help reveal as well Charlotte Smith's dissatisfaction with Hayley. Finally, although the letters at McMaster contain only passing references by Mrs. Smith on William Cowper and William Blake, they are of interest in showing how one of the most widely-known and published authors of the time reacted to the celebrated recluse at Weston Underwood and to the relatively obscure "ingenious" engraver-poet.

<sup>1</sup> See Morchard Bishop, *Blake's Hayley* (London, 1951), pp. 161-66.

<sup>2</sup> "Charlotte Smith's Letters," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 45 (1952), 237-55. McKillop confines himself to a description of the forty-five letters in the Huntington collection. The letters contain details on Mrs. Smith's harrowing domestic conflicts, the arduous life of a professional writer in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and details of her quarrels with Lord Egremont and William Hayley. Neither Bishop nor Florence Hilbish, *Charlotte Smith* (Philadelphia, 1941), still the standard work on its subject, provides any evidence of the hostility Charlotte Smith felt towards Hayley from c. 1800 until her death in 1806.

<sup>3</sup> HM 10843.

<sup>4</sup> HM 10844. I am grateful to Professor G. E. Bentley, Jr. for his kindness in providing me with this citation.

<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Smith is again referring to *Designs to a Series of Ballads and Ballade*. See G. E. Bentley, Jr., "William Blake as a Private Publisher," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 61 (1957), 539-60.

<sup>6</sup> There are Charlotte Smith letters to Mrs. Rose in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library (2), the Houghton Library, Harvard University (2), and the Charles Roberts Autograph Collection, Haverford College (1). In her letter to Mrs. Rose of 10 September 1804 (Harvard), she makes her only comment on Blake by name; she is deliberating whether to send Hayley a copy of *Conversations Introducing Poetry*. "Before I venture to send him my little book, I [want] to know if it would be acceptable for notwithstanding he has begun a Poetical Buffon [sic] himself, to assist his worldly friend Mr Blake, I was afraid mine, would be deem'd too juvenile."

<sup>7</sup> P. v.

<sup>8</sup> Cowper's letter to Mrs. Smith of 25 July 1793 is known only from its printing in Hayley's *Life of Cowper* (Chichester and London, 1803), II, 234; the holograph of his letter of 26 October 1793 is at Princeton.

<sup>9</sup> There is no evidence that Flaxman ever became involved in such a project, and *Conversations* does not contain any plates.

<sup>10</sup> Probably Charlotte Mary (*pre* 1774-*post* 1807).

<sup>11</sup> In 1800 Charles Dyer Smith (1773-1801) had been appointed paymaster of the 47th Regiment at Bermuda. He contracted yellow fever in Barbados en route to his new post and died there.

<sup>12</sup> *Designs to a Series of Ballads*.