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Leonora, Laodamia, and the Dead Ardours

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Another illustration from the Stedman work appears on p. 37 of the 1836 issue of the *Almanac* (vol. I, no. 3). The imprint--as with so many short-lived periodicals of the time--has changed, and now reads: Boston, sold by Lemuel Gulliver,<sup>3</sup> published by Charles Ellms.<sup>4</sup> The original illustration (unsigned in the Stedman volume but given to Blake by both Keynes and Bentley) entitled "The Skulls of Lieu<sup>t</sup> Lepper, and Six of his Men," appears in vol. I, p. 237, where two soldiers are seen lamenting and gesticulating over the skull of the unfortunate Lieutenant Lepper. A third soldier leans contemplatively on his flintlock, surveying the skulls of the six men who ". . . had one by one been stripped naked by the rebel negroes at their arrival at their village, and (for the recreation of their wives and children) . . . flogged to death."<sup>5</sup> The modified American version shows only a single soldier reflecting on the skulls on poles, surrounded by scattered bones--this last detail added by the American woodcutter. The text beneath, only nine lines long, very briefly summarizes the scene. The *People's Almanac* cut is signed at the lower right, "Downes," most surely J. Downes of Worcester, Mass., working c. 1834-1850.<sup>6</sup> He is recorded as illustrating other almanacs for Charles Ellms: *The American Comic Almanac*, *The Comic Token*. He was also responsible for numerous book illustrations.<sup>7</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that the publisher or editor of *The People's Almanac* had access to or himself owned a copy of the Stedman work, which formed but one source for the illustrations of the many sensational articles commonly found in such publications. Other articles in *The People's Almanac*, for instance, include pieces on the island of Tristan D'Achuna [sic], the shipwreck of the *Blendenhall*, "Terrific contest with a lion," "The affecting narrative of [Elizabeth Woodcock's] sufferings in a snow bank," and the more predictable ephemeral information of tides, lunar charts, and astronomical tables. It was common to include sensational articles with these necessary charts to make almanacs more salable and attractive, and Ellms boasted in print that future issues of *The People's Almanac* would appear "containing numerous large Engravings, and astonishing but true accounts of Adventures, Exploits and Escapes. Also fights between wild beasts, Alligators, Snakes, Men, and Eagles." The high quality of the wood-engraving is noteworthy, as is the wide range of pictorial sources from which illustrations were taken. One article in the 1834 issue on Napoleon crossing the Alps, for instance, copies the famous painting of Napoleon by David.

It may well be that a systematic examination of the large numbers of American almanacs issued in the mid-nineteenth century will reveal other such copies after Blake.

<sup>1</sup> G. E. Bentley, Jr. "New" Blake engravings . . .," *Blake* 47, p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced, for instance, by Keynes, *Bibliography of William Blake* (New York, 1921), at p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> Despite his remarkable name, this Gulliver was indeed a bookseller in Boston, and is listed in the Boston city directory for 1836.

<sup>4</sup> *The People's Almanac* was published between 1834 and 1841; various issues are found at the New York Public Library, the American Antiquarian Society, and other institutions. Copies are found with varying imprints--some have Boston addresses, some Philadelphia addresses, and some are entirely without imprints. The contents of these various copies are identical. See Drake, *Early American Almanacs* (New York, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> Stedman, vol. I, p. 237.

<sup>6</sup> Groce and Wallace, *The New-York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564-1860* (New Haven, 1957), p. 186.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, *Early American Book Illustrators and Wood Engravers, 1670-1840* [including supplements] (Princeton, 1958-1968).

## LEONORA, LAODAMIA, AND THE DEAD ARDOURS

David V. Erdman

Gottfried Augustus Bürger's *Leonora, A Tale*, translated and altered from the German . . . by J. T. Stanley, Esq. F. R. S. &c. went into three London editions in 1796, one of them containing three illustrations designed by Blake and engraved by one Perry, a mysterious figure whose first name and other works (except for one Stedman plate) are unknown.

Wordsworth and his sister, on 1 October 1798 in Hamburg, bought copies of Bürger's *Poems* and Percy's *Reliques* and sat an hour in the bookseller's shop reading. M. J. Herzberg in 1925 and Geoffrey H. Hartman in 1968 have noted some influence of Bürger's poems on Wordsworth's (Hartman calls it "unwitting"), but no one seems to have noticed how close the sexual theme of Wordsworth's currently popular *Laodamia* (1814) is to that of *Leonora*. (In 1800 Wordsworth chose to imitate, in *Ellen Irwin or the Braes of Kirtle*, the form of *Leonora* rather than the "simple ballad strain."<sup>1</sup>)

The parallel is simple but central. Laodamia, seeing her loving but dead husband returned, in the flesh as far as her eyes could tell, pleaded:

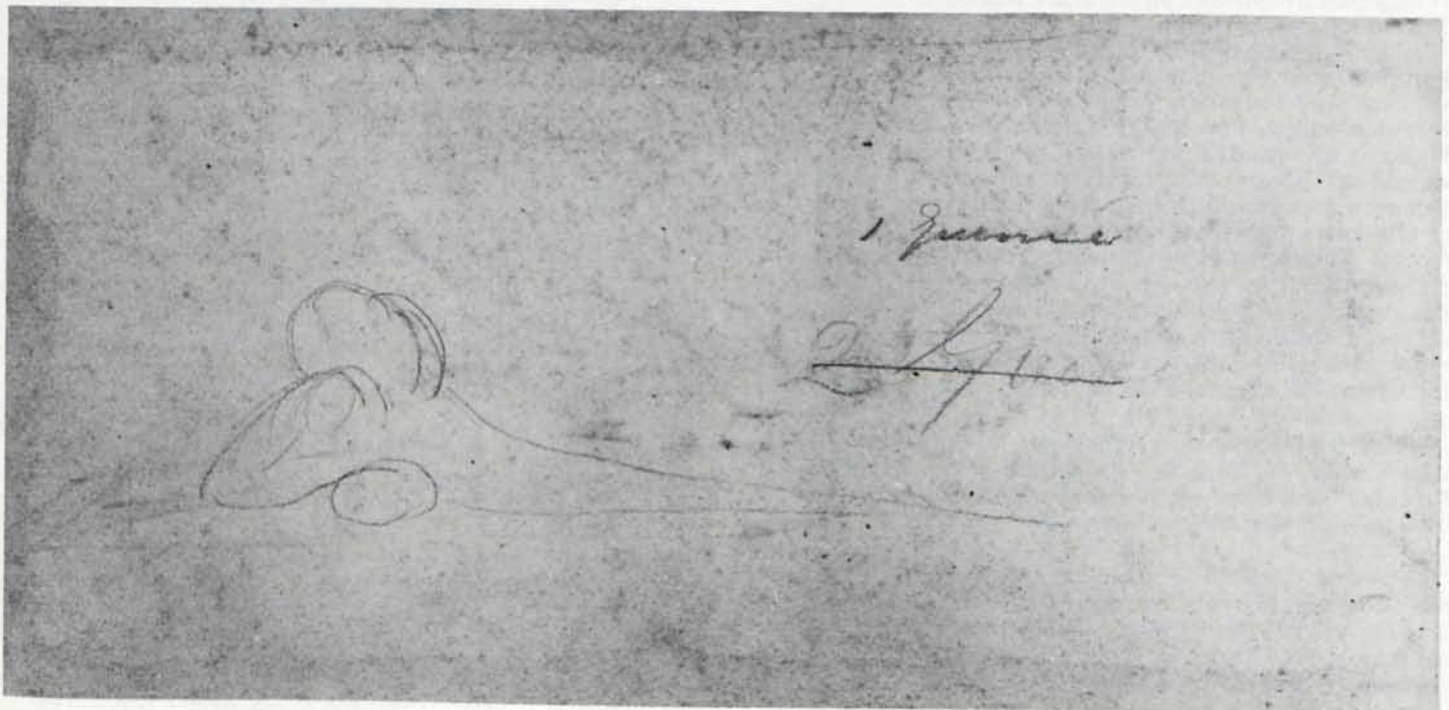
Give, on this well-known couch, one nuptial kiss  
To me, this day, a second time thy bride!

Leonora, deceived by her eyes into believing her revenant lover was alive and able, pleaded:

Oh come, thy war-worn limbs to cheer  
On the soft couch of joy and love!

Laodamia's offending "the just Gods" by mistaking the spirit for the body (she had failed to "Learn, by a mortal yearning, to ascend--Seeking a higher object") was firmly rebuked:





Be taught, O faithful Consort, to control  
 Rebellious passion: for the Gods approve  
 The depth, and not the tumult, of the soul;

and turned to "a lifeless corse." Leonora was  
 surrounded by a crowd of fiends, who danced and  
 howled "this awful lesson":

Learn patience, though thy heart should break,  
 Nor seek God's mandate to control!

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1 Blake. "The dead ardours." Pencil and ink sketch  
 for *Leonora*, 1796, to have been engraved by Perry.

2 Sketch on verso--a revenant emerging from the  
 grave? David Bindman collection.

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Each of these uxorious females had forfeited all future bliss. Bürger patched on a happy ending: 'twas "all a dream." Wordsworth provided grim solace by suggesting that his heroine had become a tree which locked into an eternal pattern of "inter-change of growth and blight," growing too high and getting blasted again and again (Ancient-Mariner like).

Blake's third illustration depicts Leonora waking and her lover, not really a wraith, rushing toward her with a plucked rose. His second depicts the grief in the community when they thought he was dead. His first, in four tiers, depicts five dead bodies (and an onlooker) stirring in their opening graves, above them five naked soul/bodies dancing against a full moon, above them a fiery horse in air, bearing Leonora clutched to her ghost lover, followed by a horn-blowing fairy whose trumpet is bent back as if to be heard only by himself. In the story the revenant must take his bride back with him into his grave before moon-set. In the top quarter of the picture Blake presents two adjacent cloud-clusters of human forms, a row of burly, sour-faced, naked men under a black cape held up by a boy, and an adjoining row of women mostly bowed down with streaming hair (there is some borrowing from the title-page and last plate of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*).<sup>2</sup>

A fourth design by Blake, a drawing in fairly finished condition but not used in the book, has been puzzled over from time to time without identification and is now in the collection of David Bindman, who kindly grants his permission for its reproduction here. It is on a small bit of paper, probably cut from a larger sheet, and it consists of another cloud-cluster of human forms, a cloven-footed youth with head buried in cloud and with a cloven foot like that of the dreamer in page 2 of *The Four Zoas* ("Rest before Labour"), a crouched Urizenic figure with triple beard and shut eyes, and a contorted female with twisted body and cloak, her eyes wide open and perhaps her mouth, shrieking.

On the back is a slight sketch, apparently of a body emerging from its grave. And a price, "2 Guineas," has been crossed out and replaced with "1 Guinea." I have not asked Bindman what he paid.<sup>3</sup>

What has kept the main design in critical limbo has been its inscription, conjectured (by Rossetti I believe) to read "The dead bad doers," which does not sound like sense or like Blake. Actually the inscriptions above and below the drawing are not very difficult to make out when we realize they were not *written* to be *read* but sketched to indicate the layout of a title-page and the inscription Perry was to engrave. On the right half of the top of the paper, cut off by the top edge, are the letters V O L U M E. On the left half presumably there was to be "First" or "Second"; there seem to be shadows of some letters, apparently in upper and lower case.

Beneath the drawing, overlapping its cloud and shading, the lettering, with a very elegant capital T and a tall P, reads:

The dead ardours Perry  
W.B.

People who guessed "bad doers" in place of "ardours" had to imagine a stem on the looped o. Perry's engraving of the inscriptions on the other designs specifies the division of labor: "Blake inv: Perry sc."

The Blake *Concordance* discloses that Blake spelled ardor/our either way, and it leads us to a cognate Blakean concept in lines 263-67 of *The French Revolution* (1791) in which the Nation's Assembly is described as "Like a council of ardors seated in clouds, bending over the cities of men, / And over the armies of strife . . . / While . . . the pestilence weighs his red wings in the sky." The praeternaturalism is quite similar. In France the ardors (passions) or spirits of the new Assembly are very much alive, while the ardors of the King and Duke of Burgundy "like the sun of old time quench'd in clouds" (68) or like clouds in a night sky ("his bosom . . . like starry heaven" 81-82) are as dead as the vampires in *Leonora*; the King sees "thro' darkness, thro' clouds rolling round me, the spirits of ancient Kings / Shivering over their bleached bones . . . 'Hide from the living!'" (72-74). "The dead ardours" makes a perfect title-heading for the poems of Bürger (as anyone with the curiosity to peruse them will find) and a suitable epithet for the interdicted passions of Leonora and Laodamia. As for Blake, his search for a term for the components of the psyche in every body, if it had not come up with "zoas" might conceivably have settled upon "ardours."

I leave to others the possibly quite rewarding pursuit of graphic and psychological resemblances to the three ardours on Bürger's cloud in the Spectres and Emanations of Blake's evolving myth. This design (and the published ones) must have been conceived in 1795-96 just while Blake was translating into design the Night symbolism of Young and was moving in his own symbolism from the Books of Urizen and Ahanian into the work that only evolved the term "Four Zoas" after several years of Spirits and Spectres.

<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth's purchase was the *Dichter* of 1796 (2 vols.), now in Grasmere. When he and Dorothy read "a few little things of Bürger" in the German original, they "were disappointed particularly in 'Leonora,' which we thought in several passages inferior to the English translation." The English passage he quotes (adding an unearthliness not in the German) is not from the Stanley translation. See *Letters: The Early Years* (1967) 233-34 & nn. and Moorman *Early Years*, 429.

<sup>2</sup> The three Blake/Perry line-and-stipple engravings are reproduced in David Bindman, *The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), plates 380-82.

<sup>3</sup> For the provenance, see David Bindman, "An Unpublished Blake Pencil Drawing of the Lambeth Period," *Blake Newsletter* 4 (1970): 39-40.