

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

N O T E

## William Rossetti's Annotations to Gilchrist's Life of William Blake

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 2, Issue 3, December 15, 1968, pp. 39-40, 48



NOTES

1. William Rossetti's Annotations to Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*

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Some Blake scholars may not know of the copy of the first, 1863 edition of Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* containing annotations by William Rossetti. This is now in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, where I examined it in the summer of 1966. It bears William Rossetti's name on the short title-page and also the inscription "Handed over to Olive/W.M.R./Sept. 1908," which presumably refers to his daughter Mrs. Olive Rossetti Agresti.

Most of the annotations were made to William Rossetti's own lists of Blake's works in the second volume. There are some corrections, for instance regarding the duplication of certain works in the 1863 lists. References are inserted to pictures in the sale of George Blamire, deceased, at Christie's on 7th and 9th November 1863 (which included "The Black Madonna" now in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon), and to works in the Aspland and H.A. Bright collections which were unknown to Rossetti when he compiled his lists. Some changes of ownership and two cases of cracked surfaces being repaired are noted and a few dates changed or inserted. Most valuable of all are two references to "Mr. Chase" which, as my colleague Leslie Parris will show in a forthcoming note, help in establishing the identity of a patron who commissioned a number of works from Blake surpassed in importance only by those executed for Thomas Butts and John Linnell.

Rossetti's notes also identify the *Tiriel* drawings, listed as "of uncertain subject" in the 1863 edition, and there are one or two annotations to Gilchrist's text in the first volume. It is difficult to date the notes precisely; indeed, they may have been done over a number of years, as is suggested by the references to both Chase and Aspland alongside the same items. One change of ownership, of List I no. 133 from "Mr. Strange" to "Mr. Scott," gives a terminus ante quem for this annotation of 1876, when William Bell Scott lent the work concerned to the Burlington Fine Arts Club exhibition. The references to Mr. Chase were almost certainly done before 1872 when the watercolours were sold anonymously at Sotheby's while those to Aspland must follow this date, when they apply to the works in that sale.

The additional entries, corrections and dates, notes of condition and so on were incorporated in the revised lists included in the 1880 edition of Gilchrist's *Life*. The fresh information about ownership, on the other hand, was not. In fact the revised lists are less informative in this respect than those of 1863, only the works from the collections of Butts and Linnell being so noted. Doubtless William Rossetti found the task of keeping up with the increasingly frequent changes of ownership difficult; the present writer can sympathize.

May I take this opportunity of appealing for help over an untraced catalogue for a sale of works from the Butts collection? This included a number of illustrations to the Apocalypse which appear in Rossetti's list with the note



"Described in the Sale-catalogue as 'very fine'," ". . . 'very powerful and characteristic'," ". . . 'of grand conception and highly characteristic'," and so on. Although I have traced sales from the Butts collection at Sotheby's on the 26th March 1852, and at Foster's on the 29th June 1853 and again on 8th March 1854 (omitting sales later than 1863) none of them includes these works or these descriptions. Nor are they to be found in the Joseph Hogarth sale at Southgate's on 7th to 23rd June 1854 or the anonymous Frederick Tatham sale at Sotheby's on 29th April 1862. Any help in tracing this catalogue will be greatly appreciated.

Some Blake scholars may not know of the copy of the first, 1883 edition of *Christiana's Life of William Blake* which was examined by William Rossetti. This is now in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, where I examined it in the summer of 1966. It bears William Rossetti's name on the short title-page and also the inscription "Handed over to Mrs. M. V. Rossetti, 1908," which presumably refers to his daughter Mrs. Olive Rossetti Agresti.

Most of the annotations were made to William Rossetti's own lists of Blake's works in the second volume of the edition. For instance, regarding the duplication of certain works in lists, references are inserted to pictures in the sale of George Blake, deceased, at Christie's on 7th and 9th November 1863 (which included "The Black Madonna," now in the collection of the University of California, Berkeley).

Blake could very well have seen and read about a tiger in the zoo in the Tower of London. In *An Historical Description of the Tower of London, and its Curiosities* (London, 1768) the anonymous writer refers to three tigers living in the Tower. This work was a popular guidebook published by John Newbery, the bookseller for whom the Newbery Award in children's literature is named.

One of the bookseller's most popular publications, the *Tower*, with its two companion volumes on Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral, was reprinted frequently between 1753 and 1774; and the three works were sometimes bound together under one general title. During Blake's apprenticeship with the engraver James Basire, he spent some time sketching the monuments in Westminster Abbey, and he may very well have used Newbery's *Historical Description* to point out the most interesting of these monuments. It is at this time that he might have seen the *Tower*, and, either in the book or at the zoo, he may have been impressed by the tigers. The writer refers to Sir Richard, "a fine young Tyger presented to his Majesty by the Earl of Northumberland," (p. 17) and Miss Jenny, "a Bengal tygress, brought from Madrass by governor Piggot, and presented to his majesty as a great curiosity. She is a most beautiful creature, far exceeding any other in the whole collection." (p. 18) Of the three, however, the writer describes one, Miss Groggery, at considerable length, and that description may shed some light on the contrast between Blake's poem and the illustration which accompanied it:

It is an old maxim, that evil communication corrupts good manners, and as a companion to this adage, we may assert, that good company and kind treatment will tame the most savage animals. We have an instance of this, in the courteous behaviour of Miss Groggery, who is altogether as kind and familiar as her companion [Dunco, a lion], and, though a tygress, discovers no marks of ferocity ---But notwithstanding the polite and friendly behaviour of these beautiful creatures, I would not advise my friends to be too great with them; for, like other couples, they may sometimes happen to be out of temper.



Young's *Night Thoughts*. The text is placed off center so that very wide margins on the outside and lower edges remain for figural scenes. Approximately 1/4 of the page is available at the bottom for an illustration and none at all at the top of a page. Moreover, no page of *Night Thoughts* is organized with a central focus as is this design. All the *Night Thoughts* illustrations are eccentric since they are designed for the outside and lower margins. Once again, the critic has made a major error in methodology by isolating one element rather than relating multiple controlling elements.

With this meager support the reviewer finally adduces that the style of the Yale drawing is more appropriate for the illustrations to Young and that it could not possibly be as late as the *Jerusalem* illustrations. I have already pointed out that the Yale drawing is centrally and bilaterally organized in contrast with all of the illustrations to Young. On the other hand, numerous of the *Jerusalem* illustrations are centrally organized. In addition, the use of flames in rhythms across the surface of the page like those in the Yale drawing is a leitmotif of the *Jerusalem* illustrations, and these incendiary arabesques allow the design to interweave with the flowing lines of the text. These flames were heightened with gold applied with a brush and contrasted with deep areas of shadow like that indicated on the left of the sheet at Yale. By contrast, the illustrations to Young are on a completely different spatial plane from the block of text and the text cuts across the illustration at right angles, leaving the figures in space behind. Later Blake unified illustration and text in a fluid linear pattern on the same surface plane, that of the page itself.

The linear surface rhythms of the Yale drawing are fused more completely with the movement of the figure than anything by Blake in the 1790's. The surface design of the *Jerusalem* illustrations in which text and figure are united in a sensitive extension of each other are the bridge to Blake's late style embodied in the *Job* illustrations. In these late works, the use of illusionistic space with traditional perspective devices is almost completely discarded for a richly interwoven surface pattern in which text and figure are fused. Finally, there is a tendency in Blake's drawings of the 1790's to retain the coherence of the silhouette of the figure in a way which is much closer to Flaxman's figural style. By contrast, the Yale drawing shows a fusion of figural movement and surrounding arabesques which is like that of the *Jerusalem* illustrations and Blake's late style.

Let me simply conclude by saying that if new evidence is brought forth to show that the Yale drawing does not illustrate the passage in Blake's text that I have quoted, I shall be more than interested and pleased to accept it. However, the reviewer under discussion has not given such evidence as would set it aside at this time.

Note: With reference to the article mentioned in Mr. Butlin's note (p. 39), "William Blake's Mr. Thomas" by Leslie Parris has now been published in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 5 Dec. 1968, p. 1390.