

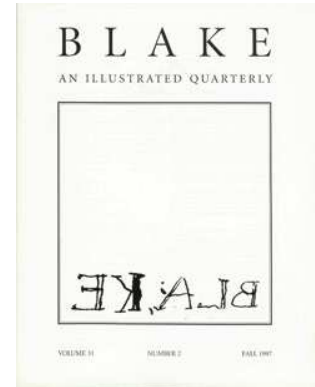
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

William Blake and the Sophocles Enigma

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 31, Issue 2, Fall 1997, pp. 65-71



William Blake and the Sophocles Enigma

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Anthony Rota and John Byrne have discovered among the papers of the poet Edmund Blunden (1896-1974) a very puzzling manuscript bearing in eighteenth century hands translations of plays by Sophocles accompanied by learned annotations in Latin and Greek and, at curious intervals and often on otherwise blank leaves, the words "William Blake" (see illus. 1-3, 7, 9-10, 24, 26-32). Nothing at all like this has previously been associated with the poet-artist William Blake,² and it is a matter of very considerable interest to discover what his connection with the work may have been.

Blake's Greek and His Knowledge of Sophocles

On the face of it, the association seems unlikely. William Blake is not known to have written the word "Sophocles,"³ he did not learn Greek until he was about 45, and his attitude towards classical authors, at least at the end of his life, was strongly hostile—in 1827 he wrote: "The Greek & Roman Classics is the Antichrist."⁴

Further, Blake used paper very frugally. In his *Notebook*, which had been used by his beloved brother Robert, Blake wrote backwards and forwards, until parts of it became a palimpsest; the proofs for his engravings for Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797) were used as scrap paper on which to write *Vala* (?1796-?1807); and copies of Hayley's *Designs to a Se-*

ries of Ballads (1802), which Blake published, were taken apart by him after 1807 and used for scrap paper.⁵ Such a prodigal use, or neglect, of good paper in the Sophocles Manuscript, in which so many pages are still blank, would have been very uncharacteristic of the frugal poet.

On the other hand, Blake did illustrate Sophocles's *Philoctetes*,⁶ and on 2 November 1821 he went with John Linnell and John Varley to the performance of a play advertised as Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* (said to be "revived after a lapse of 2240 years"), though it was in fact John Dryden & Nat Lee's *Oedipus* (1678).⁷ Further, the influence of Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus* has been traced in Blake's *Tiriel* (?1789)⁸ and even in *Jerusalem* (1804-?20),⁹ and his learned friends James Barry, John Flaxman, and Henry Fuseli made illustrations for Sophocles.¹⁰ It would be surprising if Blake had not known the plays of Sophocles, though the likelihood that he made translations from them seems slim.

Blake apparently had a natural gift for languages,¹¹ and his credulous disciple Frederick Tatham claimed that he "had a most consummate knowledge of all the great writers in all languages. . . . I have possessed books well thumbed and dirtied by his graving hands, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, and Italian. . . ."¹² According to Alexander Gilchrist, "He would declare that he learnt French, suffi-

⁵ See *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 321-34; 453-64; and 572-75, plus, for Hayley, *Blake Books Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 223-24.

⁶ "Philoctetes and Neoptolemus at Lemnos" (1812), #476 in Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1981).

⁷ *Blake Records Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 77-79; there is no reference to Sophocles in *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

⁸ Kathleen Raine, "Some Sources of *Tiriel*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 21 (1957): 1-36.

⁹ Margaret Josephine Downes, "Benediction of Metaphor at Colonus: William Blake and the Vision of the Ancients," *Colby Library Quarterly* 27 (1991): 175-83.

¹⁰ Barry's "Philoctetes on the Island of Lemnos" oil painting (1770), etching (1777), and engraving (c. 1790) is illus. 18 here; Fuseli's "The Death of Oedipus" (1785) and "Oedipus Cursing His Son Polynices" (1826) are listed in D. H. Weinglass, *Prints and Engraved Illustrations By and After Henry Fuseli: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Scolar Press, 1994) 80; and three Flaxman drawings in illustration of Sophocles are listed by Laurence Binyon, *Catalogue of Drawings by British Artists . . . in the British Museum* (London, 1898) III. On 22 July 1879, Samuel Palmer wrote: "Blake told me about 1825 that we were one century behind the civilization which would enable us to appreciate Fuseli's *Oedipus* with his daughters painted [in 1787] the year before Fuseli became an A R A" (i.e., Associate of the Royal Academy—see *Letters of Samuel Palmer*, ed. Raymond Lister [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974] 2: 968).

¹¹ Samuel Palmer wrote in September 1862: "W.B. was mad about languages" (*Letters of Samuel Palmer*, ed. Lister, 2: 669).

¹² *Blake Records* (1969) 41n4. Elsewhere Tatham wrote that among the books from Blake's library which he acquired at the death of Mrs. Blake, "the most thumbed from use are his Bible & those works in other languages. He was very fond of Ovid, especially the *Fasti*" (*Blake Records*,

¹ The connection of the Sophocles Manuscript with the poet William Blake was first noticed by John Byrne (then of the firm of Bertram Rota), who gathered much of the information used here, particularly concerning the Greek context and the Greek hand-writing. This information was incorporated in an essay by Michael Phillips (which I have been privileged to see in typescript) concluding that at least some of the Sophocles Manuscript is in the hand of the poet William Blake. I have carefully examined the manuscript, recorded its physical details, and written the present essay drawing different conclusions from the same materials. In particular, my own Greek being a good deal less than Shakespeare's, I have depended upon Byrne's conclusions in this area.

I am deeply grateful to Anthony Rota for extraordinary generosity and kindness concerning the Sophocles MS, as well as, of course, to John Byrne and Michael Phillips.

² The only previous notice of the work was given by Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1995) 227, 378, who was "indebted for this information to Mr. George Lawson of Bertram Rota Books": "A notebook has recently been discovered in which Blake has translated parts of *Ajax* by Sophocles and then on some subsequent pages, has made notes of the same dramatist's *Philoctetes*."

³ *A Concordance to the Writings of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman et al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

⁴ *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 1514, the text used in further Blake quotations.

cient to read it, in a few weeks,¹³ and at the very end of his life he taught himself Italian in order to illustrate Dante. As a young artisan, Blake would scarcely have been trained in the classical languages, but, when living in 1800-03 under the patronage of William Hayley, who was a notable linguist, he began studying Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Hayley wrote on 3 February 1802 that "Blake . . . is just become a Grecian & literally learning the Language,"¹⁴ and on 30 January 1803 Blake wrote to his uneducated brother,

I go on Merrily with my Greek & Latin; am very sorry that I did not begin to learn languages early in life as I find it very Easy. . . . I read Greek as fluently as an Oxford scholar¹⁵ & the Testament is my chief master. . . .¹⁶

It is, therefore, exceedingly unlikely that Blake had studied the classics before 1802 enough to translate Sophocles from the Greek or write learned annotations in Latin, but he might have been able to do so thereafter.

Characteristics of the Sophocles Manuscript

The small quarto volume with the Sophocles translation originally had more than 300 leaves. An octavo¹⁷ edition of the plays of Sophocles¹⁸ printed in Greek on thin paper with strong horizontal wire lines (as in an octavo) was interleaved with blank leaves, with one or two blank leaves between each printed leaf. On the pages facing the printed Greek text was written on surviving leaves a translation of

527). No copy of a work owned by Blake in "Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, . . . Italian" or any language other than English is known today.

¹³ Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, "Pictor Ignitus"* (London: Macmillan, 1863) 1: 167.

¹⁴ *Blake Records* 89; Hayley speaks of Blake's Greek lessons as early as 8 Nov 1801 (86).

¹⁵ Though later ages may be cynical about how well an Oxford scholar of 1803 could be expected to know Greek, it is very likely that Blake's shop-keeping brother James would have been impressed by Blake's claim—and that the poet intended him to be.

¹⁶ Hayley was presumably teaching Blake to read Greek using the same principles by which he had taught his son Tom; for instance, when Tom (then 14) was living with Flaxman, he wrote to his father on 17 March 1795 that he "read Greek testament" (West Sussex Record Office Add MSS 2817).

¹⁷ The size is indicated by the fact that in the outer margins of ff. 96^v, 101^v, 102^v, 104^v, 106^v, 107^v, 115^v, and 116^v there are regular rows of horizontal parallel lines, ending on the inner side in a sharply-defined vertical hiatus, suggesting that lines begun on an inlaid leaf of octavo size continued from the inlaid pages onto the host-leaves. The size defined by the hiatus is c. 14 cm wide.

¹⁸ The plays are identifiable from surprisingly clear (but still virtually illegible) offsets on the facing leaves which are still integral; for instance, "Elektra" is legible on f. 115^v, according to John Byrne, and "Philoctetes" on f. 188^v. The Greek edition, which has not yet been identified, has at the bottom of the page double-columns of notes separated by a vertical rule; on f. 171^v seems to be the page-number "443,"

the beginning of *Ajax* (ff. 3-22),¹⁹ with extensive annotations on *Philoctetes* in English, Latin, and Greek, especially on ff. 153^v-60^v, 161^v-65^v, 166^v-69^v, 170^v-75^v, 177^v-78^v, 179^v-80^v, and occasional small designs (see illus. 10, 33-34).

Later all the leaves of printed Greek text and perhaps some of the MS leaves were torn out,²⁰ leaving irregular stubs to testify to their former presence. The stubs are very narrow, and occasionally a leaf has been removed leaving no stub; for instance, f. 121, which is now loose, has no corresponding stub. With the wider stubs, it is possible to be confident that they are on thin paper with horizontal wire lines, but most of them are so narrow as to be effectively unidentifiable. The leaves cut out disappeared long ago.²¹

There were still many blank pages in the volume, including a great block from f. 22^v to f. 139^v,²² and these could be used for other purposes. For instance, Edmund Blunden, who liked to write upon good laid paper made from cloth rather than on cheap wove paper made from trees, apparently bought the volume for the blank leaves it still contained, wrote an essay on ff. 24-37, and deleted the *Ajax* translation in easily-distinguishable black ink. Most of the other integral pages are still substantially blank.

Inscriptions &c in the Sophocles Manuscripts

However, a number of these otherwise blank leaves have brief enigmatic inscriptions in old brown ink in eighteenth-century hands:

First paste-down leaf: "Blandford"

First flyleaf: "ΣΟΠΙΟΚ" (= Sophocles)

f. 1^v "The Life . . ." only the title

f. 24^v "Sunderland"²³

and on f. 188^v is a passage from *Philoctetes* with a line number "1495" and footnotes for ll. 1494 and 1496.

I have seen Greek editions of Sophocles, mostly in octavo, published in 1502 (4^o), 1567 (12^o), 1579 (12^o), 1586 (4^o, *Philoctetes* only), 1668, 1705, 1722 (12^o), 1746, 1758, 1777, 1780 (12^o, *Philoctetes* only), 1781 (4^o), 1785 (*Philoctetes* only), 1786 (4^o, 2 editions), 1786-89, 1787 (12^o), 1788 (2 editions), 1788 (12^o, *Philoctetes* only), 1797 (*Philoctetes* only), 1799, 1800, 1803 (*Philoctetes* only), and 1808. None corresponds to what I read of the offset on Sophocles MS f. 188^v. The fact that the offsetting is so extensive may suggest that the printed text was interleaved with the blank leaves soon after it was printed.

¹⁹ The translation is prefaced by a list on f. 3^v of Persons of the Drama.

²⁰ Illegible offsets of handwriting from missing leaves on at least ff. 49^v, 75^v, 76^v, 81^v, 82^v, 91^v, 92, 141^v, 154^v demonstrate that the leaves removed had writing on them. There is no stub among the leaves for the translation of *Ajax* (ff. 3-22) except after ff. 3 and 12, and the missing leaves probably bore manuscript rather than printed text, for the next pages, ff. 4^v and 13^v, begin in mid-sentence.

²¹ None of the other Blunden MSS removed by Rota from Mrs. Blunden's house was on the same paper.

²² Ff. 1^v, 2^v, 4^v, 5^v, 9^v-10^v, 17^v-18^v, 141-143^v, 144^v, 145^v-151^v, 152^v-153^v, 160^v-161^v, 165^v-166^v, 175^v-177^v, 179^v, 180^v, 181^v-182^v, 188^v-189^v are also blank.

²³ The word also looks like "hinterland"—there is a dot for an "i" (see illus. 8)—but elsewhere the word is clearer.

- f. 35^r "Blake" (deleted in Blunden's black ink when he wrote his essay on the page) (see illus. 24)
 f. 43^v "W^m Blake" in stipple (i.e., a series of dots) with, above it, "Sunderland" deleted by "BlakeBlake" (run together) (see illus. 1)
 f. 45^r "W^m Blake" in larger stipple (all but the "e" which is cursive) (see illus. 2)
 f. 48^r "Blake" (see illus. 25)
 f. 48^v "Sunderland | Sunderland | Sunderland," and below it in another ink:

*In trouble to be troubled,
 Is to have your trouble doubled

which is apparently derived from *Ajax* l. 248 (as I am informed by Ron Shepherd of the University of Toronto), a discussion between Tecmessa and the Chorus about the murderous madness of Ajax:

When his disease raged highest, in the ills,
 Which round encompass'd him, he felt a joy,
 To us, whose sense was perfect, causing grief.
 Now he is calm, and from his wild disease
 Breathes free, with anguish all his soul is rack'd,
 Nor less is our affliction than before.
 From single is not this a double ill?
 (*The Tragedies of Sophocles*, tr. [R. Potter] (London:
 G.G.J. & J. Robinson, 1788), ll. 266-72)

- f. 50^r "Sunderland"
 f. 51^r "KE" (blotted), perhaps the last letters of a word begun on a printed leaf now removed (see illus. 26)
 f. 60^r "Blake" written very small in the right margin (see illus. 27)
 f. 71^r "Bl" followed by a scroll as if setting up an ornamental signature (see illus. 9); "Sunderland" and two drawings
 f. 71^v Many ink(?) dots in an apparently random pattern
 f. 79^r "Sunderland Blake Sunderland" in the right margin (see illus. 10) with an obscure design²⁴
 f. 81^r Various letters plus "Blake Blake," the "B" of the first "Blake" in stipple (see illus. 28)
 f. 83^r "Blake," smudged (see illus. 29)
 f. 84^r "HAEKTPA" (= Electra)
 f. 88^r A doodle
 f. 91^r "Electra" and above it "[Sunderland (written over by)] Blake" (see illus. 7)
 f. 96^r Something in the margin

"Sunderland" is associated with "Blake" on ff. 71^r, 79^r, 91^r ("Blake" deletes "Sunderland"), 114^r (ibid) (see illus. 9-10, 7, 32). I cannot explain this association.

²⁴ Michael Phillips makes out a moth emerging from a chrysalis.

- f. 103^r "Blake," "Taffy Williams," "Blake," widely spaced on different lines (see illus. 30)
 f. 113^r "Blake [KKKK | (del)]" (see illus. 31)
 f. 114^r "[Sun= der= land (each syllable over-written by the word)] Blake," in the inner margin (see illus. 32)
 f. 116^r "BLAKE" written carefully in mirror-writing (see illus. 3)
 f. 141^r A doodle
 f. 147^r A simplistic profile with a snub nose, in pencil (see illus. 33), somewhat like that of Blake in middle age
 f. 147^v A crude pencil sketch of a naked man
 f. 149^v An obscure design in pencil
 f. 150^r An even odder profile, perhaps related to that on f. 147^r but bearded, in pencil
 f. 150^v A pencil hand(?)
 f. 152^r A pencil doodle
 f. 175^v A pencil tracing of the outside of the watermark
 f. 181^r A crude pencil sketch of a horse(?) seen head on
 f. 182^v A crude pencil design of a man ?dancing
 f. 183^r A crude pencil caricature of a man playing a round viola whose body is his torso (see illus. 34)
 f. 186^r A small landscape in pencil at the top

Last paste-down: A crude ink design of a man with a sword threatening another man

The drawings are the merest caricatures and have nothing to do with the creator of the *Job* designs (1810) and engravings (1826).

The surviving annotations to the translation are often impressively learned. For instance, on f. 181^r is "1162 Philoctetes de Ulysse non de Neoptoleme loquitur. H." They frequently refer to Greek scholars, such as "Heathio," and, on tracing the dates at which these scholars published their findings, John Byrne discovered that all had been printed by 1785, suggesting that the writer's information, and perhaps his annotation, stopped about 1785.²⁵ In 1785 William Blake the poet was 28 years old, just making his way in the world as an engraver and artist, and certainly not classically learned in the style manifested in the Sophocles annotations, whatever he may have become later.

²⁵ Dates of works referred to in the MS:

- 1504 "Hesych[ius]," Greek dictionary (f. 158)
 1715-20 Homer, *Iliad*, tr. Pope (f. 5^v)
 1729 Samuel "Clarke on Homer," *Iliad* in Greek and Latin (f. 162)
 1745 Richard "Dawes, Mis[cellanea]. Critic[a]." (f. 162^v)
 1750 "Vid. [Jeremiah] Markland," published classical scholarship 1730-50 (f. 154^v)
 1759 Thomas "Francklin trans" of Sophocles (f. 8 and elsewhere)
 1773 Pierre "Brumoy," publishing classical scholarship to 1773 (f. 8)
 There seems to be no reference to the translation of Robert Potter of 1788.

The question, therefore, is primarily whether all or any of the handwriting of the manuscript, and particularly of the "William Blake" signatures, is by the author of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.²⁶

Let us begin by admitting that it would be very odd to find the poet writing his name thus apparently at random in the Sophocles manuscript. But it would be equally odd to find anyone else doing so. Blake certainly did some very strange things on occasion, and this is no stranger than some others, but the difficulty in finding a motive applies equally to whoever wrote the "William Blake" signatures. And a clue to the motive *might* have been apparent in the leaves which were removed from the manuscript.

Handwriting in the Sophocles Manuscript

I take all the handwriting in the Sophocles manuscript save that of Edmund Blunden to have been added by two or more persons who were taught to write in the late eighteenth century; the color of ink, style of pen-point, formation of the letters, the use of long "s" (which was old-fashioned by about 1800), capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and lay-out all seem to me to be very characteristic of the eighteenth century. Further, though this is a good deal more hypothetical, both the paper and the Greek printed text visible in offsets seem to me to be of the late eighteenth century, perhaps 1770-1800. It would be very surprising but not impossible to conclude that the poet wrote the

²⁶ John Byrne has usefully compared the formation of the Greek letters in the Sophocles Manuscript with those in the quotation from Ephesians on *Vala* p. 3:

The *Vala* Greek is carefully, even stiltedly, written (and without accents). Certain quite distinctive letter-forms appear, all of which may be found in the Sophocles Manuscript:

The epsilon ε (one stroke) rather than Ε (two strokes)—see Sophocles ff. 4, 140.

The sigma σ used at the beginnings of, and within, words, rather than σ—see ff. 7, 153, l. 18; f. 154, l. 1, etc.

The omicron/upsilon diphthong written with the second letter on top of the first *υ* rather than beside it *ou*—see f. 155, l. 4, etc.

The phi written in a single stroke φ rather than the more conventional two strokes Φ—see ff. 7, 156, l. 1, etc.

In the Sophocles MS, on the verso of the front free end-paper, the Greek word is incomplete and ineptly written; f. 4, the Greek is not confidently written, still employing the single-stroke epsilon; on f. 84 the capitals are very poor, being of different heights and badly slanted; on ff. 140, 144 the Greek is not very confident, employing the single-stroke epsilon ε and, unusually, the ζ sigma; f. 151 one φ is employed but the two-stroke epsilon Ε appears, also accents; f. 153 ff., the Greek is now written with skill, individual character and beauty, demonstrating considerable mastery.

Greek translation or learned annotations in the Sophocles Manuscript in 1770-1800, or perhaps about 1803 as a language-learning device under the learned tutelage of William Hayley. The experiments with the writing of "William Blake," in stipple (ff. 43, 45) or in mirror-writing (f. 116) or in ornamental writing (f. 71) (see illus. 1-3, 9) are what one might expect of an apprentice engraver (1772-79) learning his craft, though they would be quite surprising as the work of the mature master about 1800.

There appear to be two main hands in the Sophocles Manuscript, written in very similar old brown ink. The first, HAND A, the hand of the translator of *Ajax* and found at the tops of the early pages, is characterized by letters with subscripts, such as "g" and "y," which flourish below several preceding letters and by a "d" which often loops sharply left over preceding letters; the "t" is usually not crossed, and the capital "C" is conventionally formed. The second, HAND B, the hand of the annotator which often appears at the bottoms of pages begun with HAND A, the previous hand, has tightly-curved tails on the "g" and "y," the "d" is usually almost vertical, the "t" is crossed regularly, and the capital "C" swoops to the right. Both hands appear on f. 4 (see illus. 11), HAND A at the top and HAND B at the bottom; compare "late impressed" there (HAND A, at the top) with "lately impressed" (HAND B at the bottom). The writer of HAND A was a more conventional orthographer than the writer of HAND B, as may be suggested by "Shield" in the translation in HAND A and "sheild" and "feild" of the commentary in HAND B (f. 5).

HAND A may be seen in the translation of *Ajax* (ff. 3-22).

HAND B is on ff. 5 (bottom), 8, 48 ("Sunderland" written with a sharper pen), 50 (ibid), 71, 79, 83, 91, 103 ("Taffy" may be in yet another hand, HAND D), 114, 140 and, 144, 145, 151, 153-160 (perhaps there are two hands on f. 157,²⁷ the second written far more carefully). "Sunderland" seems to be consistently written in HAND B with a sharp pen.

Note that the "Blake" writing is associated with HAND B (on ff. 79, 83, 91, 103, and 114). Unfortunately the word "Blake" contains none of the letters which most clearly distinguish the two hands.

A third hand, HAND C, far less distinct than the first two and most similar to HAND B, may be hesitantly distinguished on ff. 4 (see illus. 11) and 19, and perhaps elsewhere.

Handwriting in the Sophocles Manuscript and in the Poet's Manuscripts

But what is the resemblance of these hands to those of the poet William Blake?

²⁷ The same unusual two-stroke acute-angle "t" is visible in "Taffy Williams" on f. 103 (see illus. 30) and in "S.T." on f. 157 (see illus. 22).

One should begin with the premises that most writers have more than one handwriting, that in *The Four Zoas* Blake used at least four quite distinct hands, and that a professional calligrapher does not have a uniformly characteristic and idiosyncratic handwriting the way most of us do. However, even a professional calligrapher will manifest certain identifying mannerisms, and the writing in the Sophocles Manuscript does not appear to me to be that of a professional calligrapher. It has all the inconsistencies and eccentricities visible even in handwriting by those more carefully trained to form letters than is characteristic of education in the twentieth century.

Both the poet and the writers of the Sophocles manuscript used a fairly conventional eighteenth century hand in which the approximate formation of the letters is very similar. The similarity is most disconcertingly apparent in the words "William" and "Blake." However, there are some distinctions which are both clear and fairly consistent.

A The capital "A" (f. 157^v, "Ald"—see illus. 23) is a printing "A," with a pointed top, whereas in Blake's letters the capital "A" is usually a very large rounded lower case MS "a," though occasionally he does use the pointed printed "A."²⁸

B The capital "B" (e.g., f. 103^r, see illus. 30) begins with a strong vertical downward stroke and continues from the left with a new stroke forming the curving part of the "B." In Blake's letters, the "B" is uniformly formed of one continuous stroke, beginning at the top, going downward, and then rising over the first stroke to form the curvilinear portion of the letter.²⁹ Further, on f. 103^r (see illus. 30) "Blake" at the right has the "B" and the "l" linked, whereas in Blake's letters the two characters are normally, I believe always, formed of two strokes with no join.

C The capital "C" (f. 188^r, "Chrysen," f. 157^v—see illus. 23) curves dramatically deep under the line, whereas in Blake's letters of 23 September and 2 October 1800 it usually does not descend below the line at all or, when it does, but very slightly.

E The capital "E" (f. 157^v, "Epitheta" and "Edd." (see illus. 23)) is curved over on itself, but it is not so reflexively curved in Blake's letters of 23 September, 2 October 1800.

s Perhaps most distinctively, Blake's lower-case "s" is rarely connected to the following letter; see, for instance, his letter of 10 May 1801: "necessary," "accustomed," "shall," "Ease," "wish," "especially," "precursor," "present" (? somewhat ambiguous), "send," "present," "soon shall send," "several," "present," "Sussex say," "pursuit," "furnish," "Ease," "sufficiently," "service," "sense," "most," "should," "pleasant" (?), "business," "utmost" (?), "best," "Sussex," "sweetest

²⁸ Blake's practice in forming "A" is variable; in formal contexts, such as *Vala*, p. 3 (see illus. 6), and *The Ballads* MS (occasionally) it is pointed, but with the usual hand (e.g., *Vala*, p. 80) it is regularly rounded.

²⁹ However, in the more ornamental addresses, the "B" of "Butts" is composed of a straight vertical stroke and a separate curvilinear stroke in some missives (10 Jan 1802, 25 April 1803) though not in others (23 Sept, 2 Oct 1800, 11 Sept 1801, 16 Aug 1803).

spot," "least," "so," "desires," "kindest," "yourself," "also." In f. 157^v (see illus. 23), on the other hand, each "s" is joined to the next letter (14 examples).

S The Sophocles MS usually joins a capital "S" to the next letter (e.g., f. 157^v—see illus. 23), whereas in his correspondence Blake does not.

ss Both the Sophocles MS (e.g., f. 157^v—see illus. 23) and Blake's letters use the long and short double "s."

V The capital "V" (e.g., f. 157^v—see illus. 23) has a very sharp point ("Vet," twice), while in his letters, Blake's "V" is normally much more rounded (e.g., 2 October 1800: "Vision," "Virtuous," "Vegetation").

"Williams" (f. 103^r—see illus. 30) is disconcertingly similar to the "William" of Blake's signature.

The punctuation in the Sophocles is very regular and conventional, whereas in Blake's letters and MSS it is very irregular and sparse.

To confirm that these letter-forms in Blake's correspondence especially of c. 1800 were also characteristic of his handwriting both earlier and later in his life, I examined reproductions of *An Island in the Moon* (?1783), *Tiriel* (?1789), *Vala* or *The Four Zoas* (?1796-1807), *The Ballads* (Pickering) Manuscript (after 1807), and "The Vision of the Last Judgment" (?1810) in Blake's Notebook, pp. 67-68,³⁰ using as a test the formation of

Sophocles MS	Blake
"A" print-style ("A")	rounded ("a")
"B" two strokes	one stroke
"C" below line	on line
"E" reflexive	not curved on itself
"s" linked to next letter	not linked to next letter
"T" two strokes	one stroke
"V" very sharp	rounded

The result shows a comforting uniformity in Blake's usual writing style:

	A	B	C	E	s	T	V
<i>Island</i> , pp. 1, 10	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB
<i>Tiriel</i> , pp. 1, 10	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB
<i>Vala</i> , p. 3, 80	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB
<i>Ballads</i> MS, pp. 1, 18, 20	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB
<i>Notebook</i> pp. 67-68	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB	WB

And this uniformity may be found on other pages of these manuscripts.

³⁰ The reproductions—chosen because they contain examples of all the crucial letter-forms—may be found in *An Island in the Moon*, ed. Michael Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); *Tiriel*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); *Vala* or *The Four Zoas*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963); *The Pickering Manuscript*, ed. Charles Ryskamp (N.Y.: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1972); *The Note-Book of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Nonesuch, 1935); samples are gathered in *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), after p. 874—*An Island*, p. 1; *Tiriel*, p. 1; *Notebook* p. 68; *Vala*, p. 1; *The Ballads* MS, p. 1.

I conclude, therefore, that the handwriting in the Sophocles Manuscript is not that of William Blake, the creator of *Songs of Innocence* and *Illustrations of the Book of Job*.

At any rate, I do not suspect forgery. I think it likely that a genuine William Blake, one of the host of the poet's contemporaries bearing his names,³¹ wrote his names on the Sophocles Manuscript, perhaps somewhat idly as he dreamed over a school task. In some respects, the handwriting of William Blake of Bedford Row (see illus. 35) is more like that of the poet than is that of the Sophocles Manuscript. More than one of the poet's contemporary name-sakes was classically educated³² and might well have made such a learned translation of Sophocles, though no other evidence of this has survived.

The Sophocles Manuscript remains an enigma, even if one concludes, as I do, that it has nothing to do with the poet-artist William Blake. Who wrote it, why was it written, why was it taken apart, who is the William Blake cited there and what part did he have in its composition, who is Taffy Williams and what is he doing here, how are Sunderland and Blandford connected to it...? It is a fascinating puzzle whether or not it is related to the author of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

For those who wish to consider the matter further, I append a

Description of the Sophocles Manuscript

Binding: Bound in pale reddish marbled boards over a parchment spine; by December 1995 the parchment spine had mostly perished, but the leaves were still secure. John Byrne, who first examined the manuscript, tells me that it was inscribed on the spine with the name of "BLUNDEN," but this has now disappeared. Many leaves were torn out close to the gutter, generally one at a time but at least once (between ff. 51-52) in a group of up to half a dozen, leaving very narrow stubs.³³

History: (1) Apparently acquired by "Blandford" (perhaps the son of the Duke of Marlborough, known by the courtesy title of the Marquis of Blandford³⁴), whose name is written by itself in a hand unlike those in the rest of the manuscript on the first paste-down in old brown ink; (2)

³¹ See "A Collection of Prosaic William Blakes," *Notes and Queries* 210 (1965): 172-78. I have since found a number of further Wrong William Blakes to add to these 20.

³² William Blake (age 14), son of William Blake of London, was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge, on 21 July 1788, and William Jos Blake was at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1826 ("A Collection of Prosaic William Blakes" 177, 178).

³³ F. 121 is now free, leaving no stub, raising the possibility that other now untraceable leaves may also have been removed without leaving a stub or other trace.

³⁴ The son of the Marquis of Blandford bears the courtesy title of the Earl of Sunderland, "Sunderland" is written on ff. 24', 43', 48', 50', 71',

Offered for sale as "3 Vol £1-0-0" (according to the note on the first paste-down); (3) Acquired (?without the two accompanying volumes³⁵) during the 1920s probably for its blank paper by Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), who later wrote brief autobiographical essays in it; (4) Inherited by his wife *Clare Blunden*, who in 1993 offered it for sale through Anthony Rota of Bertram Rota.³⁶

Description: It is a small quarto volume (16.0 x 21.0 cm) presently consisting of 191 leaves (all but the first and last fly-leaves—on laid paper with vertical chain lines—foliated 1-189 in 1993 by John Byrne then of Bertram Rota) of laid paper with horizontal chain-lines (as in a quarto) bearing at the center of the inner margins a watermark of Britannia and a crown of a type common before 1794 and a countermark of GR above a tiny cross.³⁷

These quarto leaves were bound with a printed octavo³⁸

79', 91', and 114', and "Blake" deletes "Sunderland" on f. 43', f. 91', and f. 114' (see illus. 1, 7, and 32).

³⁵ In February 1993, Mrs. Blunden helped Anthony Rota to search the library for the other two volumes which apparently were once with the Sophocles Manuscript, but with no success.

³⁶ Neither Blunden nor his wife seem to have thought the Blake names significant, for Blunden scratched one out at the head of one page of his essay (f. 35'—see illus. 24), and the volume was considered as little more than an example of Blunden's writing until it was examined by John Byrne and Anthony Rota.

³⁷ W. A. Churchill, *Watermarks in Paper in Holland, England, France etc., in the XVII and XVIII Centuries and their Interconnection* (Amsterdam: Menno Herzberger & Co., 1935), #219-238, show Britannia with a staff in her hand and a shield behind her, within an oval beneath a crown, some of them (e.g., #221) with GR, but all are pretty distinct from that in the Sophocles MS (a reproduction of which was generously provided to GEB by Anthony Rota). Edward Heawood, *Watermarks in Paper Mainly of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Hilversum, Holland: The Paper Publications Society, 1950; Monumenta Chartae Papyraceae Historiam Illustrantia, I), #201-220, show a similar Britannia, and of these #207-10, 214-21 have a GR attached, #208 (n.d.), 217 (1794), and 218 (1790) being most like the Sophocles MS. The GR watermark is more common, with 24 examples in Heawood, none just like those in the Sophocles Manuscript.

The Britannia watermark (only half visible at a time) is on ff. 1-39; 106-39, 141-44, 146-49, 170-71, 174-75; and GR (half at a time) is on the rest. Normally a watermark appears on only half the leaves of a divided sheet of paper, not on each leaf, as in the Sophocles MS, but according to Heawood such double marks (two on the same sheet) were not uncommon.

A similar but distinct Britannia watermark with a crowned G R countermark is reproduced in *Tiriel*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 53, and a fleur de lis watermark above a rectangular shield with a G R countermark is in *An Island in the Moon* (Blake Books [1977] 221).

³⁸ The size is indicated by the fact that in the outer margins of some leaves (ff. 96', 101', 102', 104', 106', 107', 115', and 116') there are regular rows of horizontal parallel lines as if of deletions, ending on the inner side in a sharply-defined vertical hiatus, suggesting that lines begun on now-missing octavo leaves continued from the now-missing leaves onto the host-leaves. The size defined by the hiatus is c. 14 cm wide.

volume bearing the Greek text of Sophocles,³⁹ which have offset very faintly onto facing pages showing two columns of footnotes separated by a vertical rule. On many leaves one or more eighteenth-century hands wrote in old brown ink a translation (into very colloquial eighteenth century English) of *Ajax* (ff. 3-22) by Sophocles, and another hand made learned annotations in English, Latin, Greek.

At apparently random intervals (including ff. 35^r, 43^v, 45^v, 48^v, 51^r [?], 60^r, 71^r [?], 79^r, 81^r, 83^r, 91^r, 103^r, 113^r, 114^r, 116^v), generally on pages with little or no other writing,⁴⁰ "Blake," "W^m Blake," or "William Blake" is written in old brown ink, once in mirror-writing ("BLAKE" on f. 116^v), and twice in stipple ("W^m Blake" on ff. 43^v, 45^v). On f. 71^r is an ornamental B followed by a flourish, with two drawings beneath it.

There are very small, simple, amateurish sketches in pencil or black ink on ff. 71^r (illus. 9), 79^r (illus. 10), 147^r (see illus. 33), 148^v, 149^v, 150^r, 181^r, 182^v, and 183^r (see illus. 34).

There are two or more hands in the Sophocles Manuscript, and these are similar to but distinct from that of the poet.

Probably before Blunden acquired the book, 126 or more leaves were torn out, including all the printed Greek text.⁴¹

Edmund Blunden wrote an autobiographical essay entitled "Notes on Friends, Acquaintances &c" (one about "An occasion April 14, 1921," and another about a visit to Thomas Hardy at his Max Gate residence in 1923) on 12 blank rectos (ff. 24-37).

³⁹ John Byrne has read the offset running-heads of *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Trachiniae*, and *Philoctetes*.

⁴⁰ "Blake" is written at the top of f. 35^r which now bears Edmund Blunden's essay, and "Taffy Williams" is written between two "Blake"s on f. 103^r. The adjacent leaves are blank. "Sunderland" is associated with the "Blake" on ff. 43^r, 71^r, 79^r, 91^r, and 114^r.

⁴¹ There are surviving stubs before f. 1 and after ff. 1 (2), 3, 5, 7, 9, 11-12, 15-16, 18 (2?), 20, 24, 38-41, 43-46, 48-49, 50 (6?), 53-56, 58-61, 64-65, 68-69, 75-81, 83-84, 86-90, 94-100, 104-05, 109-10, 114-16, 125, 127-34, 140 (3?), 141, 143-45, 146 (2), 149 (2), 150-51, 153, 154 (2), 155 (2), 157-59, 161-64, 166-71, 173-78, 182, 184-87, 189—numbers joined by hyphens indicate a leaf removed after each leaf.

R E V I E W S

English File: Poetry Backpack: William Blake. BBC2 daytime educational program for television. Broadcast Friday, 23 May 1997.

Reviewed by A. A. GILL

Poetry Backpack is another daytime educational strand, made for older schoolchildren. Television rarely makes me very angry: this managed it. It was supposed to be a bright, punchy, accessible, undemanding yet invigorating romp around William Blake. He was, we were told a difficult poet, but worth it. We were told this by Nigel Planer, the actor who was the hippie in *The Young Ones*—an inspired choice of interlocuter for a metaphysical poet. Blake is rather a good poet for young teenagers. He also could be good television. This was frightful. Beyond parody or invective.

Where Blake is mystical and imaginative, this treatment was remedially literal and as unimaginative as bathroom scales. Imagine making the illustrations for *Songs of Innocence and Experience* come alive for young minds by explaining the technical process of etching. They did. It's like trying to explain *Newsnight* by taking the back off your television. And then there was some woman who was called a poet but who could easily have been the understudy for the naughty yellow cow lady. She helpfully pointed out that Blake's special magic was all in the words, and in particular, how the words were arranged. And some people thought the rose that wasn't feeling too well might be suffering from wormy sex, but it didn't have to be: it could be anything you liked. And then Nigel got on a Tube train and looked at the stripy seat, gave us a knowing look and made the vast metaphorical leap to a Tyger. Geddit? Give me strength. What an immortal eye.

It wasn't just that it was bad television, failing all three Es—there's tons of lousy television. What is maddening is when lazy, dumb, patronizing programs go and stamp all over another medium of culture. Poetry is the greatest prize for bothering to learn English, and Blake is one of English poetry's supreme pleasures. God, I pitied the poor English teachers who will have to resurrect some interest in him after this travesty. The box is continually accused of being moronic. It isn't. But when education programs actively de-educate, it's difficult to defend. I ardently hope an invisible worm finds the heart of everyone guilty of this terrible pile.

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