CONTENT S

Articles

William Blake and the Sophocles Manuscript
Notebook
by Michael Phillips

William Blake and the Sophocles Enigma
by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

Review

Reviewed by A. A. Gill
CONTRIBUTORS

G. E. Bentley, Jr., is the editor of Vala (1963), Tiriel (1967), and William Blake’s Writings (1978).

A. A. Gill is an award-winning columnist for The Times of London and the author of Sap Rising, a satirical novel.

Michael Phillips, formerly British Academy Research Reader in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, is completing a biography of Blake during the early 1790s, in part anticipated in “Blake and the Terror,” The Library (December 1994) and more recently in lectures given in France, the United States, and Great Britain. Another related paper has just been published in XVII-XVIII Bulletin de la Société d’études Anglo-Américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles, no. 44 (June 1997). His edition in facsimile of Blake’s manuscript of An Island in the Moon was published by Cambridge University Press in 1987, and William Blake Recherches pour une Biographie with a preface by Yves Bonnefoy was published by the Collège de France in 1995.

Editors: Morris Eaves and Morton D. Paley
Bibliographer: G. E. Bentley, Jr.
Review Editor: Nelson Hilton
Associate Editor for Great Britain: David Worrall

Production Office: Patricia Neill, Department of English, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627
Managing Editor: Patricia Neill
Telephone: 716/275-3820
Fax 716/442-5769
Production Office Email: pnpj@dbv.cc.rochester.edu

Morris Eaves, Department of English, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627
Email: meav@dbv.cc.rochester.edu

Morton D. Paley, Department of English, University of California, Berkeley CA 94720-1030
Email: mpaley@uclink4.berkeley.edu

G. E. Bentley, Jr., 246 MacPherson Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M4V 1A2. The University of Toronto declines to forward mail.
Email: GBentley@chass.utoronto.ca

Nelson Hilton, Department of English, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602
Email: nhilton@uga.cc.uga.edu

David Worrall, St. Mary’s College, Strawberry Hill, Waldegrave Road, Twickenham TW1 4SX England
Email: worralld@mailint.smuc.ac.UK

INFORMATION

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly is published under the sponsorship of the Department of English, University of Rochester.

Subscriptions are $50 for institutions, $25 for individuals. All subscriptions are by the volume (1 year, 4 issues) and begin with the summer issue. Subscription payments received after the summer issue will be applied to the 4 issues of the current volume. Foreign addresses (except Canada and Mexico) require an $8 per volume postal surcharge for surface, an $18 per volume surcharge for air mail delivery. U.S. currency or international money order necessary. Make checks payable to Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly. Address all subscription orders and related communications to Patricia Neill, Blake/Department of English, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627.

Back issues are available at a reduced price. Address Patricia Neill for a list of issues and prices.

Manuscripts are welcome. Send two copies, typed and documented according to forms suggested in The MLA Style Manual, to either of the editors: Morris Eaves, Dept. of English, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627; Morton D. Paley, Dept. of English, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1030.


© 1997 Copyright Morris Eaves and Morton D. Paley

William Blake and the Sophocles Manuscript Notebook

BY MICHAEL PHILLIPS

In January 1993 the London antiquarian booksellers Bertram Rota Ltd. invited me to inspect a manuscript notebook which contained a number of signatures by a William Blake. Following my inspection I concluded that the manuscript should be considered as once associated with William Blake, the poet, painter and printmaker. My conviction was based primarily upon the signatures. They were clearly very early and the most convincing examples indicated that they had been made by someone learning basic techniques of printmaking; in particular, those formed of pen and ink dots in the manner of stipple engraving technique (folios 43r and 45v) (illus. 1 and 2) and the experimental example of Blake’s surname printed in reverse or mirror writing (folio 116v) (illus. 3). If they were authentic, these examples suggested that Blake had probably come into possession of the manuscript during the first part of his seven year apprenticeship as an engraver (1772-79).

The substance of the manuscript supported an association with Blake. The extant manuscript originally formed the blank leaves used to interleave an octavo letterpress text of four plays by Sophocles. These larger blank leaves had then been used interminently to write translations of and annotations to the plays in several distinguishable hands, with some examples clearly resembling the hand of William Blake. At a later date, probably in the 1920s, the leaves of printed text had been torn out without breaking the binding. Of particular relevance to Blake was the inclusion of Philoctetes amongst the four plays, the subject of an etching by James Barry first produced in 1777 and of a major painting by Blake of 1812. In a letter to his brother of 1803 Blake had also referred to how accomplished he was becoming in his studies of Greek. Shortly before, William Hayley in correspondence had also made reference to Blake’s study.

I suggested to John Byrne, then an associate, and to Anthony Rota, head of Bertram Rota Ltd., that the next step should be to take the manuscript to the British Library so that the examples of Greek letter formations in the Sophocles Manuscript Notebook (as it will be referred to) could be compared with the examples in Blake’s holograph present in the manuscript of Vala or The Four Zoas. This would also provide an opportunity to make general comparisons of the holograph with those of Blake written in English in the manuscript of Vala, examples that vary widely in character from copperplate to less formal styles. I later met with John Byrne at the British Library to compare the manuscripts.

The description that follows is the outcome of these inspections and comparisons, together with study and comparisons made on my own with examples of Blake’s holograph from manuscripts as varied as those of “Then She Bore Pale Desire” and “Woe Cried the Muse,” An Island in the Moon, Blake’s letters and receipts to Thomas Butts (Letters from William Blake to Thomas Butts 1800-1803. Printed in facsimile with an introductory note by Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford, 1926) a range of Blake autograph signatures in particular from books he acquired early in life now in the Cambridge University Library and in my own collection, as well as the manuscript of Vala in the British Library. It is hoped that the illustrations from the Sophocles Manuscript Notebook will be found helpful in providing an opportunity for others to make their own comparisons. They accompany the description through the generosity of the owner, Mrs. Blunden, and Anthony Rota of Bertram Rota Ltd. For just such comparison the description was made available to G. E. Bentley, Jr., in December 1995.

With regard to the translation and annotation of Sophocles plays, the observations and distinctions that are made have been contributed by Alan Griffiths of the Department of Greek and Latin at University College London, without whose expertise the levels of scholarly and linguistic competence present in the manuscript, and the questions of authorship these raise, would not have been made clear. John Byrne, formerly of Bertram Rota Ltd., and Scot McKendrick, of the Department of Manuscripts at the British Library, have also contributed, especially in identifying similar idiosyncratic Greek letter forms present in the manuscripts of Vala and the Sophocles Notebook.

Included in the description are also my own speculations regarding similarities of handwriting which deserve to be assessed allowing for the wide variation of Blake’s holograph over the course of his lifetime, as well as an indication of the circumstantial evidence that needs to be taken into account. It is the early signatures combined with the circumstantial evidence that persuade me that the manuscript deserves to be taken seriously. If an association is accepted, its significance for our further understanding only begins with the few suggestions that have been made here.

Description

The Sophocles Manuscript Notebook is made up of 189 leaves, approximately 20.5 x 16.5 cm. The binding is unvarnished, of eighteenth century marble paper covered boards and vellum spine, the latter partially defective and