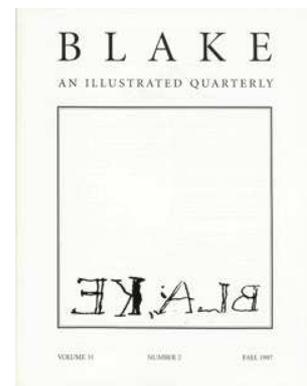


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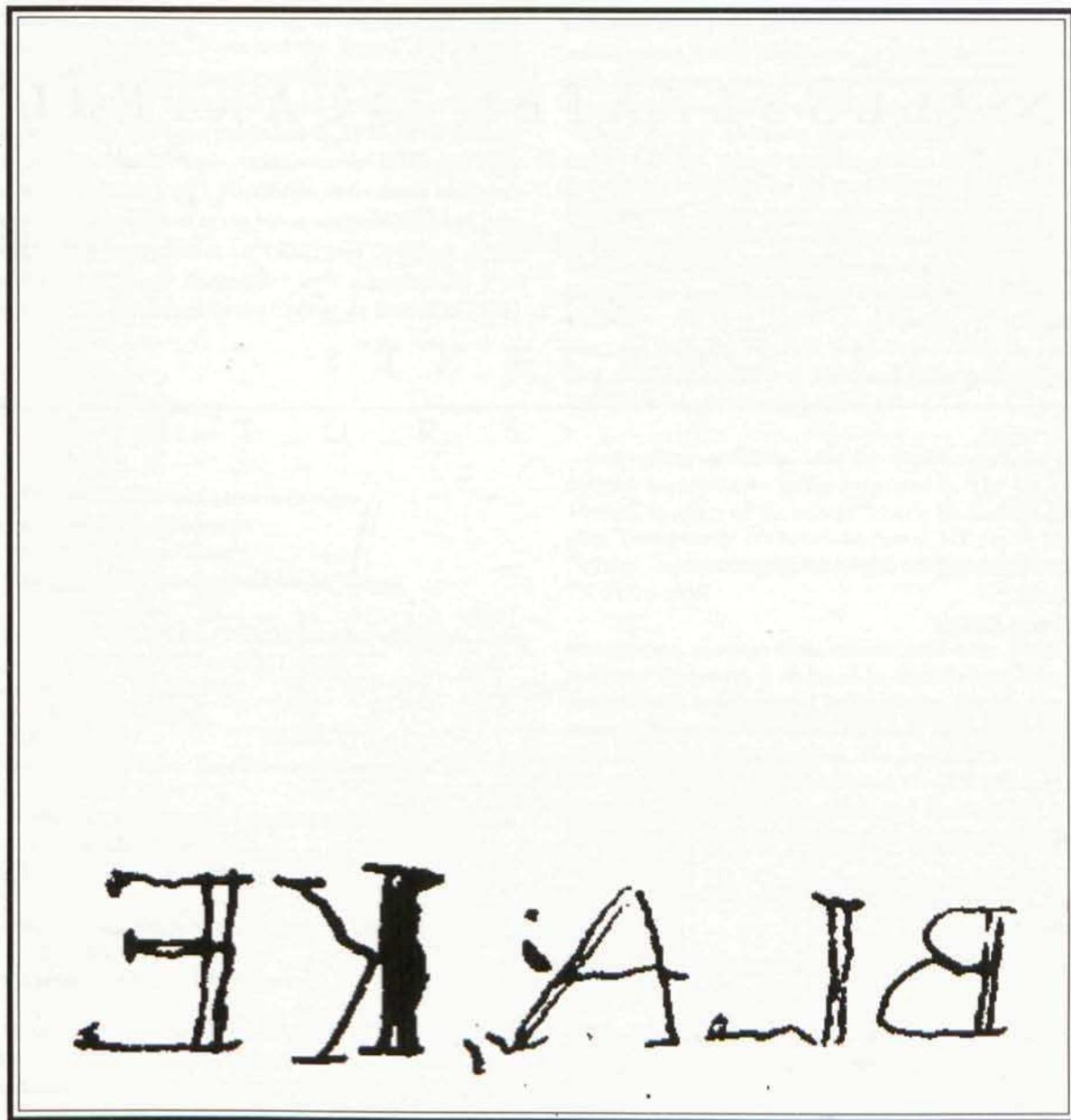
C O N T E N T S

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COVER ILLUSTRATION: Sophocles MS f. 116'. "BLAKE" in mirror-writing. Courtesy of Bertram Rota, Ltd.

[Editors' Note: Each of the following essays on the Sophocles Manuscript was designed to stand alone. Hence there will necessarily be some duplication in the information presented.]

## 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 43<sup>v</sup> and 45<sup>v</sup>) (illus. 1 and 2) and the experimental example of Blake's surname printed in reverse or mirror writing (folio 116<sup>v</sup>) (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 intermittently 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 McKindrick, 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 unsophisticated, of eighteenth century marble paper covered boards and vellum spine, the latter partially defective and