

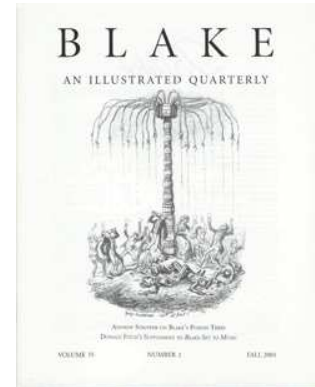
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

Blake's Poison Trees

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 35, Issue 2, Fall 2001, pp. 36-39



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BY ANDREW M. STAUFFER

At least since Geoffrey Grigson in 1947, scholars have found that the various threatening arborescent growths in Blake's work recall the legendary poisonous Upas tree of Java (*antiaris toxicaria*), popularized in England in the 1780s.¹ Grigson sees allusions to the Upas in *America*, "A Poison Tree," *The Book of Ahania*, *The Four Zoas*, and *Jerusalem*, as the source of the recurring "Tree of Mystery" (59-60). Furthermore, Erdman shows Blake referring to the tree explicitly in a canceled line of "Fayette."² More recently, Desmond King-Hele has followed Grigson in viewing it as the source of the "horrid plant" in *The Book of Ahania*, as well as of the murderous growth in "A Poison Tree."³ Clearly the Upas was known by Blake, particularly through Erasmus Darwin, and stands behind some of his arboreal imagery. However, in the case of "A Poison Tree," another, more appropriate botanical source exists: the Manchineel tree of the tropical Americas.⁴ Also well-known in late 18th-century England, the Manchineel offers closer parallels to Blake's poem of hypocrisy and wrath. It seems, therefore, that Blake's imagination of poisonous trees involves a conflation of several plants represented in the works of Darwin, Coleridge, and Stedman.

To be sure, the Upas did enjoy a vogue in English literary circles following the publication of a sensationalized, romantic account of it in the *London Magazine* in 1783.⁵ Allegedly written by a Dutch surgeon named Foersch as an eye-witness report, this essay presents an immense, spreading tree so poisonous that nothing can live within miles of it:

The Bohon-Upas is situated in the island of Java. ... It is surrounded on all sides by a circle of high mountains,

¹ "The Upas Tree," *The Harp of Aeolus, and other Essays on Art, Literature & Nature* (Routledge, 1947) 56-65. My thanks to Robert Essick, Morton Paley, and Mary Kelly Persyn for their valuable suggestions.

² The line in question reads, "There is just such a tree at Java found"; see *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton UP, 1954) 222-23. On "The Human Abstract," see 272-73.

³ *Erasmus Darwin and the English Romantic Poets* (Macmillan, 1986) 47, 52-53.

⁴ On the Manchineel, see *The Poison Tree: Selected Writings of Rumphius on the Natural History of the Indies*, trans. and ed. E.M. Beekman (U of Massachusetts P, 1981) 49-50. Beekman discusses the Upas also, on 135-39.

⁵ N.P. [or J.N.] Foersch [pseud.], "Description of the Poison-Tree, in the Island of Java, Translated from the original Dutch by Mr. Heydinger," *London Magazine* (December 1783): 512-17. Grigson says that the article was a hoax perpetrated by George Steevens (56ff.).

and the country round it, to the distance of ten or twelve miles from the tree, is intirely barren. Not a tree, not a shrub, not even the least plant or grass is to be seen. (513)

Erasmus Darwin versified this description in *The Loves of the Plants* (1789; republished as Part II of *The Botanic Garden*, 1791), summarized it in his notes, and reprinted the entire Foersch article as an appendix to the poem. Through Darwin then, the Upas legend gained a wide currency in the Romantic era, alluded to by Blake, Coleridge, Southey, and Byron, and dramatized in plays by George Colman the Younger and Stephen Reynolds Clarke.⁶ Illustration 1 shows a slightly later image of the Upas tree, from Blume's *Rumphia* (1836), presenting a more naturalistic version of the *antiaris toxicaria*, as a corrective reaction to the feverish mythologizing of the earlier decades. It was this Romantic-period publicity that allowed the Upas to enter the English language as a metaphor used, as Henry Yule puts it, "to indicate some institution that the speaker wishes to condemn in a compendious manner."⁷ Blake knew Darwin's work well, even contributing an engraving to *The Botanic Garden* in 1791, and would have had the Upas tree at least vaguely in mind as he composed "A Poison Tree" within the next year or so.⁸

However, the Upas is not the only poisonous tree mentioned in Darwin's *Loves of the Plants*. Earlier in Canto III, he writes,

If rests the traveller his weary head,
Grim MANCINELLA haunts the mossy bed,
Brews her black hebenon, and, stealing near,
Pours the curst venom in his tortured ear.—⁹

As a note to this passage, Darwin inserts the following:

With the milky juice of this tree the Indians poison their arrows; the dew-drops which fall from it are so caustic as to blister the skin, and produce dangerous

⁶ For a survey of Romantic-period usage, see Grigson 59-64. The theatrical renditions of the legend are *Dramatic Romances, Containing "The Poison Tree" and "The Torrid Zones,"* attr. Stephen Reynolds Clarke (London, 1809), and George Colman the Younger's *The Law of Java, A Play* (London, 1822).

⁷ Col. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, new edition, ed. William Crooke (Routledge, 1985; orig. pub. 1886) 952-59. This remains the most informative introduction to the history of the Upas. For an earlier account, see Thomas Horsfield, "An Essay on the Oopas, or Poison Tree of Java," *Annals of Philosophy* 9 (March-April 1817): 202-14, 265-74.

⁸ For summaries of Darwin's influence on Blake, see David Worrall, "William Blake and Erasmus Darwin," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 70 (1975): 397-417; David Charles Leonard, "Erasmus Darwin and William Blake," *Eighteenth Century Life* (1978): 179-81; Nelson Hilton, "The Spectre of Darwin," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 15:1 (1981): 36-48; and King-Hele, esp. 35-59.

⁹ *The Botanic Garden, Part II: The Loves of the Plants. A Poem, with Philosophical Notes*. 4th ed. (London, 1794) lines 187-90.



1. Botanical illustration of the Upas, from Karl Ludwig Blume's *Rumphia* (Amsterdam, 1836) vol.1, plate 22. Here the tree appears uncharacteristically harmless to man; the image was meant to correct the exaggerated legends made popular by Erasmus Darwin. Reproduced courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, © 2001 Smithsonian Institution.

ulcers; whence many have found their death by sleeping in its shade. (107)

The tree described here is more often called the Manchineel in English. Unlike the Upas, which blights all living things near it, looming "Fierce in dread silence on the blasted heath" (line 237), the Manchineel appears comfortably shady, safe, and inviting to the traveller, who is killed in his sleep by its secret poison.

The Manchineel also seems to have been quite popular as a metaphor during this period—too popular, according to Coleridge, who was nevertheless particularly attached to it. While the Upas was just emerging as part of the language in the 1780s, the Manchineel was already common stock. Recalling his schooldays at Christ's Hospital, Coleridge remarks, "Nay, certain introductions, similes, and examples,

were placed by name on a list of interdiction. Among the similes, there was, I remember, that of the Manchineel fruit, as suiting equally well with too many subjects."¹⁰ Yet Thomas DeQuincey remembered that the young Coleridge tended to honor this list of interdictions in the breach:

Coleridge, in his early days, used the image of a man's "sleeping under a manchineel tree" as [a resource] for illustration which Providence had bountifully made inexhaustible in [its] applications. ... So long as the manchineel continued to blister with poisonous dew those who confided in its shelter ... so long was Samuel Taylor Coleridge fixed and obdurate in his determination that [this image] should come upon duty whenever, as a youthful rhetorician, he found himself on the brink of insolvency.¹¹

In fact, Coleridge did use the Manchineel simile at least twice in his published work in the 1790s, once to characterize one of the infamous "Two Bills" of 1795, and once to describe false friends in the dedication to his *Poems* (1797).¹² In that dedicatory poem, writing of "chance-started friendships," Coleridge declares,

... and some most false,
False and fair-foliaged as the Manchineel,
Have tempted me to slumber in their shade
E'en mid the storm; then breathing subtlest damps,
Mix'd their own venom with the rain from Heaven,
That I awoke poison'd!

(lines 25-30)

Thus within the same few years, both Coleridge and Blake used the image of a poison tree to represent false friendship. As Coleridge makes plain, the Manchineel is the more appropriate source, since it presents a fair and tempting exterior which prompts one to drop defenses; the Upas, on the other hand, is literally unapproachable. Blake's "Poison Tree" grows with "smiles" and "soft deceitful wiles" until it produces that attractive "apple bright" that betrays the speaker's "foe" to destruction.¹³ This tree grows in a "garden" (line

¹⁰ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton UP, 1969) 1:10.

¹¹ "John Keats," *Collected Writings of Thomas DeQuincey*, ed. David Masson, 14 vols. (Edinburgh, 1889-90) 11:378.

¹² "The Plot Discovered," *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton UP, 1969) 296; and "To the Reverend George Coleridge," *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. E.H. Coleridge, 2 vols. (Clarendon, 1912) 1:174. Later, in 1815, Coleridge refers to the Manchineel obliquely in *Biographia Literaria*; of political and religious fanaticism, he writes, "The poison tree is not dead, though the sap for a season may have subsided to its roots. At least let us not be lulled into such a notion of our security" (1:197).

¹³ "A Poison Tree," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. Andrew Lincoln, volume 2 of *The Illuminated Works of William Blake*, gen. ed. David Bindman (Blake Trust/Princeton UP, 1991) plate 49, lines 7, 8, 10, 3.

13) rather than on a "blasted heath" like the Upas, and it operates by stealth and betrayal, like the Manchineel which positively welcomes passers-by to rest in its shade. "In the morning," Blake's speaker finds his foe "outstretchd beneath the tree" (lines 15-16), and lowering branches hang over the victim in the illustration, again evoking the Manchineel (illus. 2). No longer requiring its dissimulating exterior, the conquering tree is revealed by Blake's drawing as an ugly predator.

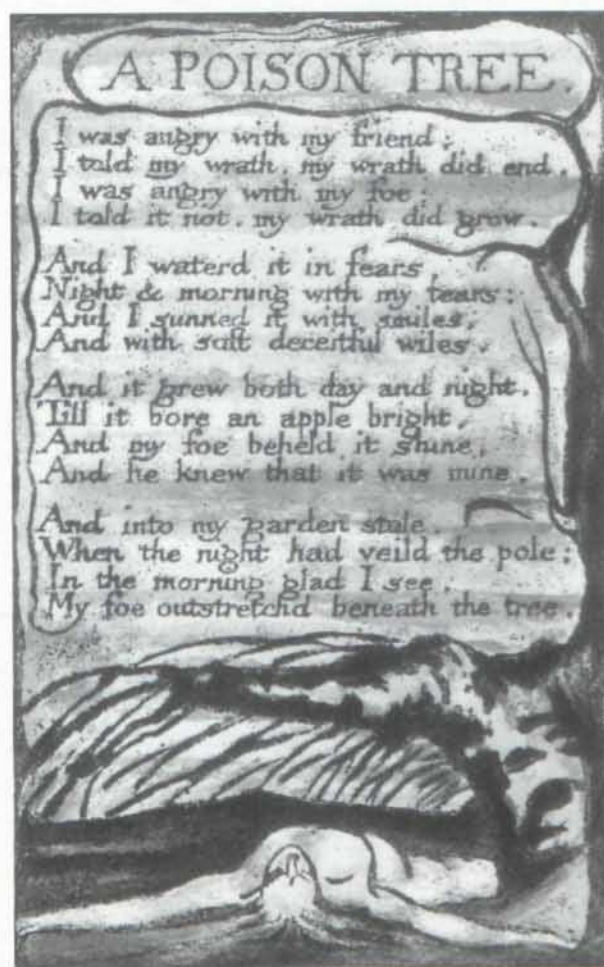
Another set of analogues that recall the Manchineel exists for Blake's poison tree. Blake certainly knew John Stedman's *Narrative of a Five-Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (London, 1796), for which he supplied a number of engravings, executed between 1791 and 1794.¹⁴ Richard and Sally Price state that "Stedman's manuscript and drawings, as well as his various meetings with Blake, seem to have exerted a significant influence on Blake's own thought."¹⁵ Stedman spends a good deal of time describing the "quadrupedes, birds, fishes, reptiles, trees, shrubs, fruits & roots" of South America, as his extended title promises, and Blake himself engraved pictures of "The Mecoo & Kishee Kishee Monkeys" and "Limes, Capsicums, Mammy Apple &c." (*Blake Books*, 623). While the Manchineel is not mentioned, Stedman does refer frequently to the Manicole, "of the Palm tree Species" (191). The Manicole is not poisonous—in fact, it bears "a delicious kind of white food" and its fronds are used frequently by the natives in constructing their huts (191ff.). However, Stedman tells of a night when he slept on a bed of Manicole greens, using terms that recall the legend of the Manchineel:

I lay quietly down ... on my green Matras, where in a clear Moonshine night, And no rain, I fell a sleep as sound as a rock. But about two hours before Day break I awaked when the Moon was down, the fire was out and I almost dead by the Cold dew, and the dampness that exaled from the Earth, being so Stiff and So benumb'd that I had scarcely strength to crawl on hands and feet. ... the Pain augmenting I soon was prevented from Breathing, without the greatest Difficulty and at last fell down behind the trunk of an old Cabbage-tree. (202)

Stedman recovered from the paralyzing dews, but Blake may have associated these two exotic trees in his mind. Finally, the *Narrative* does mention a number of poisonous plants,

¹⁴ See G.E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Clarendon, 1977) 621-24. For details on the Blake-Stedman relationship, see Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies*, 2nd ed. (Clarendon, 1971) 98-104.

¹⁵ "Introduction," *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, ed. Richard and Sally Price (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992) xli-xlii. Quotations from Stedman's work refer to this edition of the 1790 manuscript (rather than the 1796 first edition), given that Blake probably read the manuscript before composing "A Poison Tree" in 1793-94.



2. "A Poison Tree," by William Blake, from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Copy N, plate 35. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

most notably the unidentified "Markoory," which seems like the mythic Upas in Stedman's description:

The Other Tree call'd the Markoory is as Equally Dreadful for its Poisons Qualities Which are of Such a Subtle Nature, that the Verry Smoak of this Wood When set on fire is Fatal to those Animals Who Receive it in their Lungs, And it is Always on that account seen to Grow by itself, Killing everything Around it, Nay even the Slaves Refuse to Cut it Down on the Plantations so much Afraid are they of Touching it With any Tools. (459-60)

This tree, which Stedman calls "Low and Ugly, being Uneven With a verry few Branches" (460), also recalls the image engraved by Blake for "A Poison Tree." It seems, therefore, that Stedman's Markoory and Manicole bear some relation to Blake's imagination of dangerous trees, and probably would have recalled the Manchineel and the Upas to his mind.



The Upas Tree.

3. "The Upas Tree," illustration by George Cruikshank, for *The Blessings of Temperance* (London, 1840) facing page 49. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

What of the apple in Blake's poem? After all, the Manchineel reputedly kills by means of dew-fall. However, we should recall the poem's original title—"Christian Forbearance"—which gives no indication that the foe is laid low by poisonous fruit. Furthermore, in neither version are we actually told that the foe eats the apple; the exact means of his destruction are in any event obscure. All we know for certain is that he is tempted by the tree's exterior appearance (particularly its bright fruit) and winds up "outstretchd beneath the tree" as a result of approaching it. On the other hand, the apple does seem central to the mechanics of the poem, albeit absent from Blake's illustrations of the tree.¹⁶ Coleridge does mention the "Manchineel fruit" in the passage quoted above, so perhaps there existed variations on the metaphor. In addition, we have the name of the tree itself. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term comes from the Spanish *manzanilla* (and French *mancenille*),

¹⁶ Actually, in copy E of the *Songs*, held by the Huntington Library, a small, dark-reddish circle in the lower left corner of the "Poison Tree" plate may be a sole exception. The circle was added during the coloring process; it is not present in any of the other copies I have examined.

a diminutive of apple; and the tree bears an "acid fruit somewhat resembling an apple."¹⁷ Blake scholars have been quick to identify the "apple bright" of "A Poison Tree" as an analogue of the forbidden fruit of Genesis and *Paradise Lost*,¹⁸ but it seems also to owe something to the poisonous apple of the seductive Manchineel.

One might note, in closing, that distinctions between the Upas and the Manchineel tended to become blurred over time so that, by the Victorian era, the Upas seems to have all but swallowed its poisonous rival as a metaphor. For example, in *The Blessings of Temperance* (1840), illustrated by George Cruikshank, author John O'Neill presents the "dread Upas of destruction" as a symbol for alcoholic indulgence.¹⁹ Yet as both poem and image make clear, this tree bears the attributes of the Manchineel: its venom comes as liquid dropped from its branches on the unsuspecting, who are attracted, not repelled, by the tree (illus. 3). O'Neill writes,

The fellest tree that ever yet took root,
Threw up its barrelled trunk, and from each shoot
Streamed down its poison, while the victims run,
In crazy haste—to taste and be undone!
Though want and crime and pestilence abound,
And death and destruction spread around,
And every evil passion is set loose,
They madly rush to catch the envenomed juice;
While, one by one, without the least control,
Subdued, falls every virtue of the soul.
Oh, shun this danger! fly this fair decoy,
Where ruin tempts you in the guise of joy—

(49-50)

This tree, a "fair decoy / Where ruin tempts you in the guise of joy," recalls the "apple bright" and the *modus operandi* of the Manchineel, but "Upas" seems to have become the all-purpose name for illustrative poison trees by this point.²⁰ Such blurring of detail has perhaps led us to overlook the Manchineel as one particular forebear of Blake's "A Poison Tree."

¹⁷ "Manchineel," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition (Clarendon, 1991) 9:297.

¹⁸ See, for example, Robert Gleckner, *The Piper and the Bard* (Wayne State UP, 1959) 255-58; and Phillip Gallagher, "The Word Made Flesh: Blake's 'A Poison Tree' and the Book of Genesis," *Studies in Romanticism* 16 (1977): 237-49.

¹⁹ *The Blessings of Temperance, Illustrated in the Life and Reformation of the Drunkard*, 1840, 4th edition (London, 1851) 49.

²⁰ Like Coleridge and the Manchineel, Grigson remembers the Upas being used as an example of "terminological inexactitude" when he was in school (56), revealing how it had taken the Manchineel's rhetorical place by the end of the nineteenth century; see also 64-65.