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BY ANDREW M. STAUFFER

At least since Geoffrey Grigson in 1947, scholars have found that the various threatening arboreal growths in Blake's work recall the legendary poisonous Upas tree of Java (*antiaris toxicaria*), popularized in England in the 1780s. 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." 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." 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. 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. 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 Bo hon-Upas is situated in the island of Java. ... It is surrounded on all sides by a circle of high mountains, and the country round it, to the distance of ten or twelve miles from the tree, is entirely 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. 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." 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.

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.—

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


2 The line in question reads, "There is just such a tree at Java found"; see Blake: *Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton UP, 1934) 222-23. On "The Human Abstract," see 272-73.


5 N.P. [or I.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.).
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." 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 dews those who confided in its shelter ... so long was Samuel Taylor Coleridge fixed and obdurat 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

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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 "outstretched 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 analogies 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. 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." 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 Meco & 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, 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 Poisones 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 Un-Even With a very 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.
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 "outstretched 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. 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), a diminutive of apple; and the tree bears an "acrid fruit somewhat resembling an apple."

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, 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. 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,

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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. Such blurring of detail has perhaps led us to overlook the Manchineel as one particular forebear of Blake's "A Poison Tree."

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.

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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.