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A Letter from Benjamin Disraeli to Anne Gilchrist

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A LETTER FROM BENJAMIN DISRAELI TO ANNE GILCHRIST

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█ recently acquired an interesting letter written by Benjamin Disraeli to Mrs. Anne Gilchrist, the widow of the author of Blake's first biographer, almost exactly twelve months before the publication of that work:

Hughenden Manor
Nov 5 1862

Madam

There are some drawings, I believe a considerable number, by Blake, in this collection. It is many years, since I have seen them, but my impression is, that they are, in a real degree, rather his own etchings, coloured by himself, than, strictly speaking, drawings.

I leave this place tomorrow, for a fortnight, but, on my return, if Mr Rossetti care to examine them, I will give orders, that t[he]y shall be prepared for his inspection.

I am sorry to say, there is not the slightest foundation for any of the statements, contained in the letter, to which you refer. My father was not acquainted with Mr Blake, nor is there a single volume, in the Hughenden Library [*deletion*] enriched by his drawings.

I have the honour to be
Madam,
Your faithful Ser[van]t

B. Disraeli

Mrs Gilchrist

The works by Blake in the collection of Isaac D'Israeli, which were inherited by his son, are now generally identified (G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* [Oxford, 1977], *passim*), and it is true, as Disraeli says in his letter, that there was no

drawing among them. The letter mentioned by Disraeli, which had been quoted by Mrs. Gilchrist, is unidentified, but there is little doubt that its writer quoted from the well-known letter written by Isaac D'Israeli to Thomas Frognall Dibdin, and printed in the latter's *Reminiscences of a Literary Life* (1836); (pp. 784-89) this says that "It is quite impossible to transmit to you the ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY designs I possess of Blake's." If one adds up the number of pages in the illuminated books owned by D'Israeli (*America, Thel, Europe, Urizen, Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Visions of the Daughters of Albion*), the total, if each was complete, is 164, or 165, if we include "The Accusers," which Bentley thinks D'Israeli probably owned (Bentley, p. 77)--so the number given by D'Israeli is about right.

Certainly Dibdin's account is not unreliable, as Mrs. Gilchrist claimed in a letter to William Michael Rossetti, probably written soon after she had received Disraeli's letter, and later printed in *Anne Gilchrist her Life and Writings*: "Only think of Mr Disraeli's collection turning out such a mare's nest, and Dibdin's whole account a mere fabrication." (H. H. Gilchrist, ed., *Anne Gilchrist her Life and Writings* [London 1887], p. 132.)

W. M. Rossetti, it will be recalled, compiled the "Annotated Lists of Blake's Paintings, Drawings, and Engravings" in the Gilchrist biography, and he is obviously the Mr. Rossetti referred to in Benjamin Disraeli's letter. The editor of *Anne Gilchrist* added a note to the foregoing extract from Mrs. Gilchrist's letter, saying, "The antiquarian [i.e. Dibdin] said that Disraeli (Beaconsfield) possessed original drawings by Blake; so W. M. Rossetti wrote to Disraeli, and he replied in the most courteous spirit showing that he possessed only some of the published books." But from the newly-discovered letter it is evident that Disraeli's reply was addressed not to Rossetti but to Mrs. Gilchrist.

The present letter confirms the nature of Isaac D'Israeli's Blake holdings and the general accuracy of Dibdin's account. It is also of great interest in its complete dismissal of the idea that D'Israeli might have known Blake, a speculation current as recently as 1969, in John Ogden's book *Isaac D'Israeli* (Oxford Univ. Press, p. 43), in which it is stated: "There is not enough evidence to connect [D'Israeli] closely with any of the group that met at Joseph Johnson's bookshop, though it was here he would be most likely to get to know the work of Blake, if not the artist himself."