

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

M I N U T E  
P A R T I C U L A R

## Visual Analogues to Blake's "The Dog"

Nicholas O. Warner

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 18, Issue 3, Winter 1984-85, pp. 140-143



## MINUTE PARTICULARS

### Visual Analogues to Blake's "The Dog"

Nicholas O. Warner

Apart from the poetic text it was meant to illustrate, Blake's frontispiece to one of William Hayley's *Ballads*, "The Dog," appears to have two curious visual analogues in a caricature by James Gillray and an emblem by the sixteenth-century Hungarian emblem writer, Joannes Sambucus. While the primary impetus for the frontispiece comes, of course, from Hayley's poem, its affinities with the emblem and caricature suggest that the earlier works had some influence on Blake's illustration (or perhaps, even on Hayley's ballad itself). The pictures in question deal with vastly different issues: the Blake focuses on a little dog's faithfulness; the emblem, entitled "Sobriè Potandum," or "we must drink soberly," warns against the evils of drunkenness; the caricature, called "The Republican Rattle-Snake Fascinating the Bedford Squirrel," mocks the relationship between two contemporary English politicians, Charles Fox and Francis Russell, fifth Duke of Bedford. Yet all three designs share the basic feature of a reptilian beast laying snares for the unwary, and in the case of Blake and Gillray, of such a beast about to devour an animal falling toward it.

Blake's design takes as its subject the climactic moment in Hayley's sentimental ballad. Here the faithful Fido, as Hayley calls him, seeing his young master about to dive unwittingly into a crocodile's watery lair, saves the youth by deliberately leaping ahead of him into the jaws of the waiting crocodile. The specific lines Blake depicts are as follows:

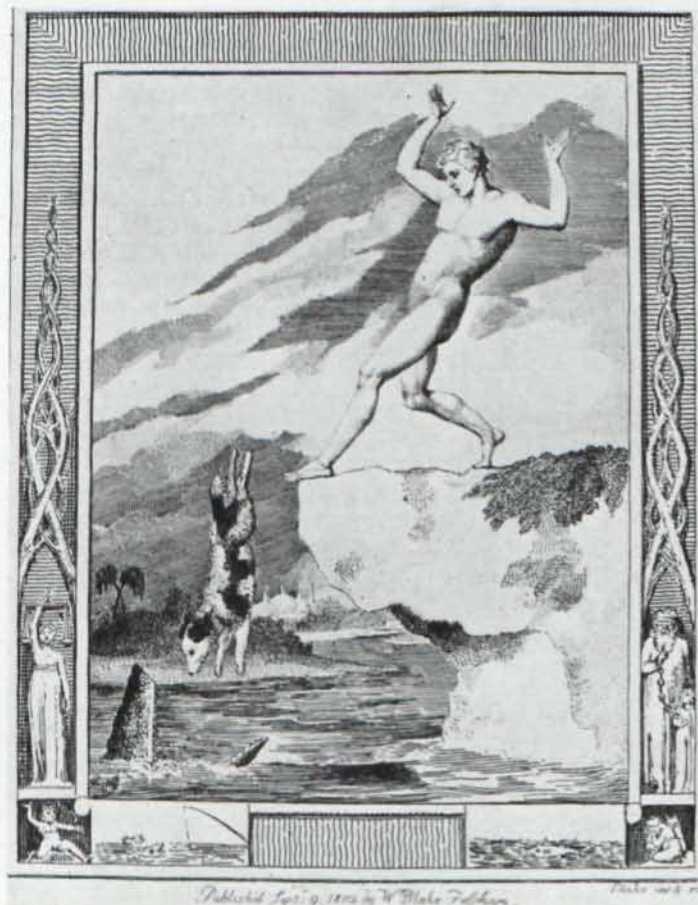
His faithful friend with nobler pace,  
And not with silent tongue,  
Outstript his master in the race,  
And swift before him sprung.

Heaven! How the heart of Edward swell'd  
Upon the river's brink,  
When his Brave guardian he beheld  
A glorious victim sink!

(William Hayley, "The Dog," 11.65-72)

(The lines given are those of the 1802 version; in 1805, lines 65-66 were slightly altered: "nobler" was changed to "quicker," while "not" was changed to "now.") Blake's illustrations for these verses in both the 1802 and 1805 editions of the *Ballads*<sup>1</sup> take essentially the same form—we see the canine hero spreadeagled in the air, as he hurtles kamikaze-fashion toward the crocodile's cavern-

ous maw; meanwhile his startled master, seeming to brake himself just in time, looks down from the safety of the cliff on the dismaying scene below (illus. 1 and 2). For the 1805 edition, Blake engraved a smaller version of the 1802 picture, eliminating the fanciful border of the earlier engraving, adding the title, "The Dog," and changing various details in the background as well as in the positions and expressions of the dog, crocodile and youth. Some of these changes render the 1805 version more dramatic than the earlier design. In 1805, the fierceness of the confrontation between dog and crocodile is intensified by their jaws being more bared—Fido is shown barking (or at least snarling), while the crocodile is less submerged, thus revealing more of his fearsome teeth.<sup>2</sup> In the later design, the increased height of the cliff makes Fido's leap seem all the more courageous. We also see more of Edward's face in 1805, and Blake has endowed his features with greater anguish. Uninspired as the designs remain, these alterations not only increase the drama of the scene, but also accompany a general improvement in the quality of the *Ballads* illustrations. As Robert N. Essick observes, "The five



1. William Blake. "The Dog," from William Hayley's *Ballads* (1802). Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.



plates for a new, octavo edition of Hayley's *Ballads*, published in 1805, show Blake's renewed power, at least on the purely technical level of copy engraving. His abilities as a designer still seem shackled to a literary context unable to call forth the Blakean sublime, but the tonal and textural variety of the linear patterns are superior to those of any of the intaglio plates executed in Felpham."<sup>3</sup>

If we turn from the Blake line-engravings to the emblem by Sambucus (number 41 in Sambucus' *Emblemata*, Antwerp, 1564, reproduced exactly as number 125 in Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems*, Leyden, 1586), we may be surprised to find the same cast of characters as in Blake and Hayley—a nude young man, a dog, and a threatening crocodile (illus. 3). Sambucus'



2. William Blake. "The Dog," from William Hayley's *Ballads* (1805). Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

composition is, however, different from Blake's. In the emblem, a youth lies on a river bank, drinking from a bowl; near him, a dog laps gingerly at the water, eyeing a menacing crocodile in the stream. (Sambucus' text informs us that the dog represents the careful drinker, wary of the poisons of inebriation as imaged by the crocodile, while the youth signifies the heedless bacchanal who, presumably, will fall prey to the crocodile's snares. The water, conveniently enough, represents both the Nile as well as liquids of a more fermented nature.) For all of their compositional differences, the emblem and Blake's frontispiece share several notable details, in addition to having the same characters. In both instances, the crocodile and man are separated by a body of water in which the beast already finds itself; the dog is closer to the crocodile than is the man; the crocodile is on the left, the man on the right, with the dog more or less between them; vague indications of buildings appear in the pictures' backgrounds; the crocodile is clearly associated with hidden danger and entrapment. In both cases, moreover, we find a sharp juxtaposition between the levels of awareness of man and dog—while the youth is carelessly oblivious to danger, the dog is markedly superior to him in being vigilant and perceptive.

Given these parallels, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Blake was familiar with Sambucus' emblem, either through Sambucus' own *Emblemata*, or what is more likely for a late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century British artist, through the famous anthology, *A Choice of Emblems*, compiled by the Englishman Geoffrey

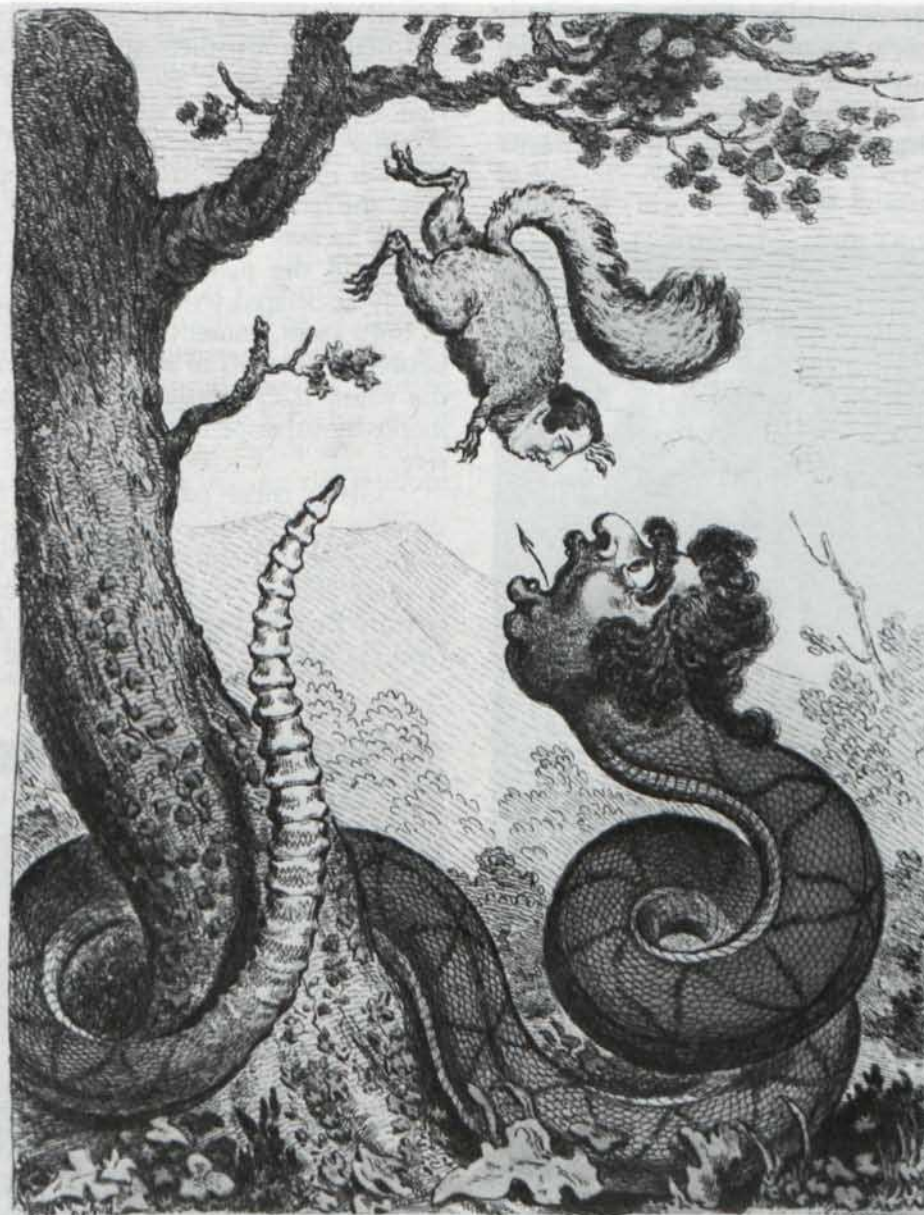


3. Joannes Sambucus. "Sobriè Potandum," from Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* (1586). Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.



Whitney. In fact, a Blake-Whitney connection has been persuasively suggested by several scholars<sup>4</sup> (though not with regard to the *Ballads* designs). First published in 1586, Whitney's collection reproduced numerous Continental emblems with Englished versions of the original texts; the work also contained twenty-three of Whitney's own designs and poems.<sup>5</sup> *A Choice of Emblems* established

its editor as the earliest English emblematicist, and "it was to Whitney that the first English emblem writers turned for their model."<sup>6</sup> Thus it is highly conceivable that Blake, "steeped in the emblem tradition"<sup>7</sup> as he was, and almost certainly familiar with other devices from Whitney, would have known the "Sobriè Potandum" design.



*The Republican Rattle-Snake fascinating the Bedford Squirrel.*

*The Rattle Snake is a Creature of the greatest subtilty: when it is desirous of preying upon any Animal which is in a situation above itself, it fixes its Eyes upon the unsuspecting Object. & by the noise of its Rattle fascinates it, & confounds its wretched Vision. All seeing all Sense & Reason lost, it falls a prey into the Mouth of the horrid Monster.* *Parody on the Rattle Snake.*

4. James Gillray, "The Republican Rattle-Snake Fascinating the Bedford Squirrel." Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



Less strikingly similar to the Blake but still suggestive of it in composition is Gillray's colored engraving, "The Republican Rattle-Snake Fascinating the Bedford Squirrel." Published 16 November 1795, Gillray's caricature depicts the Whig leader Charles Fox as a huge rattlesnake coiled around an oak tree. Falling out of the tree in a pose quite like that of Blake's self-sacrificing Fido, and heading directly toward the snake's open mouth, is a squirrel with a human head—that of the Duke of Bedford (illus. 4). The picture, on a topic dear to Gillray, satirizes "the political influence by Fox over Francis, Duke of Bedford, who had become one of the most zealous of the popular party."<sup>8</sup> Despite obvious differences, the genuine similarities between Gillray's engraving and Blake's design (the small animal in mid-flight falling into a reptile's mouth, the reptile with open jaws, gazing upwards) lend support to the view that Blake was sufficiently well acquainted with Gillray's work to echo certain of the caricaturist's motifs in his own art.<sup>9</sup> While in some instances such echoes seem intentional (as demonstrated by Nancy Bogen—see note 9), there is no evidence of a conscious imitation of Gillray in "The Dog." Yet perhaps the similarities are not purely coincidental. Indeed, the parallels between Blake's illustration and the Gillray cartoon could partly stem from Blake's unconscious absorption of Gillray's composition long before Blake ever knew he was going to illustrate a poem about a dog and a crocodile.

The analogues we have explored here provide further evidence of Blake's links to Gillray and to the emblem tradition. Continued investigation of popular art forms such as emblem books and caricatures will doubtless tell us still more about the breadth of material assimilated by Blake and recast in his own designs, even when those designs exist primarily to illustrate the words of others.

<sup>1</sup> William Hayley, *Designs to a Series of Ballads* (Chichester: J. Seagrave, 1802); and William Hayley, *Ballads . . . Founded on Anecdotes Relating to Animals* (Chichester: J. Seagrave, 1805). For detailed physical descriptions of the designs, see David Bindman, *The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake* (New York: G.B. Putnam's & Sons, 1978), pp. 479–80, and Roger R. Easson and Robert N. Essick, *William Blake, Book Illustrator* (Normal, Illinois: American Blake Foundation, 1972), I, 31–35, 41–44. For a full account of the entire Blake-Hayley *Ballads* project, see G.E. Bentley, Jr., "William Blake as Private Publisher," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 61 (1957), 539–60; G.E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 88, 92–98, 100–02, 157–62; and Robert N. Essick, *William Blake, Printmaker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 169–73.

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, Blake's 1802 illustration of a non-barking Fido fits Hayley's 1805 text more closely than it does the earlier text, for in 1805 Fido is described as leaping "now with silent tongue"; the 1805 design, however, shows Fido as he was described three years before, "not with silent tongue."

<sup>3</sup> Essick, *William Blake, Printmaker*, p. 172. Blake himself

understandably says little about these timid designs, though in a letter to Hayley dated 22–25 March 1805, Blake remarks that "The Subjects I cannot do better than those already chosen, as they are the most eminent among Animals Viz. The Lion, The Eagle, The Horse, The Dog. Of the Dog Species the Two Ballads are so pre-eminent & my Designs for them please me so well that I have chosen that design in our Last Number of the Dog & Crocodile, & that of the Dog defending his dead Master from the Vultures." *The Letters of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Piloo Nanavutty first suggested a parallel between Blake and Whitney in "A Title-Page in Blake's Illustrated Genesis Manuscript," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 10 (1947), 115; in a later article, Nanavutty pointed to evidence of Whitney as a definite source for some of Blake's work (e.g. "The Sick Rose")—see "Blake and Emblem Literature," *JWCI*, 15 (1952), 258–61. For other connections between Blake and Whitney, see Mary Lynn Johnson, "Emblem and Symbol in Blake," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 37 (1974), 151, 153; Judith Wardle, "For Hatching Ripe": Blake and the Educational Uses of Emblem and Illustrated Literature," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 81 (1978), 337, 346; and Joseph S. Salemi, "Emblematic Tradition in Blake's *The Gates of Paradise*," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, 15 (1981–82), 108–24. Mentioning Johnson's comparison of Blake's first illustration to the *Gates of Paradise* with Whitney's emblem of a "skull-gathering woman," Wardle goes on to note that "one might also suggest the original of this in Johannes Sambucus' *Emblemata*" (Wardle, 346); as far as I know, this is the first reference to a link between Blake and Sambucus. In 1952, Nanavutty listed Sambucus among those emblematisers who did not seem to have influenced Blake (Nanavutty, "Blake and Emblem Literature," p. 261).

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes*, ed. Henry Green (London, 1866, reprinted New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1967, with an introduction by Frank B. Fieler), p. 252. Fieler's introduction has some useful bibliographical information both on Whitney and on the history of English emblem books. The "Sobriè Potandum" emblem, incidentally, is reproduced not only in this modern facsimile (number 125, as in Whitney's original edition), but also in Arthur Henkel and Albrecht Schöne, *Emblemata: Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), p. 565. While Henkel and Schöne, as well as Mario Praz, in his *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, 2nd ed. rev. (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1964), both cite instances of crocodiles and dogs throughout Renaissance emblem literature, neither of these sources indicates any emblem where the two animals appear together, except, as noted only by Henkel and Schöne, in Sambucus' (and Whitney's) "Sobriè Potandum." Green's edition, moreover, though it supplies notes for many of Whitney's emblems, silently passes over number 125, that of the dog and crocodile.

<sup>6</sup> Rosemary Freeman, *English Emblem Books* (New York: Octagon Books, 1948), p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Hagstrum, *William Blake: Poet and Painter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Wright and R.H. Evans, *Historical and Descriptive Account of the Caricatures of James Gillray* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851), p. 70; see also M. Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1978), 7, 198.

<sup>9</sup> Intriguing connections between Blake and Gillray have been convincingly presented by David V. Erdman in his *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, 2nd ed. rev. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 203–05, 218–19, and by Nancy Bogen in her "Blake's Debt to Gillray," *American Notes & Queries*, 6 (Nov. 1967), 35–38. For an earlier version of Erdman's discussion, see "William Blake's Debt to Gillray," *Art Quarterly*, 12 (1949), 165–70.