

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

N O T E

The Coloured Copies of Blake's "Night Thoughts"

W. E. Moss

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 2, Issue 2, September 15, 1968, pp.
19-23



2. THE COLOURED COPIES OF BLAKE'S "NIGHT THOUGHTS"

W.E. Moss

While Mr. T.W. Hanson in his article on "Richard Edwards, Publisher" (The Times Literary Supplement, August 8, 1942) provides a good many new facts about the original drawings made by Blake for Edwards's edition of Young's "Night Thoughts", 1797, he makes little mention of the published work.

Even in its uncoloured state this is not a common book. In fact, I doubt whether many more than 200 copies were printed and finished for sale, as there was no steel-surfacing at that date and none of the prints I have seen shew signs of wear. However, it is not with the book generally that I wish to deal here, but with the very much rarer hand-coloured copies. These have never received the attention which they deserve, although they are contemporary with the earlier issues of Blake's Illuminated Books, and, on the assumption that the colour-schemes were chosen by Blake himself, have considerable importance in relation to these works.

One of the most significant and hitherto neglected aspects is the process of production of these books. The rare prospectus calls it "atlas quarto"; that is, a sheet of "atlas" size, folded twice, giving eight pages of 17 x 13 in., equal to Keynes's figures of 43 x 33 cm. The 56 leaves of the book point to 14 atlas sheets, or 28 "sides" with four pages on each, including all blanks: the make up is, however, I think, in sheets, 1 + 1/2 + 12 + 1/2. With the exception of the sheet beginning with p. 65, each sheet bears on both sides engraved plates pulled in the rolling-press, some even having three on one side, two on the other.

The engravings were printed off first, on the damped paper, (the proofs sold at Captain Butts's sale at Sotheby's in 1903, now in the collection of Mr. Philip Hofer, are all in this state, before text); and then the text had to be set up and printed as well. That is to say, a set of sheets involved twenty-three operations of the engraver's rolling-press, plus one more for the Frontispiece to Night I, and thereafter, twenty-four operations of the type-printing press, plus two for the Title and Advertisement, making a total of fifty separate operations. It would have been impossibly costly to print off in any other way, say on cut-down sheets, as that would at least have doubled the labour.

The publisher would receive these atlas sheets flat and unfolded from his printer. (Some were sent to a binder who cased them in grey boards, a state in which they are very rare).

All the coloured "Night Thoughts" I have seen were coloured before binding, that is, in the sheet before folding. It would have been both risky and slow to have tried to colour bound copies.

It is obvious that more than one scheme of colouring was adopted, but the habit of classifying the copies as "Blake's" and "Mrs. Blake's" is uncritical and ignores both printers' and publishers' methods. Blake would have supplied exemplars with suggested specimen treatments, but I doubt whether he himself, would have been employed to make the "repeats" for sale; and I do not for a moment believe that in 1797-8-9, Mrs. Blake had the ability, or even the working

space, to colour sheets measuring 34 x 26 in., with a copy to follow as well, on her work-table. But such work was an everyday job for the professional colourist, who was skilled in laying even washes of tint expeditiously. The publisher would exhibit one or more coloured copies, and offer his clients "commercial expert copies" only. He would know how to get them made quicker than he could trust Blake to manage, and it is only natural to assume that if Richard Edwards wanted coloured copies of the book, he would turn to his brother Thomas, whose skill is shewn in his painted book-edges, to execute them.

The book was certainly on view at James Edwards's house in Pall Mall as well as at the publisher's, and, supposing the uncoloured copies to have been on sale by the autumn of 1797, that leaves rather under three years to market the colour copies and make and bind them before the Blakes packed up in September 1800 and went to Felpham.

In his Bibliography of Blake, 1921, p. 202, Keynes states that "One copy was richly coloured by Blake for Thomas Butts". This seems to be quoted from the Crewe sale catalogue (1903), repeating Gilchrist (1863), who based his remark on the fact that Lord Houghton (then Richard Monckton Milnes) had bought a coloured copy at the Butts sale in 1852. This copy is identified with that which appeared at the sale of Sir Algernon Methuen in February 1936.

This provided a tempting occasion for a careful comparison, and I took my own coloured copy up to Sotheby's, and, with Mr. G.D. Hobson (the value of whose expert eye I gladly acknowledge here), we went through them side by side, page by page.

Our unanimous conclusion was that both copies were the work of the same colourist, so that if the Butts-Crewe-Methuen copy was Blake's, mine was also, executed for someone else; not impossibly for Richard Edwards himself, as the binding resembles that of the original drawings, described by Mr. Hanson.

The tints employed in both are exactly the same; but, if corresponding pages from these two copies are placed side by side, it will be found that the tints as arranged in the one reappear in the other but "interchanged" as regards their use on the page. This identity of tints would appear to signify that the two were made simultaneously, as the differences are intentional and beyond the powers of any copyist.

A further result of our examination was that my copy shewed the finer colour-composition. It is stronger, more telling in contrast and more varied and rainbow-like. Hardly a single figure, no matter how subsidiary, is left uncoloured, or uncontrasting. Nor are there any great expanses of unbroken, ungraded tint.

Thus, on p. 77, in the Butts-Crewe-Methuen copy, the great orb of the sun in the background is an even flat primrose; in my copy it is a clouded orange-brown. In my copy the sky expanses, on pp. 4, 12, 24, 37 and 70, are a mingling of blue, rose, and purple; in the other there is no such mixed colour, but only streaks and patches of various shades of blue.

A noteworthy page is 49. In my copy, the "vision" of the Sun, with his horses, glows with radiance like a stained-glass window: the Butts copy is tame in comparison. (I selected this page for reproduction in colour in my sale catalogue, Sotheby's, 2.iii.1937.)

The Methuen sale catalogue, (Sotheby's, 19.ii.1936), has a colour facsimile of the Title to Night III, a gigantic serpent, its head imprisoned under a crescent moon on which strides a star-crowned damsel greeting the dawn. The serpent is mostly red-brown, with a vertebral stripe of dark umber, on each side of which are a few blue patches.

My copy shews a serpent yellowish and green, less heavy in effect, and the patches that are blue in the other are here mostly brownish, with those that remain blue several shades lighter. Also, the damsel's outstretched right leg is not, as in the Butts copy, covered with a streaky violet-hued veiling, but is left nude, delicately flesh-tinted; there are no engraved lines on the plate to suggest the veiling. [Butts was notoriously averse to acquiring 'nudes'.]

In the Huntington Library illustrated exhibition catalogue, "Fine Books" 1936, there is a monochrome reduced gravure print of this plate. To judge by it, without actually seeing the colour, I incline to think it a copy of the Butts colouring. I do not agree with the catalogue ascription to Mrs. Blake.

I have examined the copy in the Sir John Soane Museum, which Soane evidently bought soon after publication, and which the Curator considers him to have had bound, as the style resembles others of his books. Keynes, in a footnote to p. 202, appears to regard this copy as one of "Mrs. Blake's", but it is practically identical in colour-treatment with the Butts copy, to judge from the "crucial" pages alluded to.

On the other hand, the copy in the Pierpont Morgan Library, which I examined in May 1937, seems to be coloured on the same scheme as my copy, very luminously.

In conclusion, I would say that the colour schemes for the engravings were certainly prescribed by Blake, and that there is little doubt that he intended all the copies to be coloured; hence the "emptiness" some critics have attributed to the uncoloured plates. It would seem probable that he executed at least two exemplars, with varying colour-treatment, which would be quite in character with his Illuminated Books.

It is unlikely that Mrs. Blake had anything to do with the colouring, and it is probable that the copies were made either by Thomas Edwards of Halifax or by someone he could trust, for his brother Richard, the publisher of them.

I append an outline census of the coloured copies, in the hope that readers will be able to add to and amend it:

A. Thomas Butts copy. Bought by, and perhaps made for, Thomas Butts, sold at Sotheby's, 26.iii.1852 (lot 59, Milnes, £2.1s.), Richard Monckton Milnes, 1st Lord Houghton; The Earl of Crewe, sold at Sotheby's 30.iii.1903 (lot 13, £260); Sir Algernon Methuen, sold at Sotheby's, 19.ii.1936 (lot 505, Robinson, £580); A. Edward Newton, sold at the Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 16.iv.1941 (lot 139, Sessler, \$1,750.00).

Bound for the second owner by J. Leighton in half red-brown morocco, sago-grain brown cloth sides, with Milnes' crest, "a garb or", in centre of upper cover. 16 9/16 x 12 15/16 in., 42.1 x 33 cm. Lacks the Explanation of the Engravings.

- B. W.E. Moss copy. Possibly once the property of Richard Edwards; bought in 1910 from a London bookseller by Lt.-Col. W.E. Moss, sold at Sotheby's, 2.iii.1937 (lot 261, Rosenbach, £800.)

Bound in full straight-grain red morocco, with broad gilt borders, red and blue marbled paper fly-leaves, contemporary with the publication. Covers damaged with knife-cuts and ink-stains, but leaves intact, with slight soiling. 16 3/8 x 13 in., 41.7 x 33 cm. Has the Explanation.

- C. E.N. Adler copy. Bought by him April 1925, from St. Goar, bookseller, Frankfurt, "from a Dresden collector's"; has autograph "Ottomar Fiedler". Sold by Mr. Adler in 1940 to Lincolns Ltd., London.

Bound in half-leather and canvas. At the bottom left corner of p. 7 is the pencil (?) signature "W. Blake", and, also in pencil, at the foot of p. 95 are the words "as pattern".

- D. John Ruskin copy. Francis Barlow Robinson, sold at Sotheby's, 19.ii.1884; Ruskin properties sale at Sotheby's, 24.vii.1930 (lot 109).

Bound in half-calf.

- E. R.A. Potts copy. R.A. Potts, sold at Sotheby's, 18.vi.1912; offered by Francis Edwards, June 1914 & August 1920, for £100.

Bound in half-morocco.

- F. Soane Art Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, copy. Bought by Sir John Soane on publication, probably from Richard Edwards.

Bound in half brown morocco, sides and fly-leaves of the same "frog-spawn" marbled paper.

- G. Thomas Gaisford copy. Thomas Gaisford of Offington, Worthing, sold at Sotheby's, 23.iv.1891 (lot 192); B.B. Macgeorge, Glasgow, sold at Sotheby's, 1.vii.1924, no. 118.

Bound in half red morocco, by Riviere. Has the Explanation.

- H. Stirling copy. Possibly from the collection of W. Rae Macdonald or J.M. Gray; offered by Tregaskis, date unknown, for £25; sold at Sotheby's, 4.vi.1908 (lot 734, Stirling, £24).

Bound by Annie S. Macdonald in full undressed morocco, with embossed designs on upper cover and Blake's head on lower. Title inlaid. Has the Explanation.

- I. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, copy. Thomas Glen Arthur, Carrick House, Ayr, sold at Sotheby's, 15.vii.1914 (lot 848); bought from G.D. Smith, October 1914, by Henry E. Huntington.

Bound in full brown morocco, panelled, (before 1883), by F. Bedford. Note on fly "Pearson '86/ rsi-:". Inserted are a leaf of vellum, pp. 3-4, with a water-colour drawing on p. 3 (not by Blake), and a proof before letters of the "Head of a Man tormented in Fire", Russell, Engravings of William Blake, 1912, no. 74. Has the Explanation.

J. Samuel Boddington copy. Not traced in any sale, but now in the collection of Mr. Lessing J. Rosenwald, Philadelphia.

K. Oliver Henry Perkins copy. Possibly from another member of the Boddington family; Oliver Henry Perkins; George C. Smith, Jr., sold at the Parke-Bernet Galleries, 2.xi.1938 (lot 45).

Bound in full contemporary green straight-grain morocco, gilt and blind tooled; rubbed, binding very slightly broken. With the O.H. Perkins bookplate. 16 3/8 x 12 5/8 in. Has the Explanation.

L. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, copy. Bought by J. Pierpont Morgan at an unrecorded date.

Bound in New York by Miss M.D. Lahey about 1919. Miss Belle da Costa Greene, the Director of the Library, thinks it may have been previously in a modern calf binding, rather broken at joints, but does not feel very certain.

M. W.A. White copy. Now in the possession of his daughter, Mrs. Frances White Emerson, Cambridge, Mass.

This copy is frequently stated to come from the Butts and Crewe collections; no reason is given for this attribution.

N. A. Edward Newton copy. Sold with the Newton collection at the Parke-Bernet Galleries, 16.iv.1941 (lot 138, Sessler, \$400.00); now in the possession of Mr. Wilmarth S. Lewis, Farmington, Conn.

Brown paper back, marbled board sides, uncut; lacks two leaves, pp. 45-6, 71-2. About 16 13/16 x 13 3/16 in. Has the Explanation. Laid in is a copy of the prospectus.

O. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Mass., copy.

P. Charles Dew of Salisbury copy, sold at Sotheby's, 25.vi.1892 (lot 1002).

Bound in half-russia, t.e.g. Possibly to be identified with a copy listed above.

Q. Copy sold at Hodgson's, 2.vi.1914 (lot 528, Dobell, £46).

Bound in boards, back defective, uncut. Possibly to be identified with a copy listed above.

Editor's Note: The late Lt.-Col. Moss, bibliophile and collector of Blake, wrote this article in 1942 or shortly thereafter. It has not been published previously. We thank Mr. Ruthven Todd, who informed us of its present whereabouts in the Bodleian Library, and the Bodleian for furnishing a copy. We have not attempted to bring the census up-to-date, but urge readers who have information about these or other copies to do so; any such information will be published in a future issue of the Newsletter.