

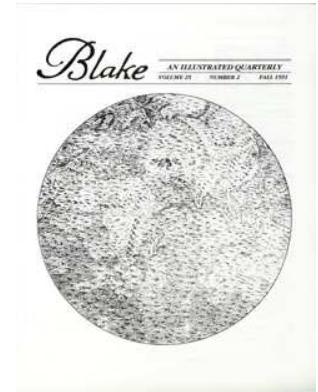
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William Blake and John Marsh

Robert N. Essick

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

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The name Edward Garrard Marsh (1783-1862) has been associated with Blake since the 1880 edition of Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*. As Gilchrist explains, "Edward the Bard of Oxford," to whom Blake alludes in his letter of 27 January 1804 to William Hayley, "was a certain Mr. Edward Marsh of Oriel College, who, when visiting Hayley while Blake was also his frequent guest and fellow-labourer, had been wont to read aloud to them the Hermit's [i.e., Hayley's] own compositions in a singularly melodious voice."¹ Thus it seems probable that "Oxford, immortal Bard!" who "with eloquence / Divine . . . wept over Albion" (E 188) on plate 41 of Blake's *Jerusalem* is also none other than Edward Marsh, even though his is hardly the first name to leap to mind when compiling a list of bards associated with the city or its university.² In a 1927 essay, Kenneth Povey provided more information about Marsh,³ but it was not until the discovery in 1984 of 64 letters from Marsh to Hayley that we learned of the extent of Marsh's involvement with the Hayley circle beginning only a few months after Blake's arrival at Felpham. The references to Blake in these letters provided new information about his life and work from 1800 to 1803.⁴

Povey notes that E. G. Marsh's father, John Marsh (1752-1828), was "a solicitor and famous amateur musician, who came into a fortune and eventually settled at Chichester in 1787,"

but no connection between Blake and John Marsh was then known.⁵ A new document has now come to light that provides information on John Marsh's friendship with Hayley and shows that the father, like the son, left us brief but tantalizing written references to Blake.

At its London auction of books and manuscripts on 28 November 1990, Christie's offered as lot 285 John Marsh's manuscript autobiography in 37 volumes bound in vellum, each containing approximately 90 leaves written on both sides, with the pages conveniently numbered. This enormous work was purchased for £28,600 by Maggs Bros., the venerable London bookshop, acting on behalf of the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. The Library received the manuscript on 14 February 1991 and it is now designated as HM 54457.

Marsh began keeping a diary when only twelve years of age and in 1796 started his autobiography.⁶ After writing a retrospective narrative of his early years, Marsh added entries on a regular basis, apparently based on a daily diary, and thus the work has a structure and tone midway between that of a diary and an autobiography. Marsh continued this work until shortly before his death, with the last 14 pages of the manuscript in another hand (presumably written by a family member) recording his final days. A transcript of the autobiography, written (according to Christie's catalogue) in the same hand as the final 14 pages of the original, has been available for some time in the Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 7757. This much abridged version in only 16 volumes omits a great deal of material, including all entries for the period 1795-1802.⁷

The main interest in John Marsh's autobiography derives from its wealth of information about his musical compositions and performances and his attendance at concerts. We can also learn from Marsh a great deal about provincial life among the educated gentry in the environs of Chichester

from 1787 to the end of his life. There are many references to William Hayley and other members of the Hayley circle, including Marsh's own son Edward, Miss Harriet Poole, and Joseph Seagrave, who printed one of Marsh's works. For the purposes of this essay, however, I will skip over or merely summarize all this material on the margins of Blakean interest, but I will fully record and comment on all passages that relate directly to William Blake.⁸

John Marsh's first contact with the Hayley family occurred on 22 March 1782 while visiting Bath. There he met "M.^{rs} Hayley of Eartham near Chichester, Wife of the Poet" whose writings were already familiar to him (7: 158). On 5 February 1783, Marsh traveled to Eartham and "had the pleasure of seeing M.^{rs} Hayley very well, & of being introduc'd by her to y^e *Bard* whom [Marsh] found to be a Gent.^m of y^e most pleasing mannere—" (8: 69-70). Marsh purchased his Chichester home from Hayley on 1 February 1786 (10: 64). In the fall of 1800, Marsh was working on a literary composition, "The Excursion of a Spirit," for which Hayley provided the title and other assistance (5 Oct., 21: 26). The two men were on terms of intimacy sufficient to permit Marsh to call at Hayley's home for the purpose of introducing his son Edward to the famous author. This visit on 22 October 1800 led to a meeting with Blake less than a month after his own arrival in Felpham:

Wishing to introduce Edw.^d to M.^r Hayley, I on the next Morning (Wed^y 22.^d) drove him to Felpham where after having some Coffee with M.^r H: we went with him to M.^{rs} Miers's (who was then at the House just by in w.^{ch} y^e Copes had sometime before resided) where we heard one of y^e young Ladies play & sing; & from thence to M^r Blake's an Engraver M.^r H. had lately brought down from London & settled in a Cottage at Felpham, in order to prepare some ornamental Engravings, Vignettes &c. for his Works. Here M.^r Hayley gave me a Ballad he had written, called y^e little Sailor Boy which M.^r Blake had engraved & ornamented with a small Plate at y^e top & bottom, which Ballad as we drove home

I began setting to Music after w.^{ch} I harmoniz'd it for 3 Voices.⁹

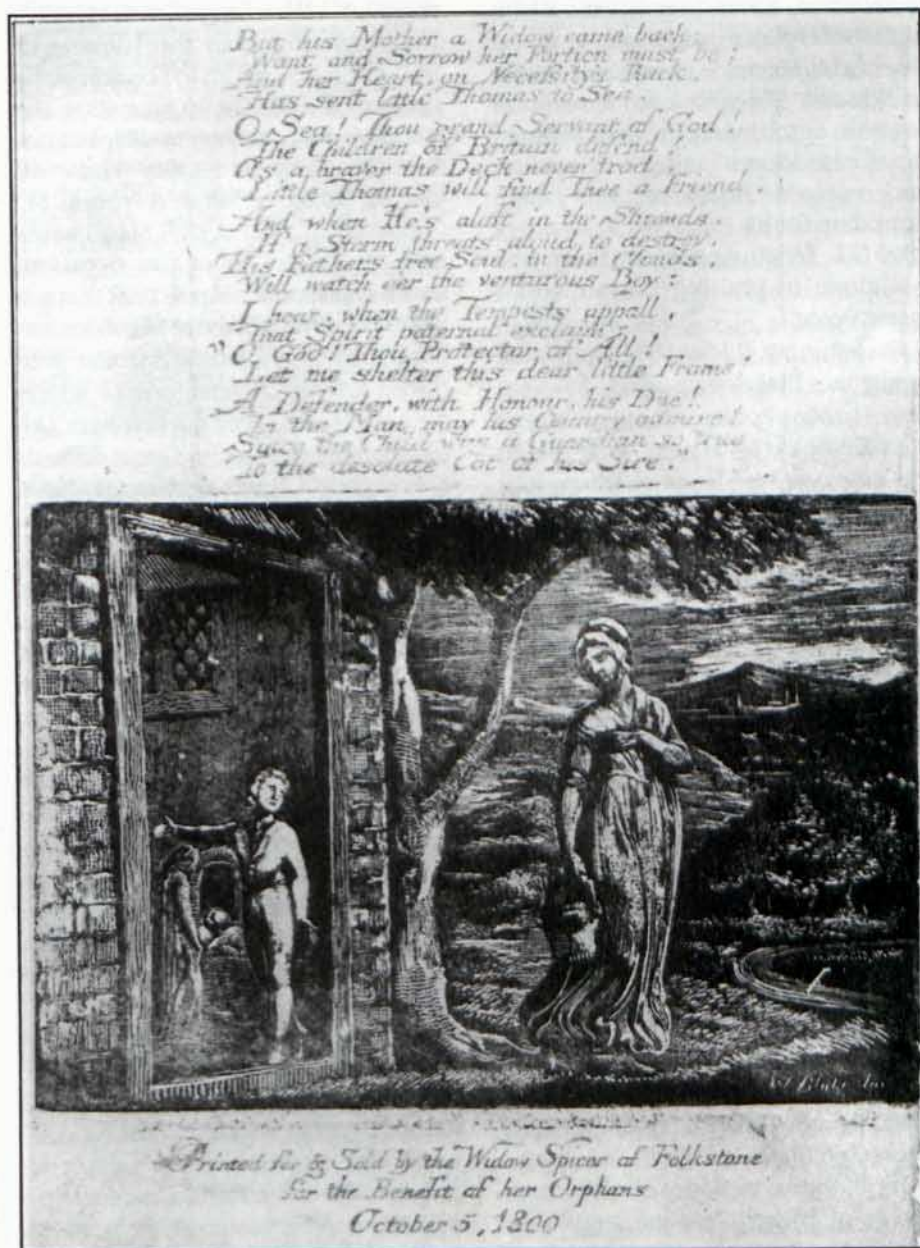
This first reference to Blake in Marsh's autobiography is revelatory in several ways, both factually and socially. Marsh very probably learned from Hayley that he had "brought" Blake to Felpham to prepare engravings for Hayley's publications. Thus it would seem, in the eyes of Hayley and his friends, that Blake's main role was a practical and subsidiary one having no direct connection with his abilities as an original artist, much less as a poet. The class distinctions are implicit: Marsh and Hayley are educated connoisseurs of independent means; Blake is a useful and respected craftsman, but not a gentleman of arts and letters. This social role accords with John Flaxman's professional recommendations that Blake should confine his activities to engraving and teaching drawing while in Felpham and avoid higher aspirations, such as "painting large pictures, for which he is not qualified."¹⁰ Blake would later complain that such advice and its attendant class consciousness confined him to "the mere drudgery of business"¹¹ and would force his return to London where he could hope to engage in more than producing "ornamental Engravings" for Hayley's writings.

The "Ballad" Hayley gave to John Marsh is of course *Little Tom the Sailor* (illus. 1), etched in relief by Blake, with headpiece and tailpiece designs in white-line etching/engraving and dated "October 5, 1800" in the imprint.¹² By setting the poem to music, Marsh provided an auditory complement to Blake's visual setting for what was quickly becoming a communal and multi-media endeavor lavished on a rather slender text. Marsh worked quickly, for by 5 November he was able to send Hayley "the Song of Little Tom the Sailor, as set by me, w.^{ch} I had promis'd to let him have" (21: 38). Marsh highlights his work on *Little Tom* by writing a marginal note on 21: 35 ("Set y^e Sailor Boy, Ballad to Music")

and including it as item "3" in his list of "Musical Compositions" for 1800: "M.^r Hayley's Ballad of y^e Sailor Boy, as a single Song, & for 3 Voices" (21: 57).

After his introduction to Hayley, Edward Marsh became a frequent caller at "the Hermit's" home in Felpham. John Marsh briefly records many such visits over several years, including entries for 10 January 1801 ("I drove

Edw.^d to Felpham & called on M.^r Hayley," 21: 60), 17 January 1802 (22: 57), 23 and 28 January ("Edw.^d took another Walk to M.^r Hayley's," 22: 58), 30 December 1802 (23: 33-34), 14 and 21 July 1803 (23: 151-52), and 30 July 1804 (24: 84). Both father and son also met Hayley at Harriet Poole's home on several occasions (e.g., 16 March 1802, 22: 72). Hayley's beloved child,



1. *Little Tom the Sailor*. Blake's broadside with Hayley's text etched in relief and the tailpiece in white-line etching/engraving, 1800. Lower half only, approx. 22 x 16 cm. Princeton University Library.

Thomas Alphonso, had died in 1800, and perhaps Edward Marsh, only three years younger than Thomas, became an occasional surrogate son for the bereaved father. Edward seems to have called on Hayley whenever the Oxford student was staying with his parents during university vacations. Thus the references to Blake in Edward's letters to Hayley may have been based on what he learned while in Felpham, either directly from Blake or from Hayley's conversation, rather than from Hayley's (untraced) letters to Edward. We also learn from John Marsh's autobiography that Edward "spoke his Verses" at a public reading and received "Blair's Lectures neatly bound up for his Prize" on 31 October 1800 (21: 37-38). Apparently Blake was not alone in praising Edward's eloquent voice.

On Saturday, 9 May 1801, the Marsh family met Blake once again: "... we drove to Miss Pooles, where we met y^e Miss Kempes, M^r Hayley & M^r Blake the Engraver, the latter of whom had drawn a striking Miniature of M^r Hayley w.^h we saw" (21: 116). This comment comes only three months after the first known reference to Blake's activities as a painter of miniatures. Hayley's statement in a letter to George Romney of 3 February 1801 that he "taught [Blake] he says to paint in Miniature, & in Truth he has made a very creditable copy from your admirable Portrait" of William Cowper.¹³ Blake's two miniatures of Cowper are still extant, as well as miniature portraits of Cowper's cousin, John Johnson, and of Thomas Butts (illus. 2) and his wife and son, and Blake may have also executed untraced miniatures of Mrs. Hayley and George Romney.¹⁴ However, there is no known miniature of William Hayley nor any other reference to it. Marsh's autobiography allows us to add such a work to the list of Blake's lost paintings. Although Marsh states that Blake had only "drawn" the portrait, water colors were regularly called drawings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

and are still thought of as a form of finished drawing, as distinct from painting, in Great Britain. Thus, the miniature of Hayley may very well have been similar in format, style, and degree of finish to the portrait of Butts reproduced here.

Blake was evidently on the periphery of John Marsh's interests and circle of acquaintances, for there are only two direct references to the engraver and miniaturist in Marsh's autobiography from the summer of 1801 to Blake's return to London in the autumn of 1803. On 26 June 1801, the Marsh family "drove to Felpham & drank tea with M^r Hayley where we met M^r Blake y^e artist & young M^r Chetwynd . . ." (21: 130).¹⁵ Marsh writes nothing further about this occasion, and it is not until 5 April 1802 that we again encounter Blake in Marsh's autobiography: "... our white Cat produced 4 white Kittens, one of which we saved for M^r Blake of Felpham, (M^r Hayley's Friend) but had great difficulty in rearing it, the Cat seeming to have very little Milk—" (22: 77-78). The marginal gloss also records this effort: "Bred a White Kitten for M^r Blake." Perhaps the intended gift was prompted by Marsh having learned that Blake liked cats—or at least favored them over dogs. As Mrs. John Linnell, the wife of Blake's great patron in the final decade of his life, wrote to her daughter Hannah in 1839, "Mr Blake . . . used to say how much he preferred a cat to a dog as a companion because she was so much more quiet in her expression of attachment. . . ."¹⁶ And we know from "The Tyger" of *Songs of Experience* (1794) that Blake had an intense interest in, if not exactly a fondness for, a feline showing a bold expression of sublimity. Marsh makes no further reference to giving a kitten to Blake; perhaps the problems in rearing it prevented the gift. But the mother apparently survived to produce more litters, or Marsh acquired another cat, for on 22 May 1805 he presented Hayley with a "little white kitten" (25: 10).



2. Blake's miniature portrait of Thomas Butts, c. 1801. Water color on ivory, 8.4 x 6.6 cm. By permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

One of Blake's major tasks for Hayley during his years in Felpham was the engraving and printing of the illustrations for *Hayley's Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper*. The project took considerable time and patience and was burdened with delays in the printing of the letterpress by Seagrave. The first two volumes were finished by 28 December 1802, for on that day the Marsh family visited "Miss Poole's," met Hayley there, and "saw the first Copy of M^r Hayley's Life of Cowper, now just printed by Seagrave of Chichester soon after which M^r Hayley was so good as to present Edw.^d with a Copy, who had in y^e Autumn frequently assisted him at Miss Poole's on Tuesday & Friday Mornings, in examining & correcting Proof Sheets of the Work—" (23: 62). Apparently the gift to Edward took place some weeks after 28 December, for in his letter to Hayley from Oxford on 11 January 1803, Edward was still enquiring about Blake's progress on "the little quintettes of Cowper's hares," no doubt a reference to the

engraving picturing Cowper's weather-house and three tame hares in the second volume of *The Life of Cowper*.¹⁷

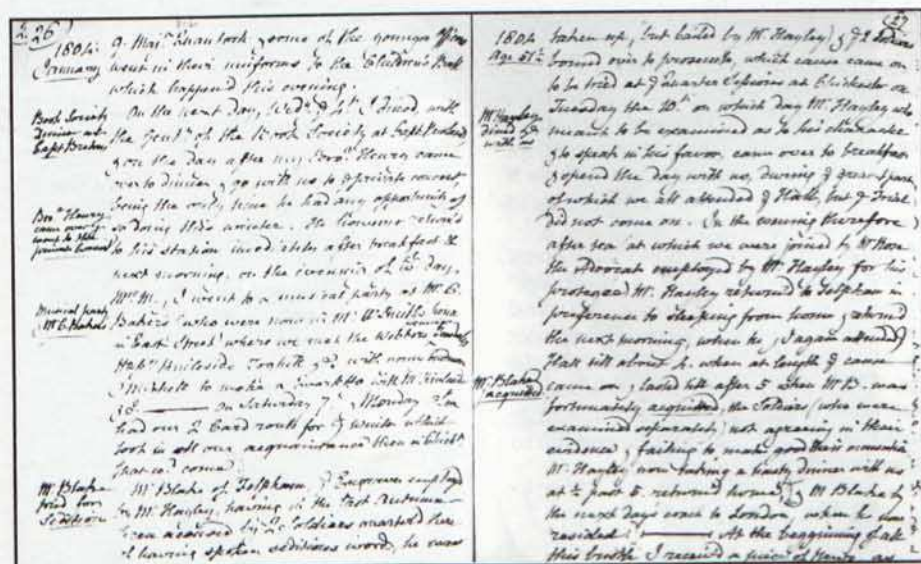
John Marsh paid little heed to Blake's artistic activities, but the latter's trial for sedition at the Chichester Quarter Sessions, 11 January 1804, was a sufficient *cause célèbre* to attract the notice of the assiduous autobiographer. Although Blake's trial and the actions leading to it are well documented, the importance of these matters to Blake's life warrants complete quotation of Marsh's rather rambling and repetitive description of the events of 10 and 11 January (see illus. 3).

M.^r Blake of Felpham, y^e Engraver employ'd by M.^r Hayley, having in the last Autumn been accused by 2 Soldiers [John Scolfield and his comrade John Cock] quarter'd there of having spoken seditious words, he was taken up (but bailed by M.^r Hayley) & y^e 2 Soldiers bound over to prosecute, which cause came on to be tried at y^e Quarter Sessions at Chichester on Tuesday the 10.th on which day M.^r Hayley who meant to be examined as to his character & to speak in his favor, came over to breakfast & spend the day with us, during y^e greatest part of which we all attended y^e Hall [the Guildhall where the trial was to take place], but y^e Trial did not come on. In the evening therefore after tea (at which we were joined by M.^r [Samuel] Rose the

Advocate employed by M.^r Hayley for his protégée [sic] M.^r Hayley return'd to Felpham in preference to sleeping from home & return'd the next morning, when he & I again attended y^e Hall till about 4. when at length y^e cause came on & lasted till after 5 when M.^r B. was fortunately acquitted, the Soldiers (who were examined separately) not agreeing in their evidence & failing to make good their accusation. M.^r Hayley now taking a hasty dinner with us at 1/2 past 5. returned home, & M.^r Blake by the next day's coach to London, where he now resided. —At the beginning [sic] of all this bustle I receiv'd a piece of News, as afflicting as it was unexpected, viz.¹ an account of the death of my Bro.^r in Law M.^r Williams of Nottingham, of whose previous illness we had not heard. The Letter arrived just as we had done breakfast [on the 10th] . . . [.] —As M.^r Hayley was to dine with us that day & his friend M.^r Rose the Counsellor, M.^r Dally y^e attorney were occasionally coming to y^e house, I thought if M.^{rs} [Marsh]. was made acquainted with this news, it wo.^d throw us all into confusion. I therefore having immediately on opening the Letter discover'd that it announc'd *bad news*, walked as if accidentally out of y^e room with y^e Letter in my hand & having read it walked into y^e Town; M.^{rs} M. being going with M.^r Hayley to the Townhall to hear M.^r Blake's trial, where I afterw.^{ds} join'd them & staid till 4. when however it not being likely to come on soon, we adjourn'd to dinner, after w.^h hearing it wo.^d not come on 'till y^e next day, M.^r Hayley after tea return'd home.¹⁸

Although Marsh's account offers no great revelations, his comments do offer a few new bits of information. We already knew from the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* for 16 January 1804 that the court session lasted two full days (BR 146-47), but Marsh's autobiography gives the first indication that anyone expected Blake's trial to begin on 10 January and was carried over to the next day. We also learn from Marsh that the trial began after 4 on the afternoon of the 11th, that it concluded after 5, and that Blake returned to London on the following day. This is very prompt justice, at least by modern standards. Bentley reasonably concludes that "Blake probably went to Felpham a few days before his trial, and he almost certainly stayed with Hayley" (BR 139). This latter point now seems less certain, at least for the 10th and 11th. If Blake was a guest of Hayley's during those two days, Blake would probably have traveled and dined with him; yet Marsh, in his several descriptions of Hayley's activities, makes no reference to Blake as Hayley's companion outside the Guildhall. Further, in his list of "The more prominent events of y^e year 1804," Marsh indicates that Hayley spent the crucial two days with him, not with Blake: "2. M.^r Blake the engraver tried at the Sessions for Sedition, & M.^r Hayleyspent 2 days w.th us" (24: 143). Such absences cannot be the basis for solid conclusions, but the engraver and his former patron may not have been on the friendliest of social terms even in the midst of Blake's trial.

On 19 July 1804, Edward brought "M.^r Iremonger," a "young Oxford friend," with him on a visit to Chichester (24: 82). On the 23rd Edward took "M.^r I— . . . to meet M.^r Hayley (to whom M.^r Iremonger had a great desire to be introduced) . . ." (24: 83). The two young men went again to see the poet a week later (24: 84-85). Perhaps Edward's Oxford colleague was a relative of the Elizabeth Iremonger who



3. John Marsh, manuscript autobiography, vol. 24, pages 26-27, containing the beginning of Marsh's description of Blake's trial, 10 and 11 January 1804. Text in ink, each leaf 19.5 x 15.5 cm. Huntington Library.

later owned a copy of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.¹⁹ Did Mr. Iremonger's friendship with Edward Marsh or his introduction to Hayley lead eventually to Blake and the purchase of one of his illuminated books? Speculation is tempting, but no conclusions can be drawn, particularly since Blake had long since left Felpham and the Marsh and Hayley circles seem to have drawn apart by the next year. Beginning in 1805, we find in John Marsh's autobiography ever fewer references to Hayley, although Harriet Poole is still to be met with from time to time. As for Hayley's friend, the engraver and miniature painter who lived for a few years in a Felpham cottage, there is not a word.

I am greatly indebted to the Huntington Library for permission to quote from Marsh's autobiography and to G. E. Bentley, Jr., for providing me with a copy of his transcript of the Blake references and other pertinent passages. Bentley was the first person to read parts of Marsh's manuscript the day after its arrival at the Huntington. All quotations from the autobiography given in this essay are based on my inspection of the original manuscript.

¹ Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake* (London: Macmillan, 1880) 1: 203. For Blake's letter to Hayley, see *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1982) 740-1 (hereafter cited as E followed by page number). Hayley notes (without reference to Blake) visits from Edward Marsh on 1 Sept. 1803 and early in 1806 in *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*, ed. John Johnson (London: Colburn, Simpkin and Marshall, 1823) 2: 44, 58.

² S. Foster Damon, for example, suggests that the Bard of Oxford is Percy Bysshe Shelley—See Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, rev. ed. by Morris Eaves (Hanover: UP of New England, 1988) 314. The discovery of direct links between Edward Marsh and Blake (see note 4) makes Damon's identification less likely.

³ K. P. [Kenneth Povey], "Blake and 'The Bard of Oxford,'" *The Sussex County Magazine* 1 (1927): 391. There is also a brief discussion of Marsh in Morchard Bishop [pseudonym of Oliver Stoner], *Blake's Hayley: The Life, Works, and Friendships of William Hayley* (London: Gollancz, 1951) 290-91.

⁴ See Robert N. Essick, "Blake, Hayley, and Edward Garrard Marsh: 'An Insect of Parnassus,'" *Explorations: The Age of Enlightenment* 1 (1987): 58-84. The references to Blake are also printed in G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 17-23, 25-27, 44, 60. Marsh's letters are now in my collection.

⁵ John Marsh receives brief notice in *The Dictionary of National Biography* 12: 1100-01. For considerably more information on his activities as an amateur composer and musician, see *A Dictionary of Musicians* (London: Sainsbury and Co., 1825) 2: 118-21, and *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed., ed. Eric Blom (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1955) 5: 588-89 (article signed by Richard Gorer).

⁶ Marsh's autobiography, 1: 143, 17: 87, 134, and 22: 170 (hereafter referred to in parentheses by volume and page number, with date when pertinent). The volumes are carefully numbered in roman numerals on their spines and front covers; most also contain the dates covered. Marsh regularly included marginal summaries of the most important events recorded on each page of his autobiography, and at the end of most years composed lists of major occurrences in his life, musical performances attended or given, and musical compositions.

⁷ According to Christie's auction catalogue. I have not inspected the Cambridge transcription and do not know if it contains any of the post-1802 references to Blake recorded here. This point, however, is of little consequence since the transcript would have independent authority only if in John Marsh's hand (which, according to Christie's catalogue, is not the case).

⁸ Just to complicate matters, Marsh knew at least three other Blakes: a "Widower" named "T. Blake" (21: 9, 30 Aug. 1800) and "the Blakes" who resided in Leominster (23: 25, 3 Sept. 1802; see also 23: 175, 16 Sept. 1803). Fortunately, the references to these other Blakes, excluded from further consideration here, are specific enough to distinguish them from our Blake.

⁹ 21: 34-35. "M.^{rs} Miers" was very probably a relative of Jeremiah Meyer the miniaturist; see G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 100n2 (hereafter cited as BR followed by page number). Marsh met "M^r Miers, the Miniature Painter of London" in February 1783 (8: 70).

¹⁰ Flaxman's letter to Hayley, 19 Aug. 1800 (BR 72).

¹¹ Letter to Thomas Butts, 10 Jan. 1803 (E 724).

¹² Marsh's copy is untraced. Indeed, none of the recorded copies has a provenance reaching back to the original owner.

¹³ BR 78; see also Hayley's letter of 13 May 1801 (BR 80). For Blake's own references to his activities as a miniaturist, see his letters to Butts of 10 May and 11 Sept. 1801 (E 715-16). Hayley very probably encouraged Blake to take up miniature portraiture, but it is doubtful that Hayley provided much in the way of instruction in the art.

¹⁴ See Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1981) #346-48, 353-54, 376-78 and illus. 455, 459-60, 476-78.

¹⁵ 21: 130. The last person named is no doubt the same "M.^r Chetwynd . . . a noble Youth" to whom John Carr refers in a letter to Hayley of 9 Sept. 1801 (BR 82). Carr jocularly claims that Hayley "& Blake have made a Coxcomb of a wretched untutored Artist," perhaps by complimenting Chetwynd's (equally wretched?) artistic efforts. Blake refers to "M.^{rs} Chetwynd & her Brother. a Giant in body mild & polite in soul" in a letter to Hayley of 28 Sept. 1804 (E 755).

¹⁶ Bentley, *Blake Records Supplement* 81.

¹⁷ See Essick, "Blake, Hayley, and Edward Garrard Marsh" 70.

¹⁸ 24: 26-29. In the margin of p. 26 Marsh wrote "M.^r Blake tried for *Sedition*," and in the margin of p. 27 "M.^r Blake *acquitted*."

¹⁹ See G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 413, provenance of copy D. For Henry Crabb Robinson's friendship with Elizabeth Iremonger in 1810, see BR 224.