

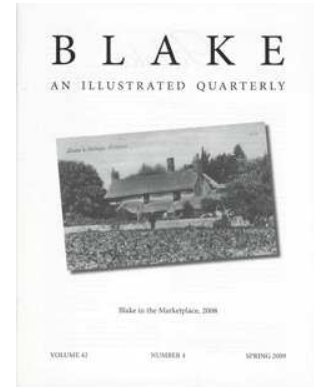
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A R T I C L E

William Blake's Miniature Portraits of the Butts Family

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BY M. CROSBY

IN EARLY 1801 William Blake painted a number of miniature portraits for his Sussex patron, William Hayley, including two of the poet William Cowper (illus. 1-2), one of which was sent to Cowper's cousin, Lady Hesketh.¹ There is also an extant miniature of Cowper's relative, John Johnson, executed in 1802 (illus. 3). These three miniatures are watercolor on card and use a stippling technique to render facial features, while opaque linear strokes are used to delineate the clothing. Blake was initially enthusiastic about painting miniature portraits. In a letter to his London patron, Thomas Butts, of 10 May 1801 he exclaims, "my present engagements are in Miniature Painting Miniature is become a Goddess in my Eyes & my Friends in Sussex say that I Excell in the pursuit. I have a great many orders & they Multiply."² In August 1803 he states that the soldier who had accused him of, among other things, uttering seditious expressions had also identified him as a "Military Painter," adding "I suppose mistaking the Words Miniature Painter, which he might have heard me called" (E 735). Private John Scolfield's misidentification was corrected in his official complaint to "Miniature painter," which indicates that Blake was known locally as a miniaturist.³ There are references to ten miniatures by Blake, but only six have so far been identified.⁴ These six fall into two peri-

ods: those executed at Felpham from 1800 to 1803, and two that are dated 1809. The extant miniatures that have been attributed to the Felpham period comprise the two of Cowper, executed for Hayley, the Johnson portrait, and one of Thomas

(by profession an Engraver) who lives in a little Cottage very near me to paint in miniature—accept this little specimen of his Talent as a mark of Kind Remembrance" (all quoted from BR(2) 107-08). See also Geoffrey Keynes, "Blake's Miniatures," *Blake Studies*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 111-12, and Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) [hereafter B] #346, 348. Butlin does not record Marsh's reference to Blake's miniature of Hayley.



1. (above) *William Cowper*, by William Blake (1801).
Reproduced by permission of the Ashmolean Museum,
University of Oxford.

2. (below) *William Cowper*, by William Blake (1801).
Reproduced by permission of the trustees of the Cowper and
Newton Museum, Olney, Buckinghamshire, England.



My argument for a redating of the Thomas Butts senior miniature was first put forward in a paper presented at the Blake and Conflict conference, University College, Oxford, 22-23 September 2006. I would like to thank Martin Butlin for reading and commenting on an earlier draft.

1. Morton D. Paley discusses the various portraits of Cowper that Blake executed in Felpham, including the two miniatures ("Cowper as Blake's Spectre," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 1.3 [spring 1968]: 236-52).

2. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1988) [hereafter E] 715.

3. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) [hereafter BR(2)] 160.

4. In Hayley's letters and the journal of Hayley's friend, the composer John Marsh, are references to miniatures of Hayley, his first wife, Eliza, and two of George Romney. In a letter to Romney of 21 April 1801 Hayley claims to have taught Blake miniature painting using "the two infinitely best Resemblances of yrself, that I am so happy as to possess.—one ... He will copy exactly,—the Head from the large unfinished sketch He shall reduce to the same size as its companion." In his journal entry for 9 May 1801 Marsh recalls seeing "a striking Miniature of M^r. Hayley" by Blake, and in a letter to Daniel Parker Coke of 13 May 1801 Hayley refers to a miniature of his wife Eliza that his son, Thomas Alphonso, was planning to execute, but which Blake appears to have painted: "My dear Tom intended to execute for you such a Resemblance of Mrs H—His own calamitous Illness & Death precluded Him from that pleasure—I have recently formed a new artist for this purpose by teaching a worthy creature



3. *John Johnson*, by William Blake (1802). Reproduced by permission of the trustees of the Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney, Buckinghamshire, England.

Butts senior. The two from 1809 are of Butts's wife, Elizabeth, and his son, Thomas Butts junior. Unlike the Cowper and Johnson miniatures, the three depicting the Butts family are watercolors on oval ivory supports.⁵ This note examines the Butts family miniatures held in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum and proposes a redating of the Butts senior portrait based on stylistic correspondences, epistolary references, and contemporary fashion trends.

In his "Descriptive Catalogue" of Blake's works, published as an appendix to the first edition of Alexander Gilchrist's biography of 1863, William Rossetti dates the miniature of Butts senior to 1801.⁶ In a manuscript annotation to the 1863 edition, Rossetti amends the dating to 1802.⁷ This date is retained in the 1880 edition.⁸ In *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, Butlin also tentatively dates this miniature to the Felpham period, c. 1801.⁹

5. A. E. Briggs briefly discusses the three Butts miniatures in the context of Butts senior's friendship with Blake ("Mr. Butts, the Friend and Patron of Blake," *Connoisseur* vol. 19, no. 74 [October 1907]: 92-96).

6. William Michael Rossetti, "Descriptive Catalogue," Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, "Pictor Ignotus," 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1863) 2: 205.

7. Cited in B #376.

8. Rossetti, "Descriptive Catalogue," Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880) 2: 212.

9. B #376.

Butlin bases his dating on Blake's letter to Butts of 11 September 1801. Writing from Felpham, Blake states, "by my Sisters hands I transmit to M^r Butts an attempt at your likeness which I hope She who is the best judge will think like" (E 716). Blake does not directly identify this "likeness" as a miniature portrait; indeed, he tells Butts about "painting Miniatures" only after a long apology for not sending any of the Bible commissions. In a postscript, he describes portraiture as a "minute operation," which may be a reference to the miniature portraits he was working on at the time. It is also possible that the "likeness" of Butts sent to London on 11 September is related to the unfinished portrait that Blake mentioned a year earlier.

In a letter to Butts of 2 October 1800 Blake reassures his London patron that he will continue work on the Bible paintings as well as on an unspecified portrait: "M^r Butts will I hope Excuse my not having finishd the Portrait. I wait for less hurried moments" (E 713). Again, there is no evidence in the letter to indicate the format of this portrait or indeed its subject, although, like that mentioned in the letter of September 1801, it was intended for Mrs. Butts, which suggests that it was of her husband.

As Blake did not begin miniature painting until early 1801, it seems unlikely that the portrait mentioned in the letter of October 1800 was a miniature. Furthermore, this portrait was not complete in late 1800 because, as he intimates, other projects were occupying his time. We know that Hayley provided Blake with a number of commissions shortly after he arrived in Felpham, such as the library portraits. It seems that during the first two years of his stay in Sussex, Blake attended to his commissions from Hayley as a matter of priority. For example, in the letter to Butts of October 1800 Blake states that he has "not got any forwarder with the three Marys or with any other of your commissions ..." (E 712). It appears that this painting, along with six other biblical watercolors, was not finished until mid-1803. In a letter of 6 July 1803 Blake tells Butts that he has seven paintings "now on the Stocks," including "the three Maries at the Sepulcher" (E 729). These were delivered to Butts on 16 August 1803. It is therefore possible that, like the biblical designs, the portrait mentioned in the letter of October 1800 was initially put on hold and may have been that which Blake's sister delivered to Butts in September 1801. If so, it seems unlikely that it was a miniature.

This possibility is further suggested in Blake's letter to Butts of 22 November 1802, where, after apologizing for not writing sooner, Blake states:

But You will Justly enquire ... why I have not before now finishd the Miniature I promis'd to M^r Butts? I answer I have not till now in any degree pleas'd myself & now I must in-treat you to Excuse faults for Portrait Painting is the direct contrary to Designing & Historical Painting in every respect—If you have not Nature before you for Every Touch you cannot Paint Portrait. (E 719)

It therefore appears that Blake had not completed a miniature for Mrs. Butts, presumably of her husband, by the end of No-

vember 1802, which suggests that the portrait sent to London in September 1801 was probably not a miniature. In the letter to Butts of 22 November, Blake claims that he needs the subject before him in order to execute a miniature portrait. This is a claim that, as we shall see, he reiterates in 1803.

The extant miniature of Thomas Butts senior is an undated watercolor on an oval ivory support, 8.5 x 6.3 cm., set in a gilt oval frame (illus. 4).¹⁰ Blake depicts Butts with close-cropped, disheveled hair, known as the Brutus style, dressed in a blue uniform with a gold epaulette. Butts was chief clerk in the office of the muster-master general, and the uniform he is wearing may be related to that office, although, as Bentley points out, he "was never either an artillery officer or Muster-Master General."¹¹ He does not appear to have undertaken any regular military training, and his duties in the office of the muster-master general were, according to a contemporary account, entirely administrative.¹² There is no conclusive evidence to indicate whether civilian personnel were entitled to wear military uniforms while employed by the government. It is possible that Butts was a member of the local militia or joined one of the numerous volunteer corps raised between 1795 and 1810, which would have entitled him to wear a uniform while on duty.¹³ Another possible explanation will be discussed below.

Blake's portrait depicts Butts's head and shoulders, with the head turned slightly to the left, and the right hand holding a book. Apart from faint traces of blue above



4. *Thomas Butts Senior*, by William Blake (c. 1809).
Reproduced by permission of the trustees of the British Museum.

and around the sitter's head and hair, the background is blank. Blake uses linear brushstrokes, with opaque white on the necktie and gold on the epaulette, to render the clothing. Linear brushstrokes are also used to delineate the eyebrows, chin, and jowls. However, Blake employs carefully worked stippling, which is achieved with densely interspersed red and black dots, on the majority of the face.¹⁴ Stippling combined with linear brushstrokes for outline is used to draw the hand holding the book. The skin coloring on both hand and face is extremely light because Blake leaves areas unpainted, using the luminous qualities of the ivory support to achieve tone and reflection, as on the tip and bridge of the nose. A small amount of opaque white is also used on the pupils for a reflective effect.

In 1809, Blake painted miniatures of Mrs. Butts and her son, Thomas Butts junior. These are also watercolors on ivory and again demonstrate Blake's use of delicate stippling. The portrait of Elizabeth Butts is on an oval ivory support, 8.7 x 6.5 cm., set in a red leather oval frame (illus. 5).¹⁵ Mrs. Butts is depicted with her hair tied up, wearing a lace bodice, and sporting a hoop earring with pearl drop.¹⁶ Her neck is bare, her head turned slightly to the right, and she holds a closed fan in her right

10. British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings: PD 1942,1010.4. There is a minute crack in the ivory, running vertically the length of the oval.

11. "Thomas Butts, White Collar Maecenas," *PMLA* 71.5 (December 1956): 1052-66 (quotation from 1056).

12. George Aust, Commissary General of Musters, describes the duties of the chief clerk of the muster-master general in a note dated 28 March 1810, quoted in Bentley, "Thomas Butts" 1054n12.

13. A member of the local militia or volunteer corps could wear a uniform only when on duty; see *A Plan for Rendering the Militia of London Useful* ... (London, 1782) 21.

14. For a detailed examination of Blake's distinctive stippling technique, see M. Crosby, "A Minute Skirmish: Blake, Hayley and the Art of Miniature Painting," *Blake and Conflict*, ed. Sarah Haggarty and Jon Mee (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 164-84.

15. British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings: PD 1942,1010.5.

16. Daphne Foskett notes that by 1800 unpowdered hair was fashionable among women, "worn with a bandeau swathed around the curls" (*Collecting Miniatures* [Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 1979] 355).

hand.¹⁷ Above her right shoulder Blake has used brown pigment to date and sign the portrait "1809 W Blake pinx".¹⁸ The bodice is rendered with linear strokes, with opaque white used on the edges. As with her husband's miniature, Blake employs a gentle stipple technique, interspersing black and light-red dots for tone to delineate the jowls, chin, lips, nose, and eyes. Black pigment is used to emphasize hair and shadow, noticeable under the chin, at the sides of the nose, and around the eyes. The eyebrows are drawn with very fine linear brushstrokes. Blake uses blue, black, and opaque white stippling on the pupils, which he mirrors on the jeweled earring. Stippling is also used on the exposed upper part of Mrs. Butts's chest. As in the portrait of her husband, Blake makes extensive use of the ivory support for skin tone, and leaves the background of the portrait blank, except for a trace of blue above her left shoulder.

The miniature of Thomas Butts junior is on a slightly smaller oval ivory support, 7.05 x 6.5 cm. (illus. 6).¹⁹ The scale is, however, significantly larger in relation to the support than the portraits of his parents. The head and shoulders are depicted, with the head turned slightly to the left and the eyes staring directly at the viewer. In the same style and position as for the miniature of Mrs. Butts, Blake has used brown pigment to inscribe "W Blake Pinx". On brown paper pasted on the rear is inscribed in black



ink "T Butts jun^r. Esq^r. Aet. 20. 1809". While this does not appear to be Blake's hand, it supports Butlin's dating.

Thomas Butts junior is depicted with close-cropped, unpowdered Brutus-style hair and is wearing a high-necked shirt and collar. The clothing is delineated using linear strokes, with opaque white on the necktie and collar. The face is again made up of densely interspersed red and black stippling, evident on the chin, lips, nose, and eyes. Black stippling is used for the sideburns, eyebrows, and shadow

under the chin, nose, and eyes. As with the other miniatures of the Butts family, Blake makes conspicuous use of the ivory support to achieve skin tone and reflection, evident on the chin, tip and bridge of the nose, and cheeks. There are some linear brushstrokes to delineate the jawline above the high collar. The background is blue wash, drawn using linear brushstrokes with stippling around the head and upper body of the sitter.

As in the miniatures of his parents, the facial coloring is extremely delicate, accentuating the luminosity of the ivory support.

In all three miniatures Blake uses a delicate stipple technique that results in an almost transparent skin tone. In comparison with the miniatures of Cowper and Johnson, the lightness of skin tone is striking, though it is possible that this may be due to fading. When we look, however, at how these miniatures were worn, it is clear that the luminous skin tone was deliberate. The miniature of Butts senior was probably intended for Mrs. Butts, who, as contemporary fashion dictated, may have worn it around her neck. The clasp on the reverse of the gilt frame suggests that it may have hung on a chain.²⁰

17. It was the prevailing fashion to depict female sitters with exposed neck and shoulders (Patrick J. Noon, "Miniatures on the Market," John Murdoch, Jim Murrell, Patrick J. Noon, and Roy Strong, *The English Miniature* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981] 163-209 [see 181]).

18. Robert N. Essick relates the depiction of Mrs. Butts to Blake's rendering of the Wife of Bath in his 1808 painting of the *Canterbury Pilgrims* ("William Blake's 'Female Will' and Its Biographical Context," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 31.4 [autumn 1991]: 615-30 [see 621]).

19. British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings: PD 1942.1010.6.

20. The reverse of the Butts senior portrait contains five locks of hair, each tied with a golden thread, on a woven hair ground (illus. 7). It was common practice to include a lock of the sitter's hair on the reverse of the miniature. At least one lock (top left) corresponds to the dark color of Butts senior's eyebrows on the miniature (the hair on his head being powdered or, as argued later, graying). Two locks (top and bottom right)



5. (facing page) *Elizabeth Butts*, by William Blake (1809). Reproduced by permission of the trustees of the British Museum.

6. (this page, left) *Thomas Butts Junior*, by William Blake (1809). Reproduced by permission of the trustees of the British Museum.

7. (this page, below) Rear of Thomas Butts senior portrait, containing five locks of hair on a woven hair ground. Reproduced by permission of the trustees of the British Museum.

The miniature of Mrs. Butts is set in a red leather case with a catch and a hinge. The lid of the case is now missing. It is likely that Butts senior carried it on his person, possibly on a chain tucked into his waist. The lid would have been closed to prevent fading.²¹ It seems likely that Blake's delicate stippling, evident in all three miniatures, was calculated to accentuate the luminosity of the ivory support.

The stylistic similarities among the three portraits call into question Butlin's speculative attribution of 1801 for the miniature of Thomas Butts senior. The evidence from Blake's letters also suggests a redating. When Blake sent the portrait of Thomas Butts senior in September 1801, he included in a postscript the following statement:

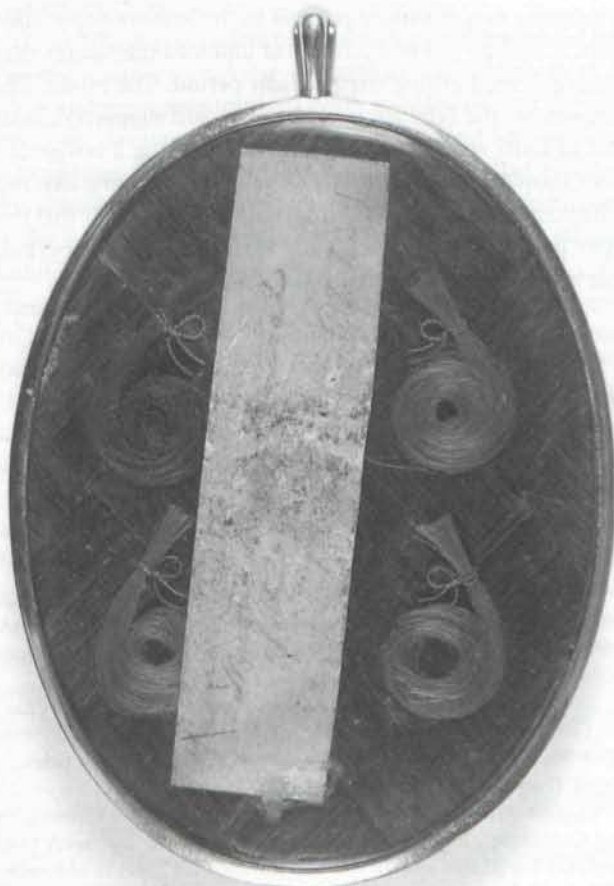
Next time I have the happiness to see you I am determined to paint another Portrait of you from Life in my best manner for Memory will not do in such minute operations. for I have now discovered that without Nature before the painters Eye he can never produce any thing in the walks of Natural Painting Historical Designing is one thing & Portrait Painting another & they are as Distinct as any two Arts can be (E 717)

In a letter to Butts of 6 July 1803 Blake reiterates his promise:

I am determind that M^{rs} Butts shall have a good likeness of You if I have hands & eyes left. for I am become a likeness taker & succeed admirably well. but this is not to be atchiev'd

appear consistent with the dark-brown hair depicted in the miniature of Mrs. Butts; another (center, under tape) is similarly consistent with the brown hair depicted in the miniature of Butts junior. The remaining light-brown lock (bottom left) does not correspond to any of the others. It was not unknown for artists to include a lock of their own hair, particularly if close to the subject. Therefore, it is possible that this lock belongs to the artist who painted the miniature. For a discussion of the inclusion of hair in miniature portraits during the eighteenth century, see Marcia Pointon, "Surrounded with Brilliants": Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England," *Art Bulletin* 83.1 (March 2001): 48-71 (especially 58-63), and "Materialising Mourning: Hair, Jewellery and the Body," *Material Memories*, ed. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford: Berg, 1999) 39-58.

21. The portrait of Thomas Butts junior is set in a black wooden frame with brass mounts, suggesting that it may have been displayed, possibly in the Buttses' residence.



without the original sitting before you for Every touch. all likenesses from memory being necessarily very very defective but Nature & Fancy are Two Things & can Never be joined neither ought any one to attempt it for it is Idolatry & destroys the Soul. (E 730)

These two letters clearly indicate that Blake planned to paint another portrait of Butts upon his return to London in 1803, possibly a miniature.

The extant miniatures painted at Felpham were executed on card rather than on ivory, with the exception of the Butts senior miniature that Butlin has dated to 1801. If Blake had access to ivory in Felpham it is highly likely he would have used it as the support for the Johnson miniature and also perhaps for the two Cowper miniatures. Ivory was relatively expensive and difficult to procure outside London, and I have been unable to locate any record of an ivory turner working in Chichester during Blake's residence in Sussex.²² Hayley may have been able to purchase ivory supports on his frequent trips to London, but this does not explain why Blake painted the portraits of Cowper, particularly the miniature sent to Lady Hesketh, and later that of Johnson, on card, and then painted the Butts senior miniature on ivory, unless the Butts portrait is from a later date.²³

While Blake repeatedly invited the Butts family to Felpham, there is no evidence to indicate that they took up his offer. Indeed, the extant correspondence suggests that from October 1801 to November 1802 Blake may have had no contact at all with his London patron. It therefore seems likely that he painted the portrait after he returned to the capital in 1803, possibly when he executed the miniatures of Mrs. Butts and Thomas Butts junior. The stylistic correspondences among the three miniatures appear to support this contention and, while there is a difference in scale among the portraits, a number of visual correspondences suggest a similar date of execution.

The portraits of Butts senior and his wife visually complement each other. The position of their heads and shoulders and the direction of their gazes are mirror images. The position of the hands, however, disturbs this mirroring effect. In both portraits the right hand of the sitter is in exactly the same position, palm uppermost holding an object, in the case of Butts senior, a book, and of his wife, a closed fan. Although the portrait of Thomas Butts junior is significantly larger in scale than those of his parents, it shares an important visual correspondence with his father's portrait. Both Butts senior and junior sport the close-cropped hairstyle that became fash-

ionable among the polite classes after the Peace of Amiens collapsed in May 1803.

Male fashions during the first twenty years of the nineteenth century were influenced by the military. This included wearing uniforms, which may explain why Butts is depicted in a military-style jacket. The Brutus haircut imitated the disheveled style of the close-cropped curls worn by soldiers.²⁴ It is uncertain whether Butts senior is wearing hair powder or if he was naturally graying. This is significant, as from 1795 there was a heavy tax on hair powder. The fashion of the Brutus style stipulated that the hair or wig must not be powdered, which suggests that Butts senior's hair was graying.²⁵ Close-cropped hair was popular among the Jacobins during the 1790s. From 1795 the Crop Club, which was inspired by the Duke of Bedford and other opponents of William Pitt's government, had their hair cropped "for the purpose of evading the tax on powdered heads."²⁶ Before 1800, it would have been unlikely that a government employee such as Butts would have sported close-cropped hair due to its association with the Jacobins. It is highly probable that he sported this style only when it became fashionable after 1802.

The evidence presented here supports a redating of Blake's miniature of Thomas Butts senior. It is possible that the portrait of Butts sent to London on 11 September 1801 was either the portrait mentioned in the letter to Butts of 2 October 1800—that is, before Blake took up miniature painting for Hayley—or an untraced portrait. If, as Butlin claims, Blake is referring to a miniature portrait in the letter of September 1801, it may be one of a number of untraced miniatures that Blake executed during the Felpham period. The miniatures dating from the Felpham period are on card supports, unlike that of Butts senior, which was executed using a noticeably finer stippling technique on an oval ivory support, like the miniatures of his wife and son. It is therefore probable that the three Butts miniatures were painted during the same period, that is, when Blake had the original before him.

22. For example, a 1798 London trade directory lists only one ivory turner working in the capital. See *A London Directory, or Alphabetical Arrangement; Containing the Names and Residences of the Merchants, Manufacturers, and Principal Traders* (London, 1798) 104.

23. The Cowper miniatures may have been used as practice pieces for the frontispiece engraving of the first volume of Hayley's biography of Cowper.

24. The style can be seen, for example, in Henry Edridge's 1804 portrait of Robert Southey and Thomas Phillips's 1807 portrait of Blake, both in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

25. C. Willett Cunningham and Phillis Cunningham, *Handbook of English Costume in the Nineteenth Century*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1970) 75, and *Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century*, rev. ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1972) 247.

26. This style became known as the Bedford Level (see Cunningham and Cunningham, *Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century* 247). For Jacobin associations with this style, see *Times* 19 September 1795: 3, col. B.