

What New Is There to Learn from Old Familiars? *Burning Bright: William Blake and the Art of the Book*. John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, 8 February–23 June 2013.

Reviewed by Sibylle Erle

SIBYLLE ERLE (sibylle.erle@bishopg.ac.uk), FRSA, is senior lecturer in English at Bishop Grosseteste University Lincoln, author of *Blake, Lavater and Physiognomy* (Legenda, 2010), co-editor of *Science, Technology and the Senses* (special issue for *RaVoN*, 2008), and volume editor of *Panoramas, 1787-1900: Texts and Contexts* (5 vols., Pickering & Chatto, 2012). With Morton D. Paley she is now co-editing *The Reception of William Blake in Europe* (Bloomsbury). She has co-curated the display *Blake and Physiognomy* (2010-11) at Tate Britain and devised an online exhibition of Tennyson's copy of Blake's *Job* for the Tennyson Research Centre (2013). Apart from reception, she is working on "character" in the romantic period.

- 1 THE discovery of new etchings in Manchester made international headlines in January 2013. In Britain on Monday the 21st the *Independent* reported, "Hundreds of Lost William Blake Etchings Discovered at a Manchester Library." The article, written by Nick Clark, said, "researchers ... stumbled upon a treasure trove" when they "found about 350 engraved plates designed by Blake." The treasure-hunt language can be traced back to the web pages of the John Rylands Library and therefore essentially the press office of the University of Manchester. This publicity caused a few ripples but the excitement was short lived, as the "discovery" applied to the stacks of the library rather than the works known to have been created by Blake. Still, what happens to Blake in the public sphere matters.
- 2 The dark temporary exhibition space on the first floor of the late nineteenth-century Gothic building of the library not only contained these recently rediscovered treasures—the exhibition booklet said "some exciting new finds from the Library's collections" and the display board "many of these works have previously lain undetected"—but also and more importantly showed a large collection of Blake's commercial art. In addition, the display



contextualized the reception of Blake's craftsmanship by juxtaposing designs with images by the Ancients, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the members of the Arts and Crafts movement, such as Samuel Palmer, William Holman Hunt, and Walter Crane, as well as a facsimile published by William Muir and an example of a newly illustrated edition—a Blake poem illustrated by Jacynth Parsons from the 1927 edition of *Songs of Innocence* published by the Medici Society. The mixture of books, sheets, designs, and images resonated with what this Blake exhibition was about: the art of the book.

- 3 *Burning Bright* occupied three rooms because it spilled into the adjacent Spencer and Crawford Rooms. It was curated by the archives and visual materials manager, Stella Halkyard, and grew out of Colin Trodd's *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World 1830-1930* (2012) as well as the efforts of his students, who, after receiving special training on prints, etchings, and engravings, found what was on display. Was *Burning Bright* throwing new light on Blake? How excited should we still be? The answer is—a bit. "Burning Bright" is, of course, a familiar expression, used twice in Blake's "The Tyger" (1794): "Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night; / What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" The last stan-

za repeats the first but changes the last line to “Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” (E 24-25). In the section on John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative, of a Five Years’ Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America; from the Year 1772, to 1777* (1796), the exhibition booklet quoted Stedman on the “tyger-cat” whose eyes sparked “flashes like lightning” (11). A sense of audacity, I think, was maintained and creatively constructed in the display. The story to be told in this review is how the display handled, or rather could be seen to resist, the discovery narrative imposed through the media, because Burning Bright made a statement about the legacy of Blake’s art (it said “creative impact” on the board).

- 4 The language of a supposed treasure hunt through the stacks of the library was countered directly by the image on the board at the entrance: we saw one of the explorers, equipped with a magnifying glass, poring over the pages of *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. In view of the treasure narrative it was surprising that this explorer didn’t wear white gloves and that her pendant, hanging on a long necklace, was touching the pristine page. I couldn’t tell how excited she was, since she stared intently at the image in front of



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her. I had to admit grudgingly to myself that I envied her the access and proximity to the physical object. To remedy this lack or loss, the John Rylands offered all visitors a session on a computer, where I could use—as she did—a magnifying tool to study this book, as well as Blake’s *Night Thoughts*, page by page and close up. That the library digitized both *Illustrations of the Book of Job* and the hand-colored copy of *Night Thoughts* and has made them available online may be a small solace to all of you who will want to examine these specific copies. At the entrance, opposite the board with that posed photograph, we were introduced to Blake. On this particular board the emphasis was on Blake the visionary poet, which is one of many Blakes we could have had: it said, “by the age of eight Blake was already showing signs of visionary spirituality,” and next to it a little pink boy, one of Blake’s many images of children, served as a reminder that boys and not girls had to cope with wearing pink in the eighteenth century.

- 5 Burning Bright showcased a selection of the Blake collection at the John Rylands, but it seemed that none of what was on display was actually new; that is, there was no work of art that had not previously been listed in G. E. Bentley, Jr.’s *Blake Books* (1977) and *Blake Books Supplement* (1995) or Robert N. Essick’s *William Blake’s Commercial Book Illustrations* (1991), though the show included some newly discovered copies of works with his commercial engravings, most of which have since been included in Bentley’s annual checklists in *Blake* and the online compilation of those lists, “William Blake and His Circle.” There may be small adjustments to be made. Bentley, for example, doesn’t say that Stedman’s *Narrative* at the John Rylands is colored (see *BBS* p. 255). On the top shelf of the first vitrine there was a copy of William Hayley’s *Ballads* (1805), which was opened to show “The Lion,” facing p. 100 and illustrating “The Lion. Ballad the Nineth [*sic*].” Next to it sat Hayley’s *Triumphs of Temper*, which, according to its label, was illustrated with plates engraved by Blake after Maria Denman. The label, in other words, contradicted the title page, which attributes the designs to Maria Flaxman, John Flaxman’s half-sister. (Maria Denman was Flaxman’s wife’s sister, who was known as Maria Flaxman after John and Ann Flaxman adopted her.) On display was the newly illustrated twelfth edition of the work, published in 1803. This edition, with six plates engraved by Blake, is sufficiently rare to deserve some commentary. As Mark Crosby discusses, the work had previously been illustrated with seven engravings after Thomas Stothard, and Blake’s plates were used in only two editions, 1803 and 1807, but not in any subsequent ones because of wear (123). He argues further that John Flaxman and Lady Harriet Hesketh were disappointed with the published plates, even though Blake and Hayley had “edited” the drawings together (111-12). Crosby suggests that Hayley must have liked the proofs that Blake would have print-

ed. He thinks that Hayley sent the plates to London to be printed: “If Blake or Catherine had been responsible for printing the plates, it is highly likely that they would have spotted the imperfection [on pl. 6] and corrected it” (123). Bentley lists this copy under “Manchester” in the online “William Blake and His Circle.” Robert Blair’s *The Grave* (1808), which was displayed on the bottom shelf, is known too, and Bentley had previously found a copy of “unrecorded format” in the Whitworth Art Gallery (see *BB* p. 526).

- 6 The second vitrine had George Cumberland’s *Thoughts on Outline* (1796) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories* (1796) at the top, and Jacob Bryant’s *A New System, or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774-76) and Stedman’s *Narrative* below. The Cumberland, not listed in *BBS*, is included in the online “William Blake and His Circle,” and the Manchester Bryant was already listed in *BBS* (p. 203). According to *BBS* (pp. 264-65), the John Rylands owns copies of both the 1791 and 1796 editions of Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories*. Here we could see what is special about the later edition: the frontispiece has been cut and pasted—not printed—onto the page facing the title page. Bentley does not comment on this feature, which might suggest that it is an anomaly, though this should surely tell us something about the art of the book. But the label was silent.
- 7 The second vitrine was the most thought provoking, I think, because of a plate from Bryant’s *New System* (vol. 2, facing p. 410). The label indicated, as was to be expected, that Blake probably engraved a small number of its plates when he was apprenticed to James Basire in the 1770s. It also said that “Bryant’s writing had a profound impact on Blake and formed an important source and inspiration for the symbolic systems he developed in his own works.” This point is easy to support, because Blake referred to Bryant when he talked about antiquities in his description of *The Ancient Britons* in *A Descriptive Catalogue* (1809). It is impossible to know for sure which plates might have been engraved by Blake (see Essick 117 and *BB* p. 537). The plate depicts four figures, three of which have animal heads. What the impact on Blake may have been I realized once I had moved on to the next vitrine, which contained Robert Thornton’s edition of Virgil’s *Pastorals* (1821) and Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden* (1791), because the second figure in the Bryant plate, identified as Hermes and compared to Osiris, was echoed by the dog-headed Anubis figure from “Fertilization of Egypt” as engraved by Blake after Henry Fuseli for Darwin. The Hermes/Osiris figure in Bryant has a human head with wavy hair and an elongated snout of a dog; the crocodile that he is holding down with his left foot has a beak with teeth. The crocodile is a sacred animal associated with the Nile. It was tempting to indulge this visual parallel between the illustrations for Bryant’s

New System and Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden*, but unfortunately the more we think about it the less it will stand up. This is because the Anubis figure is in Fuseli’s sketch of “Fertilization of Egypt.” The label involuntarily raised the question of Blake’s input into his commercial engravings. While he would have followed the instructions and guidance of Basire in the 1770s, it is more than likely that he followed Fuseli’s when working on the plate for *The Botanic Garden*. There is more. Essick (46-47), who examines “Fertilization of Egypt,” discusses the plate’s relationship with the text and documents that the winged floating figure originates in Fuseli’s sketch. The exhibition label, however, asserted that “the bearded rain-god displayed here is entirely Blake’s invention.” That Fuseli gave Blake a free hand when he was working up the sketch is probable, but this notion doesn’t reveal how close they were, how often they met, and indeed how Fuseli treated his engravers (on their relationship, see Todd). The exhibition label, in short, made a bold and unsubstantiated claim. What we know for sure is that the two drawings, Fuseli’s and Blake’s, show this rain god (see Essick pls. 68 and 69). Bentley lists the 1791 as well as the 1795 editions of *The Botanic Garden*, but the copy of Virgil’s *Pastorals* is not listed anywhere, which means that we are technically dealing with a discovery.

- 8 The sense of disappointed excitement continued as I walked through to *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (Spencer Room) and *Night Thoughts* (Crawford), the highlights of Burning Bright. In their edition of the *Night Thoughts* designs, Grant et al. have already documented the John Rylands copy. They draw attention to the quality of the coloring and point out that this copy was most likely colored by Blake as well as his wife, Catherine (1: 53). The information in the Crawford Room was vague because label and board contradicted each other: one ascribed the coloring to Blake, the other to the husband and wife team. The huge book and its wonderful designs stopped me in my tracks. The book was open at pages 72 and 73, revealing an image of Christ on the right-hand side. The figure is walking with actual nails sticking out of red-rimmed wounds in his hands and feet (the wound in his right foot is obscured). He is wearing a crown of thorns and drops of blood are running down his forehead. Christ is looking down and reaching out to someone on his left who is outside the image. Grant et al. also note that the copy belonged to the second Earl Spencer, George John Spencer (1758-1834), before it came to the John Rylands (1: 66). When she decided to have a memorial library built for her husband, John Rylands’s widow bought the Spencer collection as part of its foundation. The bookplate dates the acquisition to 1894, which means that the acquisition of *Night Thoughts* preceded the official opening of the library by six years.



9 As I walked into the Spencer Room, I encountered *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. It is one of the one hundred copies printed on drawing paper in March 1826 by James Lahee for John Linnell. We could look at plate “14,” “When the morning Stars”; the paper was in very good condition. According to the label, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* was published by Blake in 1825. This date, of course, originates from the imprint and is incorrect. The label also named the students who discovered the copy; it suggested that this was the main find of the Blake project carried out at the library, and the display board spoke of “Blake’s ‘[as] exquisitely engraved as grandly conceived’ masterpiece.” The story to be told here is about the previous owner. A lot of work has been done on Blake collectors already, and this one deserves more attention. According to the bookplate (which could be accessed via the computer in the Crawford Room), this *Job* was presented to the John Rylands by Richard Hawkin, Esq., of Darwen in Lancashire. Hawkin, who became friends with Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), the social and gay rights campaigner, settled in York, where he stood as the Labour candidate during the local municipal elections (having been nominated by the York Labour Representation Committee) for Monk Ward on 2 November 1903. He campaigned for a housing reform to benefit workers, a municipal cemetery, and playgrounds. Hawkin was present at the inauguration of the Guild of Freemen of the City of York on 9 September 1953 and published *A History of the Freemen of the City of York* in 1955. Judging from

the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, by the time Hawkin died in 1968, he had been a generous donor for many years; his collection included ninety-two volumes relating to Blake—facsimiles of the works as well as biographies and literary studies—many materials about Yorkshire, and also a “small selection of anarchist literature ... and pamphlets relating to the anti-slavery movement” (2). In the “Notes and News” section at the beginning of the *Bulletin* the unidentified editors evidently wrongly assumed that the *Job* was, like the other works by Blake in Hawkin’s possession, a facsimile (3).



- 10 The remainder of the temporary exhibition space was filled with books about Blake (Gilchrist, Swinburne, Yeats and Ellis), about ten books by artists and writers influenced by Blake, and finally Muir’s facsimile of *Songs of Innocence* and Parsons’s illustration to Blake’s “The Little Black Boy.” Fascinating materials: compelling visual parallels. It became clear, for example, that plate “14” (“When the morning Stars”) from *Job* inspired Crane, who reproduced the angelic figures in *Line and Form* (1900), because in the margin of the book, open at pages 18 and 19, Crane acknowledges his source.
- 11 In her blog entry of 14 January 2013 (John Rylands Library Special Collections blog), Halkyard wrote that the researchers “uncover[ed] a significant hoard of books containing designs and engravings,” which, “due to their dispersal across our collections ... have previously lain undetected.” In the next sentence she talked about “finds.” I appreciated the single quotation marks but want to stress that what was extraordinary about this display was the freshness of the ink and color of the images in the books. I looked at them with admiration: they hadn’t been opened in many years, and the golden upper-arm bands in “Europe Supported by Africa & America” from Stedman’s *Narrative* burnt brightly in the dark and filled my eyes. Halkyard, too, by the way, used such a metaphor when she described the

impact Blake has had on those who came after him. Manchester was well worth a visit.

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