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William Blake's Manuscripts



R E V I E W

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1 THE autumn 2017 special issue of *Huntington Library Quarterly*, edited by Mark Crosby, is devoted to manuscript studies of the works of William Blake. Several of these studies were originally presented at a 2013 symposium at the Huntington Library, which, as Blake scholars know, houses one of the world's finest Blake collections. Taken together, the essays demonstrate the variety of ways

in which the close study of Blake's manuscripts and prints can yield significant new discoveries about his engraving techniques, his working habits, and his influences. Or, as Crosby puts it in his introduction, "the eight essays ... range in methodological approach from considering the materiality of Blake's manuscripts to more conceptual concerns, with particular attention given to discussing the instability of long-term preservation" (363).

2 The collection begins with Joseph Viscomi's "Signing Large Color Prints: The Significance of Blake's Signatures." Having closely examined the *Blake Archive's* digital images of twenty-nine surviving impressions of Blake's color monographs, Viscomi has "been able to identify the status of each print and resolve the problems of date and sequence."

Using image-editing software, I have been able to remove yellowish varnishes, or brighten colors to recover original conditions, or enhance images to reveal (or determine the absence of) obscured substructures and features. Most important, I have been able to enlarge any area multiple times without distortion and focus on how designs were printed rather than on how impressions were finished. As a result, I have identified which impressions of a design were printed together and in what order, which were printed separately, and which were refinished, or freshened up in preparation for sale. (376)

Besides his examination of the prints, Viscomi also sequences the impressions of the monographs according to the various ways Blake signed, or didn't sign, them. In so doing, he proposes a hitherto unknown printing session (c. 1796), argues that Blake reconceived of the prints as paintings about 1807, and suggests that Blake's "market and audience was larger than is generally acknowledged, his economic situation slightly better, and his artistic appeal and reputation slightly wider" (402). This is an important essay, filled with the kinds of detail we have learned to expect from Viscomi, all of it well worth attending to.

3 In "Blake Writes Backward," Alexander Gourlay puts Blake's engraved signatures under the microscope to show the different ways he experimented with backward writing, or retrography. As detailed as Viscomi's piece, Gourlay's essay traces the development of Blake's retrographic technique, showing it to be distinct from those employed by other engravers, and demonstrating that the study of it is useful in determining the relationship between the signed plates and the lettering used in his illuminated works.

4 Angus Whitehead turns from Blake's engravings to his letters—to the "kitchen letter" to John Linnell, postmarked 25 November 1825, discovered in the John Murray Archive by Michael Phillips. This letter, containing a brief account of Blake's kitchen and referring to a printing session of the Job

illustrations, was treated by both Phillips and Whitehead in 2005 articles, but Whitehead returns to it here to examine, more minutely, specific references in it. In so doing, he fleshes out our understanding of the Blakes' living arrangements as well as Blake's rather difficult (at this stage of his life) relationship with Linnell.

- 5 Fernando Castanedo examines a more problematic manuscript, that of *An Island in the Moon*, and attempts to redate it slightly—to 1786 (at least in part) rather than 1784–85, as had been argued by Keynes, Erdman, Bentley, and the *Blake Archive* editors. Castanedo maintains that the work contains a reference to Hester Piozzi's 1786 *Anecdotes* of Samuel Johnson, particularly to her story of Reynolds's "Blinking Sam" portrait, and may also refer to satirical prints of Johnson and Boswell in the Hebrides, published in April of that same year.
- 6 The next three essays in the collection treat various problems with Blake's most difficult manuscript work, the unfinished *Vala*, or *The Four Zoas*. Luisa Calè, in "Blake, Young, and the Poetics of the Composite Page," looks first at Blake's procedures in developing his illustrations to *Night Thoughts*. She describes carefully the process by which he took Young's printed quarto leaves and, by adding leaves of Whatman wove paper, turned them into the extra-illustrated, folio-sized work now housed at the British Museum. Selected watercolors from the extra-illustrated folio were then engraved and published in an atlas-sized quarto volume in 1797, and Blake used proofs of the prints in preparing the manuscript of *Vala*. Calè is interested in the ways that Blake's procedures subvert "the letterpress as a support for reading" and especially how in *Vala* he "challenged the teleology of printing, staged the separation of illustration from letterpress, and inverted the relationship between print and manuscript production" (459).
- 7 Wayne Ripley approaches the *Vala* manuscript in a different way: rather than examining its composition, he looks at revisions in the manuscript that seem to echo Moravian hymns published in John Gambold's *A Collection of Hymns of the Children of God in All Ages* (1754). As others have noted, these hymns may be the source of Blake's use of the word "Zoa." Ripley goes further to argue that a number of late revisions to the manuscript seem to respond to phrases and theological ideas (particularly the femininity of God) from many parts of the hymnal, and he suggests that further study of Gambold's collection is necessary for understanding both *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.
- 8 Finally, Rachel Lee considers the challenges faced by the *Blake Archive* in attempting to create a digital edition of the *Vala* manuscript. The problem with digital encoding, from the beginning of the TEI initiative, has been the hierarchi-

cal structure of its system, which does not always take into account the arbitrary nature of manuscript entries. Lee looks at the problems Blake's manuscript presents and describes both the successes and failures of the way she and her fellow text-encoders have tried to solve them. Especially important is her discussion of the durability of digital texts: editors must encode for the long term, so that their projects are not thrown into the dustbin the next time a platform or a software display system changes.

- 9 The collection closes with a meditation by Morris Eaves on permanence and impermanence in the digital universe. As someone whose digital edition¹ was completed (Eaves eulogizes, at one point, the many hundreds that were not), and who has wondered, many times, how long our TEI-Lite-code-converted-to-HTML-by-a-Perl-script will continue to be legible by web browsers, Eaves's words struck home. We must build with the future in mind, even if we can't yet imagine it. And we must be resigned to letting things die—a fitting conclusion to as fine a collection of essays on Blake as I have read.

1. <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/LB>>.