

“a bite”: The First Published Reference
to Blake’s Ghost of a Flea?

BY ANGUS WHITEHEAD

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1 THE *Literary Gazette* was an innovative and widely read weekly literary review initiated by the publisher Henry Colburn in 1817 and edited by the Scottish journalist and antiquary William Jerdan.¹ The newspaper operated from 5 Catherine Street, just off the Strand, not far from William Blake’s studio-apartment at 3 Fountain Court. On 18 August 1827, just six days after Blake’s death, the *Gazette* published the first obituary of the poet-artist. While praising Blake’s work highly, it condemns the poet-artist’s neglect by his contemporaries:

Blake [has] been allowed to exist in a penury which most artists,—beings necessarily of a sensitive temperament,—would deem intolerable. Pent, with his affectionate wife, in a close back-room in one of the Strand courts, his bed in one corner, his meagre dinner in another, a ricketty table holding his copper-plates in progress, his colours, books ..., his large drawings, sketches and MSS.;—his ancles frightfully swelled, his chest disordered, old age striding on, his wants increased, but not his miserable means and appliances: even yet was his eye undimmed, the fire of his imagination unquenched, and

1. The firm of Henry Colburn published an impressive and eclectic range of books, including novels, poetry, travel literature, accounts of contemporary warfare, and antiquarian writings and drawings. Colburn published major works such as Samuel Pepys’s diary and (with Richard Bentley) an edition of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, as well as works by “silver fork” novelists Lady Caroline Lamb and Lady Charlotte Bury, both of whom Blake met (see Peter Garside, “Colburn, Henry [1784/5–1855],” *ODNB*; G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004] [hereafter *BR*(2)] 333-34). Other notable works published by Colburn include Chateaubriand’s *Recollections of Italy, England and America*, the poetry of Thomas Campbell, the plays of Joanna Baillie, and the writings of James Hogg. Blake’s acquaintance Marguerite, Countess of Blessington, as well as the poetess and novelist “L. E. L.” (Letitia Elizabeth Landon), appeared first in the pages of the *Literary Gazette*.

the preternatural, never-resting activity of his mind unflagging.²

As Bentley notes, it is likely that the obituary was written by the *Gazette*’s chief contributor, the art critic William Paulet Carey, a Blake enthusiast and former printmaker.³ In a number of pamphlets and articles published between 1808 and 1819, Carey had consistently lauded Blake’s work as an artist, especially his designs for *The Grave*.⁴ The detailed obituary suggests that Carey (or whoever the author was) had actually visited Blake at Fountain Court.

2 The earliest published reference recorded in *Blake Records* to Blake’s encounter with the ghost of a flea is the obituary of September 1827 in the *Literary Chronicle*;⁵ three months before the poet-artist’s death, however, the *Literary Gazette* had featured a fleeting reference to the flea. On Saturday, 12 May 1827, below a short review of William Raddon’s recent engraving of Henry Fuseli’s *The Nightmare*, appeared a markedly less sympathetic review titled “Mr. Puff’s Morning-Guns!! K. [sic] [Henry] Heath delt. Published by T. McLean.”⁶ The review is severely critical of Heath’s print (illus. 1), even though Heath presumably intended it as satire and not advertising:⁷

THIS caricature represents a fellow in some sort of military uniform firing off a bottle of pseudo-champagne, mounted as a cannon, and marked 5s. 6d. We fancy, from the accessories, it is meant to satirise one of the many quacks with which this London hive of ours abounds. But in our opinion, mere self-sought notoriety is not a good ground for caricature: there ought to be a certain station in life, an influence however small, a character in society however

2. *Literary Gazette* no. 552 (18 Aug. 1827): 541.

3. *BR*(2) 467fn; Nicholas Grindle, “Carey, William Paulet (1759–1839),” *ODNB*.

4. See *BR*(2) 275 (1808), 302 (1810), 330 (1817), and 369 (1819). The pamphlet of Dec. 1817 indicates that Carey had not met Blake by that time (see *BR*[2] 332). In Dec. 1820 a “William Blake,” together with John Varley and other artists, signed a testimonial as to Carey’s experience and competence to become keeper of “a select and valuable Collection of Paintings, Engravings and other works of Art” (*BR*[2] 374).

5. *Literary Chronicle* (1 Sept. 1827): 557-58. See *BR*(2) 468-70.

6. *Literary Gazette* no. 538 (12 May 1827): 300.

The title of the print refers to Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The Critic*, act 2, scene 2. Mr. Puff at Tilbury Fort exclaims, “What the plague! Three morning guns! There never is but one! Ay, this is always the way at the theatre. Give these fellows a good thing, and they never know when to have done with it” (Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The School for Scandal and Other Plays*, ed. Michael Corder [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998] 320). For a further reference to the subject of the print and Mr. Puff, see “Twelfth Night at Almack’s,” *London Magazine* (1 Feb. 1827): 205.

7. Little is known of the engraver and caricaturist Henry Heath. Dorothy George describes him as “a competent and versatile but very imitative caricaturist” (quoted by Simon Heneage, “Heath, Henry [fl. 1822–1842],” under “Heath, William [1794/5–1840],” *ODNB*).



1. "M^r Puff's Morning-Gun's!!" from A. M. Broadley, "Annals of the Haymarket," vol. 1, p. 524. Image and permission courtesy of Westminster City Archives.

slight and dubious, otherwise the caricaturist is playing the game of the charlatan. There are men of very paltry ambition, even where the base thirst of dishonest gains may not prompt them to seek, in being talked of, the chance of catching gulls: thus Waterton the traveller is (not against his own wish, we are told, but solely for notoriety's sake) figuring in the print-shops riding on a cayman or crocodile! Thus too our walls are chalked, not only near London, but to remote parts of the country—for, as the fools are spread over the whole land, the knaves seek them as far and wide as they can with the means in their power. Then, who would caricature Dr. Eady or the Blacking Manufacturers? Such subjects as these are no better than noxious insects.

The reviewer concludes, "C. Varley and Blake (the illustrator of 'The Grave') caricatured a flea—though also a *bite*—a more respectable and much worthier creature than the puffing species alluded to."

- 3 The author of the review, almost certainly Carey, writing in the spring of 1827 and still within Blake's lifetime, is clearly confident that his readers will recognize a reference to Blake as "the illustrator of 'The Grave,'" thereby suggesting that Blake remained a familiar name two decades on. The brief allusion to the caricature of a flea appears to assume that some of the readers were also familiar with Blake's en-

counter with the “spiritual apparition of a Flea”⁸ sometime between 1819 and 1825, the period in which Blake and John Varley’s midnight séances took place at Blake’s residences at 17 South Molton Street and later Fountain Court.⁹ However, the reviewer wrongly identifies Blake’s partner as “C. Varley,” the inventor and painter Cornelius, rather than his elder brother, the astrologer and landscape artist John. Martin Butlin has proposed that copies of the visionary heads may have been made using Cornelius Varley’s patented graphic telescope,¹⁰ but Cornelius is not known to have had any other involvement with the project. Either the *Gazette*’s reviewer was poorly informed, or (less likely) it is a typo (C. for J.). In any case, the fleeting reference suggests that Blake’s encounter with the ghost of a flea was already a story familiar among literary and artistic circles in the metropolis.

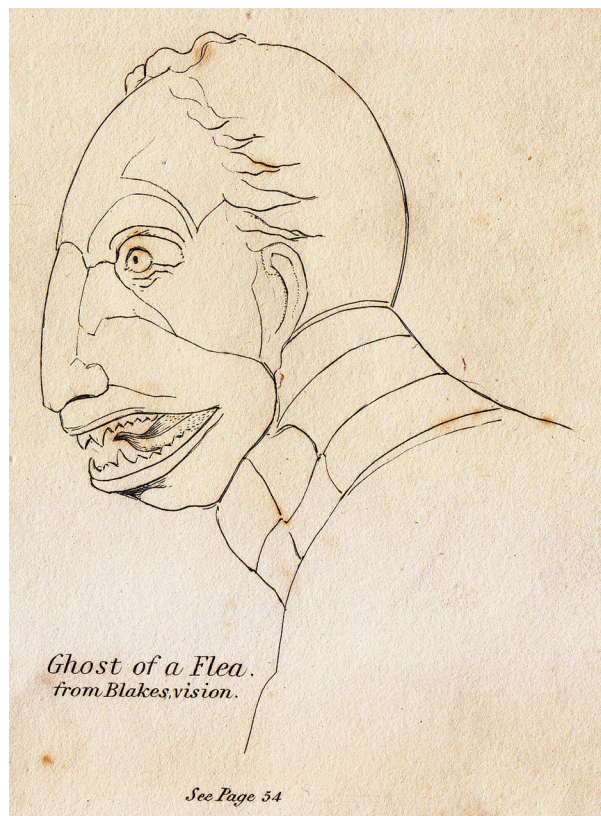
- 4 The reviewer also mentions that Varley and Blake “caricatured a flea.” The idea that Blake’s drawing, as much human in shape as flea, is somehow satirical in nature is a novel one, differing from John Varley’s and Allan Cunningham’s later accounts. The suggestion is of interest, as eighteen months later Blake’s representation of the ghost of a flea would enter print culture through John Linnell’s engravings for Varley’s *Zodiacal Physiognomy* (illus. 2). In addition, the reviewer’s discussion of Blake and Varley is set in the context of criticism of Heath’s choice of subject for his engraving, “a fellow in some sort of military uniform firing off a bottle of pseudo-champagne, mounted as a cannon, and marked 5s. 6d.” An examination of the print (illus. 1) reveals further details: hung outside a building labeled above its arches “OPERA CANNONADE” is a sign reading “SPARKLING / & CREAMING / CHAMPAIGNE / 5s_6d / Per BOTTLE.” The name of the building and the “champagne,” as well as the suspiciously cheap price of the beverage, enable us to identify the “quack” as Charles Wright, a prominent vintner selling champagne and other wines from his premises at the Opera Colonnade, Haymarket, at the western end of the Strand.¹¹ In addition to this circumstantial evidence, his name appears on the building and under Heath’s signature. Wright appears to have enjoyed the enthusiastic patronage of George IV and numerous members of the nobility and gentry. As John Strachan has

8. John Varley’s description in his *Zodiacal Physiognomy* (1828); see G. E. Bentley, Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 377-78.

9. See *BR*(2) 346-69.

10. See Martin Butlin, “Blake, the Varleys, and the Patent Graphic Telescope,” *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, ed. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 294-304.

11. See *A Descriptive Account of the Second Royal Gala Festival, at Stratford-upon-Avon* (1830) 43.



2. Linnell's engravings of the "Ghost of a Flea" for Varley's *Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy* (previous page). Images and permission courtesy of Robert N. Essick.

Varley also promises a full-length engraving, which never appeared; the drawing of the flea in its entirety (right) is from the Small Blake-Varley Sketchbook, now dispersed. Image and permission courtesy of a private collection, UK.



observed, Wright's was "the most notable brand of champagne in the period."¹² He aggressively marketed his champagne and other drinks through advertisements featuring verse in journals such as Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*.¹³ However, Wright was also satirized in a number of magazines of the period; several allusions carry either implicit or overt suggestions that his champagne was sham.¹⁴ In his satirical poem *The Age Reviewed* (1827), Robert Montgomery paired Wright with the *Gazette's* owner, Colburn,

who was notorious for his aggressive sales tactics.¹⁵ The *Literary Gazette* was clearly aware of the identity of the "quack" that Heath was either satirizing or puffing in his print: the paper had recently been ordered to pay damages to Wright for libelous remarks that it had made about his champagne.¹⁶

- 5 In its attack on Heath's print and its subject, the review goes on to mention three other London "quacks," or insistent self-publicists, of the period: "Waterton the traveller" refers to naturalist Charles Waterton, who wrote, "I have attacked

12. John Strachan, *Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 39.

13. See, for example, *Examiner* no. 981 (19 Nov. 1826): 751 (col. 2, section 6).

Wright used lines from Lord Byron and from Thomas Moore's poetry, as well as copywritten epigrams and acrostics, to advertise his product in the *Times* during the summer of 1826 (Strachan 39-42).

14. See *Literary Gazette* no. 515 (2 Dec. 1826): 766.

15. Strachan 258. See also George Daniel's mockery of Wright in his poem *The Conversazione* (1835). Wright's advertising strategies are satirized in the popular comic song "Because 'Tis in the Papers" (see Thomas Hudson, *Comic Songs* [London: Gold and Walton, 1828] 7).

16. See note 14, above.

and slain a modern Python, and rode on the back of a Cayman [South American crocodile] close to the water's edge; a very different situation from that of a Hyde-park dandy on his Sunday prancer before the ladies."¹⁷ "Dr. Eady" was a notorious and apparently mentally unstable medical swindler operating in London during the mid-1820s.¹⁸ In his allusion to "the Blacking Manufacturers," the reviewer is referring to Robert Warren's blacking manufactory at 30 Strand, several blocks west of the premises of the *Gazette*. The author and journalist William Frederick Deacon, Warren's friend, produced a book of parodies of contemporary poets dedicated to the king, with each parody praising Warren's blacking.¹⁹ T. A. B. Corley notes that "Warren was one of the first to market a nationally advertised household product in Britain. His press publicity featured verses; one poet, Alexander Kemp, boasted of having written two hundred of these offerings. A popular theme, of a cat spitting at its reflection in a well-blacked Hessian boot, was illustrated by George Cruikshank."²⁰ Warren, then, pioneered advertising techniques, including verse and print culture, to promote and sell his product—techniques soon utilized by Wright in the advertising of his champagne.

- 6 As the reviewer recognizes, some of these "quacks," notably Waterton, were not averse to celebrating their eccentricities for notoriety, publicity, and self-gain. After discussing these four hoaxers or self-promoters, he makes the brief allusion to Blake: "C. Varley and Blake . . . caricatured a flea . . . also a *bite*." As the italics suggest, *bite* was contemporary slang or cant. The *OED* defines it in this context as "an imposition, a deception; what is now called a 'sell'; passing from the notion of playful imposition or hoax, to that of swindle or fraud."²¹ In describing Blake's drawing of the ghost of a flea as "a *bite*," the reviewer appears to be making a series of puns, firstly on "bite" simultaneously referring to hoaxes and flea bites and secondly on "noxious insects" simultaneously referring to four celebrated quacks and the subject of Blake's "caricature." In addition, he situates Blake and Varley and the ghost of a flea as a notorious contemporary phenomenon in the same category as the productions of the cayman-riding Waterton, the medical quack Eady, Warren the blacking manufacturer, and Wright the purvey-

or of sham champagne. Cunningham and later Blake biographers have represented Blake's flea encounter as evidence of the poet-artist's eccentricity, madness, or visionary abilities.²² However, James King has suggested that Blake may have been humoring or playing a joke on his friend:

Blake's resulting drawing owes more to the engraving of a flea under a microscope in Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*, where the proboscis of the insect is described as "slip[ping] in and out, than to a visionary experience. Although Blake had a powerful eidetic imagination, the appearances of Achilles, Corinna, Lais, Herod, Edward I and William Wallace smack more of tomfoolery on Blake's part than a serious interest in phantoms of the night."²³

- 7 The *Literary Gazette* review suggests that in the spring of 1827 Blake's vision and drawings of the ghost of a flea were not necessarily regarded as evidence of either his madness or visionary imagination, at least for the writer and some of his readers. Instead, like King, some contemporaries may have interpreted the encounter as a knowing deception. For the reviewer, however, the ghost of a flea is not a case of Blake's humoring Varley, but rather a hoax manufactured by the poet-artist and his friend. Accurately or not, he appears to imply that they consciously concocted and encouraged the story for the sake of notoriety and publicity. For him, if the ghost of a flea is "a *bite*," the joke is not on Varley, but on contemporary (and perhaps future) "gulls" in London and "fools . . . spread over the whole land." And yet Blake and Varley's imagined flea is regarded by the reviewer as "more respectable and much worthier" than the "puffing species" of Wright, Warren, Waterton, and Eady.

17. Charles Waterton, *Wanderings in South America, the North-West of the United States, and the Antilles, in the Years 1812, 1816, 1820, and 1824* (London: J. Mawman, 1825) 242.

18. See "Annals of Quackery. Caution to the Public. Eady's Escape from St. Luke's!" *Medical Adviser, and Guide to Health and Long Life* (17 July 1824): 77-79.

19. See *Warreniana* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1824).

20. T. A. B. Corley, "Warren, Robert (1784/5-1849)," *ODNB*.

21. The *OED* notes that this term was used as early as 1711 by Richard Steele in *Spectator* no. 156: "It was a common Bite with him, to lay Suspicions that he was favoured by a Lady's Enemy."

22. See, for example, Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (London: John Murray, 1830) 2: 167-71; Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise* 368-82.

23. James King, *William Blake: His Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991) 214-15. See also Robin Hamlyn and Michael Phillips, *William Blake* (London: Tate, 2000) 190.