

Introduction

THIS VOLUME presents five of William Blake's early illuminated books, beginning with his first known efforts (c.1788) at printing texts and designs together from relief-etched copperplates and concluding with *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). Along with the *Songs of Innocence* of 1789, [1] these works contain many of the fundamental principles and images, both visual and verbal, that have made Blake famous in our time. These works also reveal the early development and first flowering of relief etching, the medium so intimately bound up with Blake's achievement as both poet and artist. An understanding of how these books were made will provide the material foundation for a brief consideration of the formal and thematic developments they reveal. More detailed discussions are offered in the individual introductions to each title.

Much of the appeal that relief etching must have had for its inventor lay in its simplicity and directness. [2] Blake needed only to draw, with brush and pen, his pictures and letters on a copperplate with an acid-resistant varnish of the sort commonly used by etchers in his day. He made corrections easily by scraping off some of the varnish or adding more. He then surrounded the plate with a wall of wax, poured acid into the shallow vessel thereby created, and allowed the acid to eat away the exposed metal. His images were then left in relief, like moveable type or a modern rubber stamp. Even in his first illuminated book, Blake added a further graphic technique. By scraping through varnished areas to expose the copper, he created lines that printed white against a dark background—see, for example, the fine lines in the clouds on plate 4 of *All Religions are One*. Such white-line work could be cut with needles into the varnish before etching or into the metal with burins afterwards. Similarly, entire relief areas could be easily scraped away before or after being etched, or masked during printing. But the *addition* of new relief surfaces, except for very small dots or lines, was extremely difficult and is not known to have been attempted by Blake.

Blake's technique required him to write his texts in reverse, only a minor challenge to one trained as a professional engraver and etcher who must constantly work with mirror images. The slight difficulty of reverse writing was more than compensated for by the autographic nature of the medium. The technique consumed far less labour and time than either conventional etching/engraving or typographic printing. It permitted—indeed, promoted—a seamless relationship between conception and execution rather than the usual divisions between invention and production embedded in eighteenth-century print technology and its economic and social distinctions among authors and printers, artists and engravers. Like drawings and manuscripts, Blake's relief etchings were created by the direct and positive action of the author/artist's hand without intervening processes, such as tracing, transferring, or mechanical copying, generally employed in the intaglio printmaking that Blake practiced all his life. Yet, like conventional graphics and letterpress texts, relief-etched images could be printed many times over. It is fair to say, in spite of the apparent contradictions of such terms, that Blake's relief etchings are composites of 'printed drawings' and 'printed manuscripts'.

Relief etching allowed for direct composition in the graphic medium without detailed drawings sized to the plates or carefully blocked-out manuscripts showing precisely where the words would be placed on each plate. The absence of such preliminaries for Blake's illuminated books strongly suggests that he took advantage of this feature of his medium. All Blake needed was a rough manuscript of the sort we find in his Notebook; he did not require a fair copy or even a completed manuscript to begin production. Formatting an illuminated book required at most a sketch to indicate the general location of design and text areas; both could be modified in the course of drawing and writing in varnish (see the Introduction to *The Book of Thel*, discussion of supplementary illustration 4 (71)). The size, shape, and length of the text on each plate, and the placement and size of designs, were fixed only when the plate was executed. This method of production allowed Blake to compose plates seriatim within distinct textual units, such as those in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Each unit, however, could be produced out of sequence and assembled later in a variety of arrangements. Each illuminated plate and book could grow and take shapes not previously determined.

Although pictorial images could be invented directly on the copper, Blake sometimes turned to his storehouse of designs that he had first developed as drawings. A good case in point is offered by the development of the figure with legs crossed and thrusting his arms downward and to his left on the title page to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (for a detail, see *Visions*, supplementary illustration 3). Blake first invented this design in the early 1790s as a pencil sketch inscribed in another hand 'The Evil Demon' (supplementary illustration 1). [3] At about the same time, he borrowed the motif for a series of emblematic designs he was sketching in his Notebook (supplementary illustration 2). Here he modified the figure, crossing his left leg over his right, lengthening his hair, and slanting his extended arms downward. For the etched version in *Visions*, Blake retained these variants and made further but much slighter modifications. Both drawings were executed before Blake began work on the *Visions* title page and neither was drawn with the illuminated book in mind. No direct preliminary drawing was required, for Blake needed only to return to his emblem design and draw it free-hand on the copperplate. As with all known drawings of motifs subsequently used in relief etchings, Blake did not reverse the image when he drew it on the plate, and thus it is reversed in impressions from the plate. [4]

After cleaning the varnish from his plates, Blake inked their relief surfaces with a dabber (similar to a letterpress printer's inking ball) and printed

them with low pressure in the engraver's rolling press that he owned. He generally proofed a complete copy of a book in black ink, but in his early years Blake favoured coloured inks for almost all copies intended for sale. While some plates were probably printed singly, the early copies of *Songs of Innocence*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* were printed two plates at a time, in one turn through the press, on two aligned leaves, and then two more plates were printed on the other side of the same leaves. Most copies of *The Book of Thel* may have been printed two plates at a time, but in all known copies on only one side of the leaves. For all the illuminated books, multiple impressions were taken from each plate, or each set of plates intended to be printed together, before it was removed from the bed of the press and the next plate or set printed. Printing two plates simultaneously enabled Blake to register facing pages and to attend to the page spread. Printing multiple impressions, by far the most efficient method, corresponded to the long-established practices of both plate and type printers and allowed Blake and his wife Catherine to build up a stock of books quickly.

In the early years of production, most printing sessions for the illuminated books included several different colours of ink, although Blake generally used only one colour on each impression. Slight residual droplets, particularly along the edges of relief plateaus, of a prior colour in some impressions suggest that Blake would pull all impressions he desired in one colour for a plate (or set of plates) in the press, clean the plate(s), and then ink with the new colour. Once again, this would have been the most efficient method and did not require the repetition of the same sequence of colours from one plate to the next. In a few hours at their press, Blake and Catherine could print sets of impressions and separate them into piles according to colour of ink, for eventual assembly into copies of an illuminated book. These procedures led to a purposely diversified stock of books. The products of each printing session correspond to an 'edition' of a book, while each ink colour can be considered a different 'issue' of the edition.

Hand colouring was also executed by editions for all but a few late printings of the illuminated books. Blake and his wife would colour all the impressions of one plate in an edition, then go on to the next pile of prints from another plate. This production sequence is indicated by the presence of the same colours applied in the same manner (although not necessarily applied to the identical areas) on the same plates in multiple copies from the same printing sessions of *Songs of Innocence*, *The Book of Thel*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. The fundamental unit of production for the illuminated books was the printing and colouring session, not the individual copy. In the last stage of production, copies were assembled from impressions on hand. Although Blake may have chosen particular impressions to create a copy, such care was not necessary as long as impressions from the same printing issue and the same colouring session were bound together. Care was required, however, when assembling copies from poorly printed impressions; such prints were often illegible and required outlining and rewriting in pen and ink. By 10 October 1793, when Blake announced in his advertisement 'To the Public' that 'No Subscriptions for the numerous great works now in hand are asked, for none are wanted' (E 693, K 208), the Blakes had assembled a diverse stock of illuminated books ready for sale. Blake is not known to have produced commissioned copies of his books until the nineteenth century.

The common notion that Blake was first attracted to relief etching because he wanted to print illustrated texts is at best a half-truth. Relief etching seems to have evolved from Blake's work as a printmaker, not as a writer. It was probably first used for purely pictorial images such as 'The Approach of Doom', a separate plate datable to c.1788 and based on a design by Blake's brother Robert. [5] When Blake did turn, probably in the same year, to etching words in relief, his handling of the technique progressed rapidly. After some problems in *All Religions are One* with keeping his letters uniformly slanted and with maintaining straight lines of text, Blake soon overcame most of these difficulties in *There is No Natural Religion*, also of c. 1788. For the first and last plates of text in this work he abandoned his upright, roman letters and executed his words in an italic, semi-cursive hand closer to handwriting. This style was easier to execute since it required fewer independent strokes. And since the resulting dense matrix of lines provided better support for the inking dabber, italic permitted a shallower etch. Less time in the acid bath decreased the chances of varnish lifting and spoiling the plate. Blake returned to roman lettering for the *Songs of Innocence* and to set off some sections of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but elsewhere throughout his illuminated books he used versions of his italic hand.

Early in 1794 Blake added colour printing to his repertoire of illuminated-printing techniques. Colour printing may have evolved out of Blake's habit of using various ink colours during his early printing sessions. It would have been a simple step to apply a second colour of ink to selected areas of a single copperplate, but this soon developed into the use of gum- or glue-based pigments to create rich colouring effects. These pigments were very probably applied to the plate with brushes, a variation on the standard *à la poupée* method of colour printing intaglio plates with small dabbers. Blake used a very simple form of colour printing, confined to a few touches of black and brown on relief surfaces, in the first extant printing of *There is No Natural Religion* c. 1794 (see our reproduction of copy G) and in a few copies of the illuminated books produced as part of a large-paper set c. 1795. Such rudimentary colour printing, however, may not be Blake's first use of the technique. As with relief etching in general, Blake's progress was sure and quick. From the start, he appears to have understood and exploited the opportunity provided by his shallow etching to print colours from recessed as well as relief areas of his plates, as can be seen in copy F of

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, reproduced here. The deep hues and dense and textured surfaces in such works tend to give them a brooding intensity that matches the sublimity of the texts they accompany. But even the finest colour-printed impressions required some hand colouring and often pen and ink outlining to clarify forms.

The rapid technical development of relief etching and colour printing is matched by Blake's exploration of the potentials of the illustrated book, and in particular the connections between format, literary genre, and pictorial mode. He began, in *All Religions are One*, with aphorisms accompanied by simple designs with a very limited range of motifs, a conjunction similar to the emblem books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The physical distinction between one copperplate and another is maintained in the confinement of each aphorism or other textual unit to a single plate, while their sequence is set by the number given each 'Principle' and the long-established conventions for placing frontispieces and title pages. *There is No Natural Religion* expands on this format by including two contrasting series of numbered propositions concluded by a full-plate design acting as a tailpiece for the whole work.

Songs of Innocence introduces a new form—the illuminated poem—for the presentation of brief lyrics. Most are completed on a single plate, but several are allowed to continue onto a second. Only the companion poems 'The Little Girl Lost' and 'The Little Girl Found' share a plate; all others begin at the head of a plate and conclude at the foot of a plate. The absence of plate or poem numbering and the manner in which the impressions were printed and coloured allowed Blake to arrange the book in a variety of sequences. The conventional use of headpiece and tailpiece designs, long familiar to Blake from his work in engraving commercial book illustrations, [6] is enriched in the *Songs of Innocence* by the placement of major design elements in one or both side margins when the short lines of his lyrics left sufficient space. On some plates, such as 'Infant Joy', the brief text is surrounded on all sides by parts of a single, unified design.

In *The Book of Thel*, Blake brought to the illuminated book the genre of verse narrative in lines of fourteen syllables. The text is divided into four numbered sections, each beginning at the top of a plate or just below a headpiece and ending at the foot of a plate or just above a tailpiece. At least one such design punctuates each division between sections of the text. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* expands and complicates this basic format. After a verse 'Argument' with a design in the bottom and right margins, as in some of the *Innocence* plates, the prose text is divided into sections of narrative, aphorisms, and numbered declarations like those in the early tractates *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*. Most of these sections in the *Marriage*, however, consist of more than one plate and a few share the same plate; many are titled, but others are set off from what preceded them by a headpiece alone. Except for the design in the right margin of 'The Argument', major designs appear only at the beginnings or endings of textually self-contained sections. This restraint is balanced by great freedom in the use of numerous small, interlinear designs that combine the functions of illustration, decoration, and even punctuation. The presence, absence, and size of designs may have been dictated in some cases by the space left after writing the text on the copper.

In both *Thel* and the *Marriage*, Blake dispensed with frontispieces, perhaps because his medium permitted what amounts to a full-plate design on title pages. The frontispiece returns in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* to complement a highly pictorialized title page. After 'The Argument' (plate 3) of *Visions*, the remainder of the text is one continuous narrative with dialogue, divided only by illustrations and, as in *Thel*, extra space between lines to indicate verse paragraphs. Interlinear decorations on plates 5 and 8 have been expanded into significant illustrations; but the simple manner in which the plates are divided between text and illustration, with most designs at the head or foot of a plate, remains the same as in *Thel* and the *Marriage*. After the *Marriage* was printed, c. 1790, Blake's commercial commitments increased substantially. With *Visions*, Blake returned to illuminated printing after a two-year hiatus, picking up stylistically—and, as we shall see, thematically—where he left off. The typographic convention of catchúwords, however, present in all but the early tractates, is abandoned in favour of etched numbers (first used in *Thel*) to indicate the sequence of plates.

The relationships among texts and designs in the illuminated books are so various and complex that they defy easy generalization. The philosophical propositions in *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion* offer little visual imagery or even named objects. These qualities alone may have determined the relative independence of many designs from accompanying texts. The links are thematic and metaphoric, not direct and literal. Here and throughout the illuminated books, similarities and differences among the designs can be as important as text/design connections. In *The Book of Thel*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, most of the larger designs tend to picture events and characters described in the text, although not necessarily on the same plate. The title page and final tailpiece in *Thel* are among the more notable exceptions to this rule of thumb; both include major motifs not named in the text. Smaller designs and the fairy-like figures that decorate the first text plate of *Thel* and the title page of *Visions* are generally less directly related to specific passages in the poems. In both these books and in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the title page designs function as epitome illustrations that encapsulate several essential themes in a single complex image. The other designs in the *Marriage* extend through a wide range of text/design conjunctions

and contentions.

It would be wrong to conceive of these changes in the structuring of the illuminated books as a story of progressive improvement. Rather, they show Blake's creativity in exploring the possibilities of his visual and verbal media. We can sense a similar range in pictorial and poetic styles, extending from the feminine pastoral and picturesque of *Thel* to the comic, satiric, and horrific sublime in the *Marriage* and *Visions*. Similarly, Blake's rhetoric employs an impressive number of traditional modes, with particular attention to aphoristic declaration and the subtle uses of the interrogative as a way to confound common assumptions, suggest alternatives, and engage the reader's imagination. The early illuminated books also indicate the variety of Blake's often antithetical intellectual engagements: John Locke and rational empiricism in the early tractates, contemporary natural philosophy in *Thel*, Emanuel Swedenborg and John Milton in the *Marriage*, feminist and anti-slavery tracts in *Visions*, and everywhere the Bible. These explicit allegiances and arguments were in turn shaped by the revolutionary times in which Blake lived and his own personal and professional roles as an urban artisan, a Christian radical, and an ambitious artist and poet.

Within the variety of the early illuminated books we can perceive some thematic continuities. Desires, both those of the body and those that attempt to transcend the physical, are a central issue. The conflict between desire and the forces of restraint or repression shapes much of the dramatic tension so characteristic of Blake's writings. That drama in turn energizes the concern with changes in perception or states of consciousness from error to enlightenment, innocence to experience, and hypocrisy to honesty. The concept of a 'Poetic Genius' in all humans, introduced in *All Religions are One*, receives further investigation in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The educative limits of sense experience and the debate between natural and revealed religion at the heart of *There is No Natural Religion* continue as key issues in *The Book of Thel*. The concern with female sexuality and the search for self-definition in *Thel* take centre stage in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, through its wit and wonderful oddities, engages desire and restraint in their most basic theological, historical, and psychological contexts.

The early illuminated books provide Blake's readers with a wealth of delight, but an equal portion of difficulties. His logic is contracted and mixed with irony and parody in the tractates and the *Marriage*. The location of Blake's own point of view or voice in *Thel*, the *Marriage*, and *Visions* is a matter of endless critical debate. Throughout the illuminated poems, the relationship between the literal and the metaphoric is often puzzling—although that may well be an essential part of Blake's attempt to disconcert conventional suppositions about the relationship between the real and the imaginary and between representation and that which is represented. Our attempt to assist readers with these and related issues is continued in the introductions and notes to each illuminated book. The sections on 'Plates and Printings' necessarily delve into some technical details, but the investigation of how and when Blake made his books has some of the qualities of good detective stories and should engage readers who usually avoid bibliographic essays.

[1] All plates originally etched for *Songs of Innocence* are reproduced and discussed in volume 2 of this series, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. Andrew Lincoln (1991).

[2] Only a brief summary of the relief-etching process is given here. For a more detailed description, see Viscomi, *Art of Blake's Illuminated Prints*. For a general survey of the full range of Blake's graphic works, see Essick, *Blake Printmaker*. The information summarized here (and in the separate introductions to each book) about printing formats and the dates and contents of printing and colouring sessions is fully set forth in Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book*.

[3] Butlin no. tog dates this drawing to 'c.1793' and places its composition after *Visions*. We believe that the logic of the motif's development indicates the sequence presented here. If copied after the *Visions* title page, the drawing would have had right and left in the same direction as in the plate.

[4] The full-plate designs in white-line in *Milton* and *Jerusalem* are exceptions to this practice. They required preliminary sketches for counter-proofing onto the copper, and thus the printed image has right and left in the same direction as the drawing.

[5] Dated to c. 1788 in Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book*, chapter 20, correcting Essick, *Separate Plates* 12-13. According to Smith 2:461, Blake's recently deceased brother revealed the process of relief etching to him in a dream. If Blake believed this, then the choice of a composition invented by Robert for one of the first attempts at relief etching would be appropriate.

[6] See particularly Ritson, a work for which Blake engraved nine designs after Thomas Stothard. For further comments on the illustrative formats of the illuminated books, see Easson.