

## William Blake's Annotations to Milton's *Paradise Lost*: New Evidence for Attribution

BY LISA SHERLOCK

LISA SHERLOCK (l.sherlock@utoronto.ca) is chief librarian, Victoria University Library in the University of Toronto.

1 IN 2000–01, three books believed to have been owned or annotated by William Blake were displayed in an exhibition at Tate Britain that focused on the state of Blake scholarship at the time. Two of the works, collections of engravings, are thought to have belonged to the young Blake: *Historia del Testamento Vecchio dipinta in Roma nel Vaticano da Raffaele di Urbino ... al sig. Annibale Carracci* (Rome: Giovanni Orlandi, 1603 [Amsterdam: Excudit C. J. Vischer, 1638]) and *A Political and Satirical History of the Years 1756 and 1757. In a Series of Seventy-Five Humorous and Entertaining Prints* (London: Printed for E. Morris, n.d. [1757?]). The third book on display was a copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, edited by Richard Bentley and published in 1732.<sup>1</sup> All three belonged to Michael Phillips, guest curator of the exhibition, and are now held by Victoria University Library (Toronto). Following the critical reaction to these books, and particularly to the attribution to Blake of annotations signed "WB" in the Bentley Milton,<sup>2</sup>

1. Bentley's edition was never reprinted. In later years, Pope would include Bentley in *The Dunciad in Four Books* (1743). The Bentley edition is a large quarto, finely printed with superb engravings; an expensive book at the time, printed in limited numbers, that even in the eighteenth century became uncommon.

2. David Bindman, in the *Burlington Magazine*, objected to the exhibition's presentation of the three books as having belonged to Blake, stating that he was "completely certain that ... the annotations to Milton were not written by Blake." In reviewing Phillips's book *William Blake: The Creation of the "Songs" from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (2000), Alexander Gourlay agreed that while the "WB" monogram used to sign the annotation on display in the exhibition is similar to the one with which Blake signed his art, he had not seen any examples in Blake's text. Gourlay disagreed that the rest of the annotation is in Blake's hand and found the sentiments expressed "at odds with [Blake's] usual opinions." In "William Blake and His Circle, 2002," G. E. Bentley, Jr., withdrew his initial support for considering the Milton edition as having been owned or annotated by Blake; he further critiqued the attribution in "William Blake and His Circle, 2008." Jason

Mark Crosby thoroughly examined the Milton volume and published an article in the *Book Collector* in 2008 in support of the book's having passed through Blake's hands. Crosby compared the annotations in question, on pages 355 and 398, with the handwriting employed by Blake in his *Vala* manuscript. He also identified unique features in George Vertue's portrait engraving of Milton on the frontispiece of Bentley's edition that are mirrored in Blake's tempera portrait of the poet, one of eighteen heads commissioned by William Hayley to decorate his Turret House library. These paintings were commissioned and completed during the period in which Blake would have had access to the edition in Hayley's library.

### Provenance

2 The matter of this copy's early provenance remained in question. In concluding his article, Crosby pointed to a fragment of a bookplate that required further examination (illus. 1). The bookplate has since been identified by Anthony Pincott of the Bookplate Society as belonging to William Backwell, a descendant of a banking family and himself a founder of the banking house Dawes, Noble, & Company in Pall Mall in London's West End (Phillips, unpublished) (illus. 2).<sup>3</sup> Backwell—and later his heir, William Harwood, who changed his name to Backwell in 1770—resided and owned property in Buckinghamshire, where his home, Caldecot Manor, was approximately five miles from the village of Weston Underwood (Sheahan 457). Weston Underwood was where the poet William Cowper lived at Weston Hall from 1786 until 1795 (Sheahan 584). In 1791 Joseph Johnson commissioned Cowper to edit an edition of Milton for a proposed Milton Gallery.<sup>4</sup> Cowper and Hayley subsequently collaborated with each other, and after Cowper's death in April 1800 his papers passed to Hayley, who prepared a biography of Cowper and editions of Cowper's writings and editorial work on Milton.<sup>5</sup>

Snart's article in the *European Romantic Review* in 2005 was also critical of the attribution; it was followed up in his publication *The Torn Book* by the inclusion of the Bentley Milton volume as one requiring further research.

3. I'm grateful to Michael Phillips for giving me permission to make use of his unpublished research.

Robert Harding, director of the Early British Department at Maggs Bros. Ltd., has corroborated this information (personal correspondence, 22 Oct. 2019). His appraisal indicates that there is enough of the bookplate left to identify it as an armorial plate belonging to a member of the Backwell family, "most likely William Backwell (c. 1715–70), a banker of Caldecot Manor, Buckinghamshire."

4. G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s *Blake Records* (60) gives 1 September 1791 as the date of the announcement by Johnson and James Edwards of "Thirty Capital Plates, from Subjects in Milton" for the edition that Cowper was commissioned to edit. The announcement includes Blake among the engravers.

5. Hayley notes that Cowper's cousin, Lady Hesketh, gave him "all the writings of that poet relating to Milton" (*Memoirs* 2: 61).



1. (left) Fragment of a bookplate in Milton's *"Paradise Lost,"* ed. Richard Bentley (London, 1732). Victoria University Library (Toronto). Blake Suppl. no. 1079. Reproduced with the permission of Victoria University Library.

2. (right) Bookplate of William Backwell. John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester. Luis Marino Pérez Collection: "Festoon, Wreath & Ribbon," Box A-B E33. Image © University of Manchester.

3 In the preface to his edition of the *Latin and Italian Poems of Milton Translated into English Verse, and a Fragment of a Commentary on "Paradise Lost,"* by the Late William Cowper, Esqr. (1808), Hayley notes that when Cowper was contemplating a Milton commentary, "he had several friends, who took a pleasure in the hope of supplying him with every thing he could require" (xviii-xix). In particular, he remarks upon a copy of Bentley's Milton that was among the books loaned to Cowper. The proximity of Caldecot Manor to Weston Hall makes it possible, even plausible, that the Backwell family was the lender.<sup>6</sup> The Backwell copy also fits with Hayley's description of the book as "containing many very severe censures, in manuscript, against the presumptuous editor," since it contains nearly eighty anonymous annotations, many of a censuring nature, in a contemporary hand, labeled by Crosby as "Hand C." The two signed "WB" are designated as "Hand D."

6. Cowper knew Caldecot, as the village had invited him to compose an epitaph for the tomb of Thomas Abbott Hamilton, a local lace merchant, who died on 7 July 1788 at the age of thirty-two (Phillips, unpublished).

#### Copies of Bentley's Edition of *Paradise Lost* in Hayley's Library

- 4 The copy that Hayley refers to should be distinguished from a copy of the same edition that at one time Cowper owned and annotated. The latter appears in a list of books owned by Cowper compiled by William Barker (see Keynes), and it is now in the collection of Christ's College Library, Cambridge. A comparison between the annotations made by "Hand C" in the Backwell copy (illus. 3) and Cowper's many annotations, critical in tenor toward the work of Bentley, in his own copy (illus. 4) illustrates that they are not in the same hand.
- 5 A reference to another copy of Bentley's edition, uncovered in research by Crosby subsequent to his 2008 article, surfaces in Hayley's unpublished correspondence.<sup>7</sup> In his preparations to write his biography of Cowper, Hayley borrowed

7. I'm indebted to Mark Crosby, associate professor at Kansas State University, for giving me permission to make use of his unpublished research on Hayley's correspondence.

— procal! O! procal nota profani! — 6 —

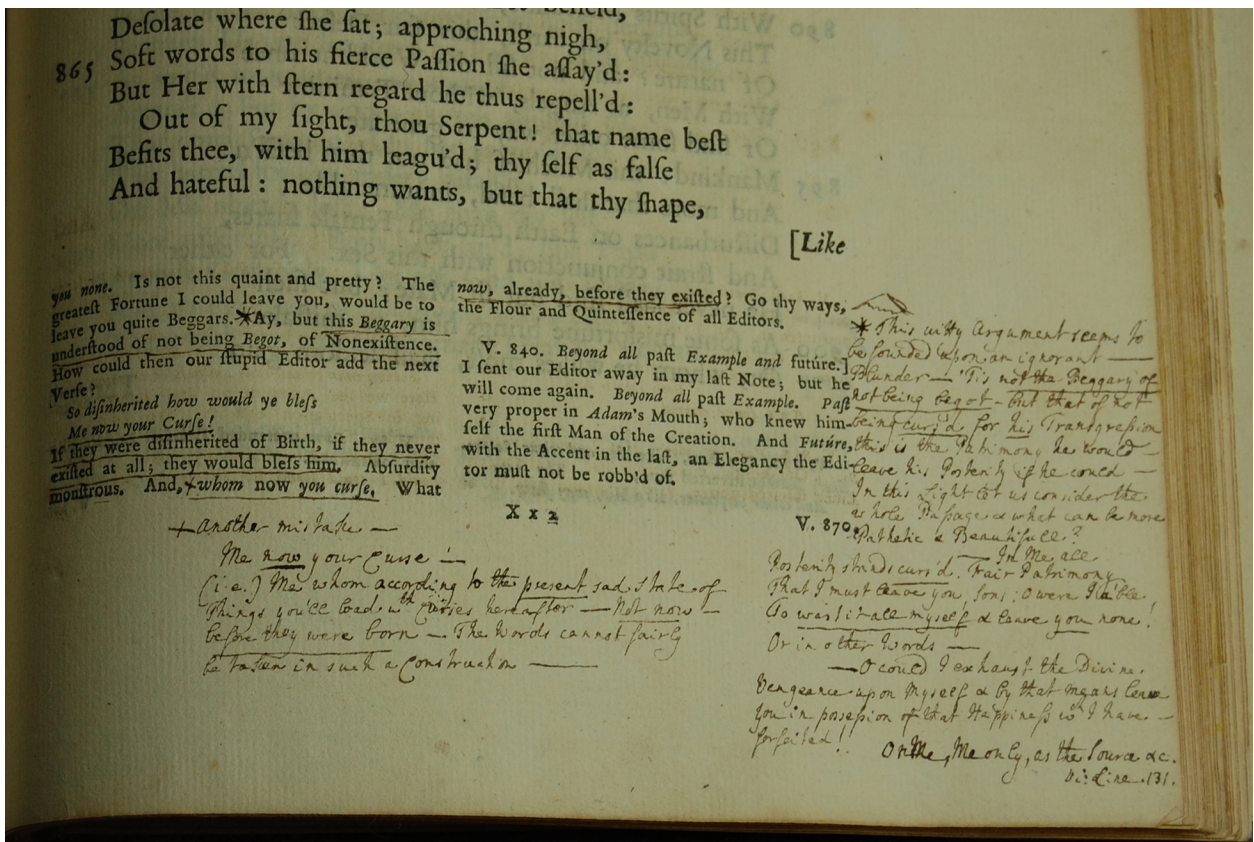
May be apply'd even to the celebrated Bentley. It wd. have become that able writer, tho' in literature a natural abolition among the first of his age, had he been more temperate in his Criticism upon the Paradise Lost; had he not so repeatedly and so injuriously offer'd violence to its Author, from an affected Superiority, to w<sup>ch</sup> he had no pretence. But the rage of Conjecture seems to have seiz'd him. — Conjecture can cure all, says he. — Conjecture, whose performances are for the most part more certain than any thing, that we can exhibit from the authority of Manuscripts — but how, if so certain, can it be call'd Conjecture? — This spirit, whatever it may have boasted, has done more mischief by far than good: — w<sup>ch</sup> is confin'd to works of second rate, it may leave matters as they were; or if not much better, at least not much worse. But when the divine Geniuses of higher rank, whom we not only applaud, but in a manner revere, when these come to be attempted by petulant Correctors, & to be made the subject of their wanton Caprices, how can we but exclaim with a kind of religious abhorrence,

— procal! O! procal nota profani! —

Harris's *Philological Inquiries*  
p. 36.

James Harris, *Philological Inquiries in Three Parts* (1727)

3. Annotation by the anonymous "Hand C," whose writing predominates in the copy of Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost* under consideration. Victoria University Library (Toronto). Blake Suppl. no. 1079. Image used with the permission of Victoria University Library.



4. Annotations by William Cowper to his copy of Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost*. Christ's College Library, Old Library, EE.2.8. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Christ's College, Cambridge.

a copy from the family of Ashley Cowper, the uncle of William Cowper. In a letter to Lady Hesketh, Ashley Cowper's daughter, Hayley apologizes for borrowing the volume without letting her know; the letter is dated 10 January 1802, when Blake would have been resident in Felpham, working in Hayley's library (Crosby, unpublished).<sup>8</sup> Hayley needed to see this copy because it contained two inserted manuscripts: a verse by Ashley Cowper on "the absurd & pedantic Editor of that Milton" and an epigram by William Cowper memorializing his uncle.<sup>9</sup> In his letter to Lady Hesketh, Hayley promises to return the volume promptly. Pre-

sumably it was returned, for it does not appear in the list of books owned by Hayley that was compiled after his death.

- 6 Through Cowper or Cowper's family, Hayley had access to more than one copy of Bentley's *Paradise Lost*. One seems to have arrived with Cowper's papers and may be distinguished by Hayley's description of it as "containing many very severe censures, in manuscript, against the presumptuous editor." This copy was to assist Hayley in finishing Cowper's work on Milton and was conceivably loaned to Cowper from the library of William Backwell. Another was borrowed by Hayley from Lady Hesketh in preparation for his *Life of Cowper*. This copy is distinguished as containing the two manuscripts described above. Apparently, a third copy may also have been present. The sale catalogue of Joseph Mayer (July 1887), which includes items from Hayley's collection, lists a copy described as "formerly belonging to Cowper."<sup>10</sup> When this one became part of Hayley's library is not known.

8. Mark Crosby, "William Blake's Annotations to Milton's *Paradise Lost*: The Copy of *Paradise Lost* in Hayley's Library during Blake's Residence in Felpham Identified." Crosby's transcription is taken from Hayley's autograph copy of the letter in the Firestone Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University, Hannay Collection, box 5, f. 19. He notes that Hayley gives a slightly later date of 23 January 1802 in his *Memoirs*.

9. "Lines Composed for a Memorial of Ashley Cowper, Esqr. Immediately after His Death, by His Nephew William of Weston" was reproduced by Hayley in his *Life of Cowper* (2: 228).

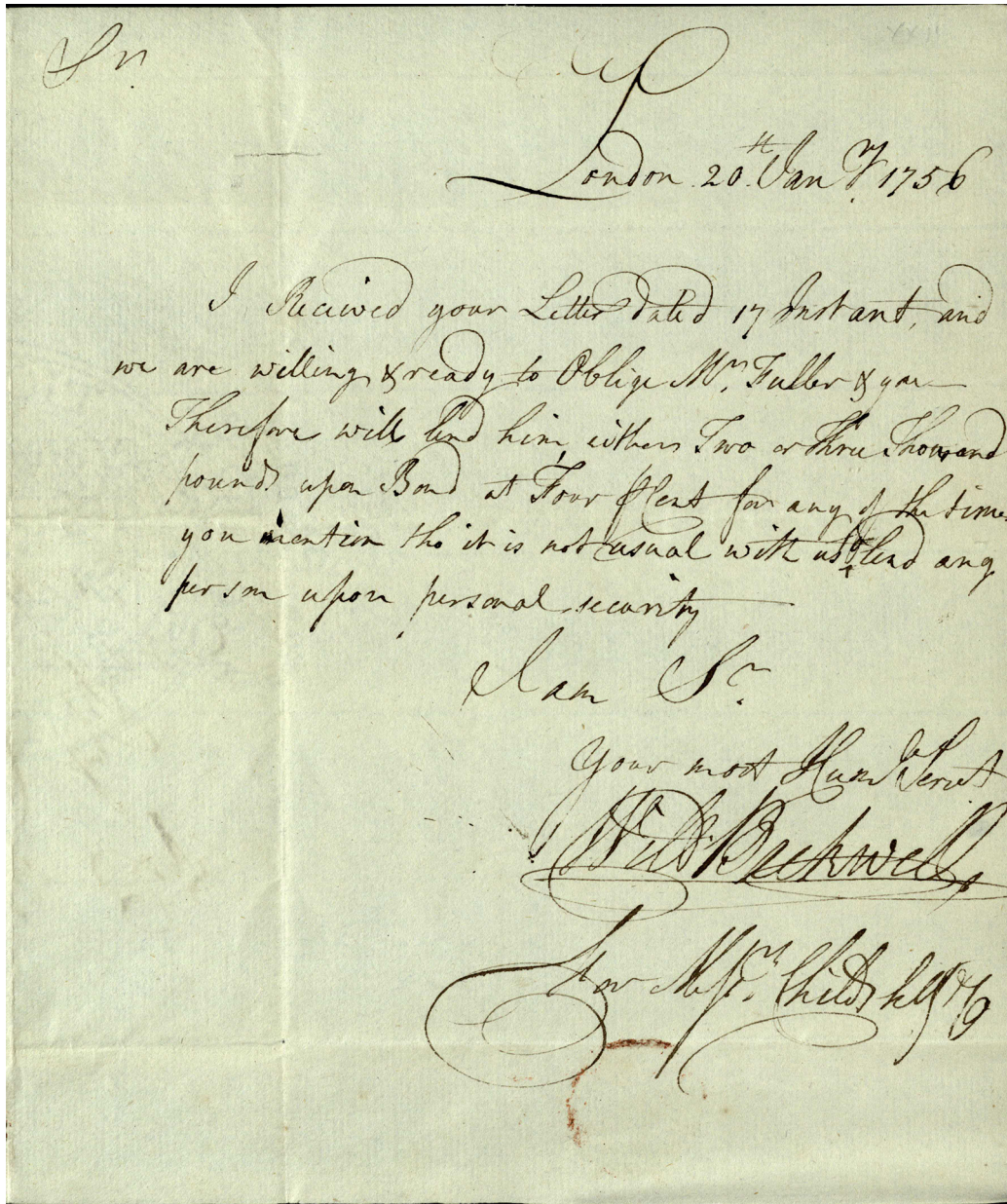
10. See Crosby's note 61 in his essay in the *Book Collector*.

7 At least two of the copies were in Hayley's library between 1800 and 1803, when Blake was working there, researching and painting the series of eighteen portraits of the poets, including Milton, while also producing engravings for Hayley's *Life of Cowper*. During his three years in Felpham, Blake began *Milton a Poem*, inspired, as G. E. Bentley speculates, by visions that he experienced in his garden in Felpham, which are at the heart of the poem (*Stranger* 222, 244). In a letter to Thomas Butts in July 1803, Blake refers

to the prospect of being "fully employd" engraving his own designs, along with those after George Romney and John Flaxman, for "Cowpers Milton."

**The Handwriting of the Annotations and Blake's Letters to Thomas Butts**

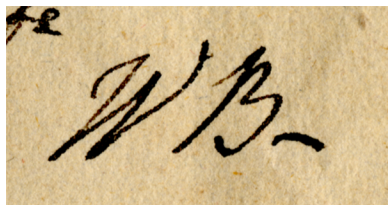
8 A sample of Backwell's handwriting (illus. 5) illustrates that it is not the same hand that penned the annotations on



5. Letter from William Backwell to Stephen Fuller, 20 January 1756. Reproduced with the permission of the East Sussex and Brighton and Hove Record Office. SAS-RF/19/25.

pages 355 and 398 in the copy of Bentley's Milton (illus. 10 and 11). The criticism leveled against the attribution of these annotations to Blake predominately disputes that they are in his hand. As others have pointed out, Blake's handwriting changes depending upon the context in which he was working, whether in annotations, correspondence, or other writings as they survive in manuscript.<sup>11</sup> The hand that appears in the manuscript Notebook varies from the hand in the books that Blake is known to have annotated. His handwriting and the hand that wrote the "WB" marginalia in the copy of Bentley's Milton have not been fully compared to the letters that Blake wrote from Felpham to his friend and patron Butts at the same time that he was employed by Hayley and immersed in the work of Milton.

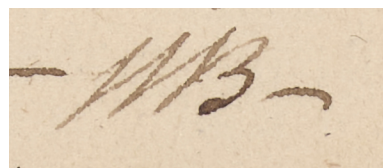
- 9 Toward the end of his letter to Butts on 2 October 1800, Blake composed a verse directed to Mrs. Butts and signed it with a monogram (illus. 6) that bears comparison with the one in the annotation on page 355.



6. Blake's monogram on his 2 October 1800 letter to Thomas Butts. Reproduced with the permission of the City of Westminster Archives Centre. Preston Blake Collection: Letters from William Blake to Thomas Butts, 1800-03.

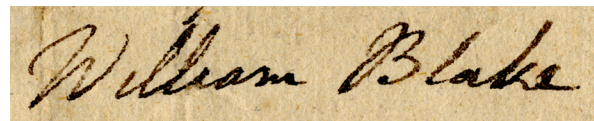
The "WB" monogram on p. 355 (illus. 7) is in a spiky style characteristic of Blake's handwriting in his letters, marginalia, and other manuscripts, and the tilde-like downward-tilting dash after the B matches what is seen in the letter to Butts.

11. As noted by Phillips in his response to Snart in the *European Romantic Review* and acknowledged by Snart, "The range of styles available to Blake was considerable" (Snart, *The Torn Book* 170). In "William Blake and the Sophocles Enigma," G. E. Bentley, Jr., notes that Blake "used at least four quite distinct hands" (69) in the *Vala* manuscript.

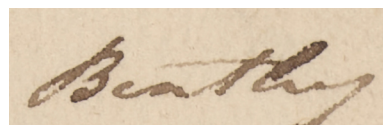


7. "WB" from the annotation on p. 355. *Milton's "Paradise Lost,"* ed. Richard Bentley (London, 1732). Victoria University Library (Toronto). Blake Suppl. no. 1079. Reproduced with the permission of Victoria University Library.

Notable also is Blake's full signature at the bottom of the same letter to Butts (illus. 8): the B in "Blake" is written with the same upward loop that the annotator uses to complete the B in the second occurrence of "Bentley" (illus. 9) in the marginal note on page 355 of the Milton edition (illus. 10).

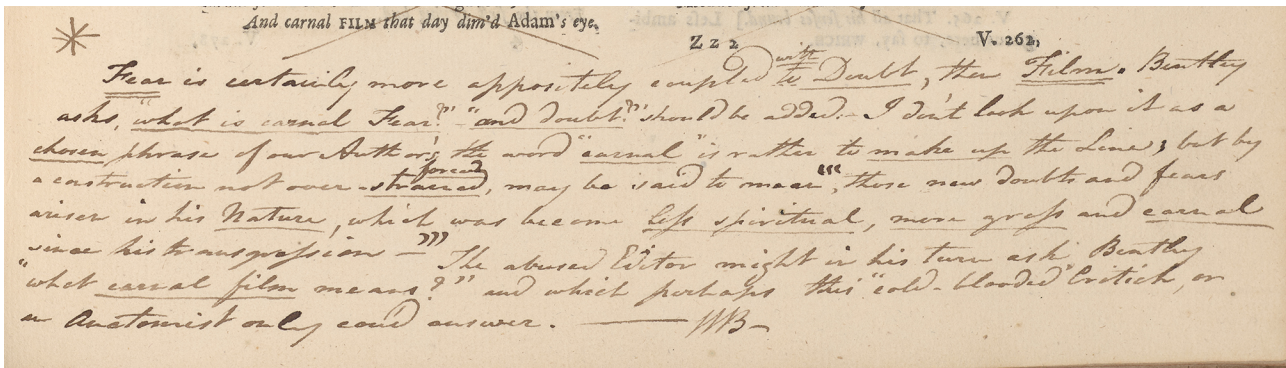


8. Blake's signature on his 2 October 1800 letter to Thomas Butts. Reproduced with the permission of the City of Westminster Archives Centre. Preston Blake Collection: Letters from William Blake to Thomas Butts, 1800-03.

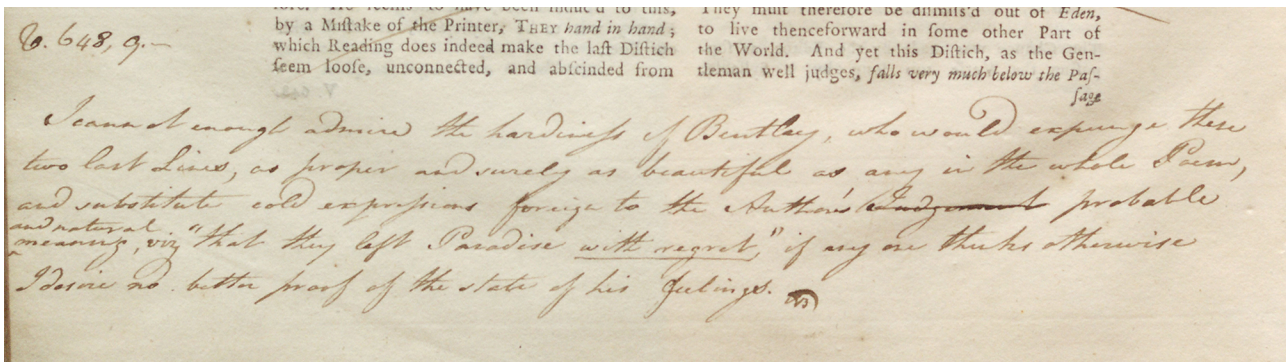


9. "Bentley" from the annotation on p. 355. *Milton's "Paradise Lost,"* ed. Richard Bentley (London, 1732). Victoria University Library (Toronto). Blake Suppl. no. 1079. Reproduced with the permission of Victoria University Library.

In both marginal notes (illus. 10 and 11), the annotator alternates between forming the letter B with a straight back and a looped back in the same way that Blake alternates between the two letter forms in his monogram and signature on his October 1800 letter to Butts.



10. First annotation signed by "WB", p. 355. Milton's "Paradise Lost," ed. Richard Bentley (London, 1732). Victoria University Library (Toronto). Blake Suppl. no. 1079. Reproduced with the permission of Victoria University Library.



11. Second annotation signed by "WB", p. 398. Milton's "Paradise Lost," ed. Richard Bentley (London, 1732). Victoria University Library (Toronto). Blake Suppl. no. 1079. Reproduced with the permission of Victoria University Library.

10 A subsequent letter to Butts, on 22 November 1802, is liberal in its use of quotation marks, either double or triple marks in some instances, to denote that Blake is quoting Joshua Reynolds (illus. 12). This practice is in play, too, in the annotation on page 355 of the Bentley Milton. We see quotation marks to demarcate the annotator's reiteration of Bentley's note that queries Milton's text:

Bentley asks, "what is carnal Fear?" "and doubt?"

A few lines down, triple quotation marks enclose a further response to Bentley's changes:

"those new doubts and fears arisen in his Nature, which was become less spiritual, more gross and carnal since his transgression —"

### Other Examples Compared

11 The first marginal note signed with the monogram "WB" (page 355) refers to book 11, line 212 of *Paradise Lost*, in which Adam, in his loss of innocence, can no longer see God. Richard Bentley suggests that the word "film" be substituted for Milton's "fear," and it is to this emendation that the author of the annotation responds:

Fear is certainly more appositely coupled <sup>with</sup> Doubt, than Film. Bentley / asks, "what is carnal Fear?" "and doubt?" should be added. I don't look upon it as a / chosen phrase of our Author's the word "carnal" is rather to make up <sup>forced</sup> the Line; but by / a construction not over- strained, may

Dear Sir

Falham Nov. 22. 1802

My Brother tells me that he fears you are offended with me. I fear so too because there appears some reason why you might be so. But when you have heard me out you will not be so.

I have now given two years to the intense study of those parts of the art which relate to light & shade & colour & am convinced that either my understanding is incapable of comprehending the beauties of Colouring or the Pictures which I painted for you are equal in every part of the art & superior in One to any thing that has been done since the age of Raphael. <sup>to the Royal Academy</sup> ~~will show~~. that the Venetian fine in Art can never be united with the Majesty of Colouring necessary to Historical beauty. I in a letter to the Rev. Mr. Gelpin author of a work on Picturesque Scenery he says Thus "It may be worth consideration whether the picturesque is not applicable to the excellencies of the inferior schools rather than to the higher. The works of Michael Angelo Raphael & appear to me to have nothing of it: whereas Rubens & the Venetian Painters may almost be said to have nothing else. — Perhaps Picturesque is somewhat synonymous to the word Taste which we should think improperly applied to Homer or Milton but very well to Pindar or Pope. I suspect that the application of these words are to excellencies of an inferior order & which are incompatible with the Grand Style you are certainly right in saying that Variety of Truth & Forms is Picturesque: but it must be remembered on the other hand. that the reverse of this — (uniformity of colour & a long continuation of lines) produces Grandeur" — I say for Joshua and To say I for I have now proved that the parts of the art which I neglected to display in those little pictures & drawings which I had the pleasure & profit to do for you are incompatible with the designs — There is nothing in the

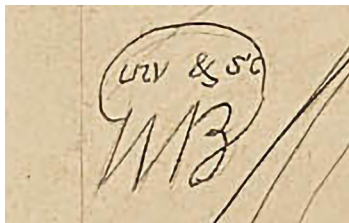
12. First page of a letter from Blake to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802. Reproduced with the permission of the City of Westminster Archives Centre. Preston Blake Collection: Letters from William Blake to Thomas Butts, 1800–03.

be said to mean, “those new doubts and fears / arisen in his Nature, which was become less spiritual, more gross and carnal / since his transgression —” The abused Editor might in his turn ask Bentley / “what carnal film means?” and which perhaps this “cold-blooded” Critick, or / an Anatomist only could only answer. ——WB—

The second annotation (page 398) refers to book 12, lines 648-49, the final two lines of the poem. This was the page-opening displayed in the exhibition. Bentley proposes changing these lines to alter their rhythm and alleviate the desolate atmosphere created by Milton as Adam and Eve leave Paradise. The annotator is emphatic in stating his opposition:

I cannot enough admire the hardiness of Bentley, who would expunge these / two last Lines, as proper and surely as beautiful as any in the whole Poem, / and substitute cold expressions foreign to the Author’s ~~Judgement~~ probable / and natural  
 ^ meaning, viz “that they left Paradise with regret,” if any one thinks otherwise / I desire no better proof of the state of his feelings. WB

- 12 In his 2008 article, Crosby provides instances of monograms that Blake employed in his work between 1797 and 1805 that are similar to that which appears on page 398 of the Bentley Milton. They come principally from his engravings for Richard Edwards’s edition of Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (1797) and paintings such as *Bathsheba at the Bath* (c. 1799–1800) (Crosby 521). Intermittently, this monogram appears in the *Vala* manuscript, often on the bottom left- or right-hand side of the images (illus. 13).



13. *Vala*, or *The Four Zoas*, monogram on f. 22r. © British Library Board. Add MS 39764.

In all examples, Blake executes a semicircle that overarches the “WB” in the style of the “WB” on the page 398 annotation. However, the pen stroke moves from a loop formed at the base of the B and circles around and back over that letter, attaching to the top of the W from right to left. This is an opposite movement to that which forms the monogram on page 398 of the Bentley Milton, where the overarching pen stroke moves from left to right from the top of the W, curling over and in a semicircle around the B (illus. 14).



14. “WB” from the annotation on p. 398. *Milton’s “Paradise Lost,”* ed. Richard Bentley (London, 1732). Victoria University Library (Toronto). Blake Suppl. no. 1079. Reproduced with the permission of Victoria University Library.

Yet the looping of the pen stroke over the letters, whether forward or backward, gives the same stylistic impression. As Blake had been for some years proficient in reverse or mirror writing, he would have been able to write in either direction with ease (Bentley, *Stranger* 37).

### Conclusion

- 13 An annotated copy of Richard Bentley’s edition of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* was displayed in the Blake exhibition, first in London and then in New York, in 2000 and 2001. Immediately following, the attribution to Blake of two annotations signed “WB” was disputed. In response, the copy was made available for study from 2003 to 2005 in the manuscript reading room of the British Library, and, from 2005 to 2007, in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. During this time only Mark Crosby took the opportunity to examine it. It should be noted that, while on exhibition, the volume was open to the annotation on page 398; the annotation on page 355, with the clear and distinctive monogram matching, for example, the one that Blake used to sign his letter to Thomas Butts on 2 October 1800, was not on display, nor did it appear in the exhibition catalogue.
- 14 In his paper in the *Book Collector*, Crosby concluded by asking if help could be given in identifying the fragment of

an eighteenth-century bookplate in the volume. It is now identified as belonging to William Backwell, who lived near William Cowper at his home in Weston Underwood, making it possible that it was the Backwell copy that Cowper borrowed for his work on Milton.

- 15 We know that Cowper's books and papers were present in William Hayley's library from September 1800 to September 1803, when Blake was employed by Hayley and spending much of his time working in the library. As Crosby has shown, Blake's portrait of Milton for Hayley's library contains distinctive features that are found only in George Vertue's portrait engraving of Milton in Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost*. Furthermore, Hayley described the copy that Cowper borrowed, and that presumably arrived in his library with Cowper's papers, as "containing many very severe censures"—in other words, numerous annotations, many of a critical nature. This also describes the Backwell copy, which has nearly eighty anonymous annotations, many disapproving of Bentley's emendations.
- 16 As shown here, some of Blake's letters to Butts written from his cottage at Felpham are in a style of handwriting, and signed with a monogram, that share characteristics, some idiosyncratic, with those of the two annotations signed "WB" in the Backwell copy of Bentley's edition. Other examples of Blake's writing style and distinctive monogram have been cited by Crosby.
- 17 Are the two annotations signed "WB" in the Backwell copy of Richard Bentley's edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1732) attributable or not to the William Blake? The new evidence presented here must be worthy of consideration.

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