

Interpreting Birds, Beasts and Text in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Symbols and scenes follow and frame lettering in William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Lines of text begin and end with leaves, birds, ribbons and clouds, the shadows of serpents and horses. These illustrations are small as letters and act as letter stand-ins, as if the sentence, secretly unended, leaps into and persists in stick figures, curlicues and flames. Letter, scene and symbol are related not only by style – the letters are themselves like little pictures – but by the close placement of text and symbol, the streaming of symbol from sentence end, and the landscaping of the page by illustrations that herald and cradle the text.

The nature of this relationship is complicated. If there is a mapping between text and illustration, it seems at first sight to be personal to Blake, as if angels and flowers are connected by his own sense-associations, by mythic literature in his own mind. Yet wherever there are symbols, there are external references that permit public or universal association, by which their meaning can be interpreted in context. In this case, such references might include common human experiences of what a symbol depicts (the ways of bulls or tigers); foundational theological texts (like the Bible); and known instances of the symbol in religious art and writing.

Blake's symbols are diverse, but roughly of four kinds: **Beasts** (snakes, horses and birds), **Nature** (mud, flower and flame), **Angels** (and demons – celestial but manlike things) and **Men** (all human forms). I will interpret the meanings each kind takes on in this work, based on recurrent geometric and stylistic relationships between instances of each symbol and the text they frame and follow. In so doing, I will examine the degree to which the scenes and symbols might be said to continue, complement, or augment textual semantics in Copy H of the *Marriage*,¹ and reflect on differences between text and illustrations in how they carry meaning.

Plate 1 of Copy H is colored red and blue, and little birds fly between the last stanzas. This suggests the plate itself is sky, and the text is as suspended from it, the burden of Blake's "burden'd air". The illustration is cast as true-form, and the text as a limited indication, a burden borne by image only to help her seer truly see her. Meanwhile, the rounded bodies of human beings lounge whitely under the last line: "Hungry clouds swag on the deep." The clouds' personification is reinforced by illustration, by human embodiment at the bottom – the depths – of the page. These scenes build on Blake's animistic language, giving skies and clouds a human form, relating the human-minded and the natural, the human-bodied and nature for many plates to come.

Some men are little shades. Plate 2 reaches into the line "...love and hate are necessary for human existence" with a leaf or wave holding two figures, facing inward with clasped hands. Placed like this beside these words, a "loving" scene could have two meanings: either that of all the named necessities, love is most important and the only one depicted; or that in every love

¹ There are nine copies with different coloring, so I focus on Copy H – which is very intricate.

there is hate, that the purest and most obvious depiction of love must also be like hate. Further remarks in the *Marriage* eliminate the first possibility: Blake insists that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul" and "Energy is the only life and is from the Body". It is therefore unlikely for him to divide the compound of Love and Hate like Body and Soul, and privilege Love over Hate as churches privilege "Reason, called Good, which [sacred codes see stemming] alone from the Soul." (Plate 4) Though this scene has a multiplicity of meaning, its adjacent text aims to have one; pointed text narrows the scenes in its company.

"God will Torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies," reads Plate 4. The last word is trailed by a big, bounding dog and two child-figures, connected by a brush-stroke to a coupled unit like parents. An idea emerges: a man of energies cavorts with animals; the animal is larger and lifelier than man because it is charged with energy. The tallest (male?) figure points at (or hails!) an even larger animal, grazing like a bull, head bent at a cliffside; the ground falls away from that head, dividing the striding father from the peaceful beast-king. This beast is the energy of man from which he is religiously separate.

This is why Blake draws shade-figures: they are incomplete states of created things. Faceless, featureless, the stick figure is the reason-part of man, and the lineal beast is his energy. They require the right marriage to assume a fuller form. A false interpretation of the line "Reason is the bound or outward circumference of energy," leads to a false marriage: these words melt into a throned man, a man-king made royal not by power or size, but by thronging priests and courtiers. This procession is again divided (this time by a swooping letter *l*) from another vision: that of a man in chariot driven by two bridled horses.

Setting the bridling man as reason and the bridled horse as energy, the drawing cautions against an understanding of "bound" as binding influence. Reason is the naturally arising border or boundary of energy, and should not be its driver or leasher. The poverty of drawing in these two visions – of man above man, and man above beast – identifies both as false marriages. Bare reason cannot be grafted to reason; it requires false hierarchy. Reason cannot marry energy if placed in false hierarchy.

The text itself distinguishes these marriages, the *l* of *eternal* reaching down into the flames. This evokes a hellishness in false marriage by knitting together *eternal* fire. It also seems to validate the idea that text arbitrates meaning in images. It reveals the difference between image-concepts, in this case by physically dividing them, and in general by providing context, which requires consistent interpretation.

True marriage is achieved in Plate 5. A richly painted man and horse fall down to flames of red and gold. The sketched rider of Plate 4 is in full focus, colored and detailed, and unseated: one leg tangles with his steed as they descend into the fire, a sign of merging. The descent itself is a fulfillment, as the fire was already promised in Plate 4, but could only tug at the shades by a hooking letter.

The rider's sword falls beside him, pointing into his own body. It was his only weapon, "the restrainer or Reason who usurps [desire's] place & governs the unwilling." Now it flies freely into the fire, where it will be melted, distorted beyond use. The Satanic fire of desire has found him, coupled with his large, strong horse, which he can no longer threaten. His human and animal bodies are equalized, leveled and in limb connected, meeting the flame as reason and energy together.

Other well-colored illustrations of the good also argue for a lack of hierarchy. The large, full pictures of eagle and serpent in Plate 15 do not speak of predation, even though the eagle has the serpent in its clutches. They do not even seem to notice each other. Instead, one looks towards the heavens (which are filled with text) and the other faces down, tongue flying and plying the dark blue air. One might imagine the eagle crowing in victory, and the serpent crying out in pain. But the text in their heaven confirms the intuition that they are different from hunter and hunted.

The plate tells us that a "Viper" inhabits the second chamber of a "printing-house in Hell, [where] knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation." The viper "[folds] around the rock & the cave, and others [adorn] it with gold and precious stones." The golden streaks of his head and neck cast the "it" that is adorned as the viper himself – a case where the illustration disambiguates the text. The line ends in a serpentine ribbon and a man-figure with snakelike arms, his hands opening in imitation of a snake's head. Another figure beside him lies strangely, as if his legs are becoming different, blending together like a snake's body. These mutated forms may be the adorners, textually implied to be "other [vipers]".

These viper-like things are like the "Eagle-like men" who "built palaces in the immense cliffs" around the printing-cave. In the third chamber of this cave, just past the viper-chamber, there is an "Eagle with wings and feathers of air, [who] caused the inside of the cave to be infinite." The wings and feathers of the illustrated eagle are the same gold of the viper. If there were direct correspondence between text and illustration, the air-feathers would have to also be gold-feathers, and so air would have to be gold. I assume this equivalence is not intended, as it would explain little of the text's meaning. It seems the image complements the text instead of building on or reinforcing this meaning.

In its role as complement, the eagle signifies two ideas without clearly written analogues. One is that the eagle and the viper, made of the snake's material and supported by the eagle's, are continuous and even somehow identical – or at least intersecting along some conceptual dimension. A candidate dimension is energetic or elemental: both the eagle and the viper are energy-containing and moving perhaps solely by their energies, and these energies are grounded in their respective elements of air and metal.

The second idea is that the material of the eagle is not just air but also gold, and therefore the way in which the cave is made infinite has also to do with the qualities of gold. Since the mechanics of infinity are not described, we can imagine that the dark sea in which the snake and eagle swim is a kind of burst cave, a deepened and unbounded space filled with the eagle's

material and lit by the snake's. This imagination couples to the text but does not directly further any of its ideas, instead moving radially outward from the described phenomenon into broader possibilities.

There are only four sketches of angels, each blowing a trumpet. Three of them cluster around "The voice of the Devil" titling Plate 4, two to the left and one to the right blowing high into the corners of the plate. The fourth floats in a blue and purple sky on Plate 7, blowing at the word "folly" in "If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise". "Folly is the cloke of knavery," reads the next line, and the next: "Shame is Prides cloke."

The four trumpets easily remind of Revelation 8:6-12: "The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down on the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up." There are green leaves in the later book, dancing around the words in Plate 25, and a smudge of green on the ground in a Plate 7 sketch – a man lifts his leg, reaching largely for something beyond the plate margin. One could say the plates grow yellower; the lush green of Plate 1 never recurs, since "the just man [has been driven] into barren climes". There is some possibility that the first trumpet seals this concept of barrenness; of the blood-fire, we see a lot of fire.

"The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed." Much falling into the flames occurs, including a tiny sketch of upended man flame-falling in Plate 6, but no sea accepts a blazing form; unless the flames count as blood-seas, or the red-blue skies of Plate 10, the second part of the prophecy is also irrelevant. As for the third and fourth angels, no "great star, blazing like a torch, [falls] from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water," and at no point do we see a "third of the day without light, and also a third of the night."

Why reference Revelation? One clue might be that after the four angels, "an eagle that was flying in midair [called] out in a loud voice." There being only four trumpets might secretly identify the eagle in Plate 15 as the Biblical caller. The eagle's head turned up may be in calling movement, and the text positioned above his beak – previously understood as in his heaven – might be his issued words. If so, this would create a relation, if not an equivalence, between the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation and the dire cries of the Apocalypse: "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!"

These blasts do not come, but three angels do – in textual form. Each are defeated or cast away from their stations: in Plate 14, "the cherub with his flaming sword is hereby commanded to leave his guard at tree of life, and when he does, the whole creation will be consumed and appear infinite and holy when now it appears finite & corrupt." In Plate 17, an angel comes to Blake and attempts to convince him he is "pitiable [and] foolish", and in "a dreadful state". Blake proves that the "hot burning dungeon" to which the angel sees him condemned is but "a

pleasant bank beside a river by moonlight," and that the angel's "metaphysics" had contorted his perception of this truth.

Another aspect of the same truth converts an angel introduced in Plate 22: a Devil tells him in Blake's audience that honoring the gifts and genius of each man is the real worship of God, and that religious rules are distractions of vice and cowardice, for even and especially Jesus' virtue was in "breaking [the] ten commandments; Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules." The angel "[stretches] out his arms embracing the flame of fire", and "is now become a Devil."

The Apocalypse is subverted when the last three angels are banished, outwitted and finally converted to true godliness. The life stilled by love-angels flows out and is fanned like a flame, swelled and encouraged by their transformed fellows – the former angels which now, instead of punishing living men, also delight in "[reading] the Bible in its infernal or diabolical sense which the world shall have if they behave well." Wellbehaving is still required; the angels still care for it, perhaps even enforce it; yet now it is differently defined.

There is only one Devil. He sits bottom center on Plate 10, under the words "Enough! or too much". One is certainly both enough and too much. He seems to be dictating to two non-devils – with blue robes and golden hair, men or angels? – the Proverbs of Hell. Unlike the angel-sketches, he has wings; this easily connects to Blake's inversion of good and evil, and their sources. True good comes from that which the Church calls devilish – which all churches have called devilish – and what they call good is a denial of life, and therefore a corruption of worship. It is Plate 10's Devil who embodies true good: pink with health, muscled, bold, he points and speaks vigorously, letting men know the truth by the gray-blue sea.

Blake's illustrations, both symbol and scene, can be read as echoing, extending, or alternating with the text, which itself in slanted lettering – continuous in style with his ribbons and sketches – pulls different pictures together, creating relations that fold back in the written word. Image and text disambiguate each other, and in fact the images are mostly known by other textual sources – the writing that comes before and makes Blake's work legible. His beasts are pure energy, gaining color and resolution when rightly married to his men, who without their animals are shadows, twigs of reason. And his angels try to keep this beastly life from men, until clever Blake and Devil together thwart their evil project.