

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS
Taking Dictation: Plates 5 and 10 of Blake's
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

Anthony Apesos

ABSTRACT In this essay, Anthony Apesos discusses two of the illuminations in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: an interlinear scene on plate 5 and a half-page illustration on plate 10. He argues that these depict episodes of dictation, referring to Milton and his dutiful amanuenses. They point to Blake's later treatment of Milton in the poem named for him. **KEYWORDS:** Henry Fuseli; Catherine Blake; Milton and dictation; depictions of Milton; William Blake's *Milton*

❧ **WILLIAM BLAKE BEGINS HIS EPIC** *Milton* (1804–10) with an address to the Daughters of Beulah to be his muses and inspire his hand to write: “Come into my hand / By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm / From out the Portals of my Brain” (plate 2, lines 5–7).¹ He refers again to the physical act of writing when questioning the adequacy of his “cold hand of clay” (plate 20 [22], line 17) to communicate his vision. Blake does not elsewhere stress the manual nature of his own and, indeed, most people's writing. The fact that he does so here foregrounds the way in which the greatest work by the protagonist of *Milton* first appeared on paper. The author of *Paradise Lost* is famous for not using his own hand to write his masterpiece—owing to his blindness, he dictated it and subsequent compositions to his daughters.

The unusual way in which Milton had produced his epic already concerned Blake more than ten years earlier in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). In this work, I will argue, are two illuminations that depict a figure taking dictation from another figure. These two images, when viewed together, complement the idea of Milton that Blake presents within the text. The two illuminations I will discuss are very

1. This and all Blake quotes are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 1982).

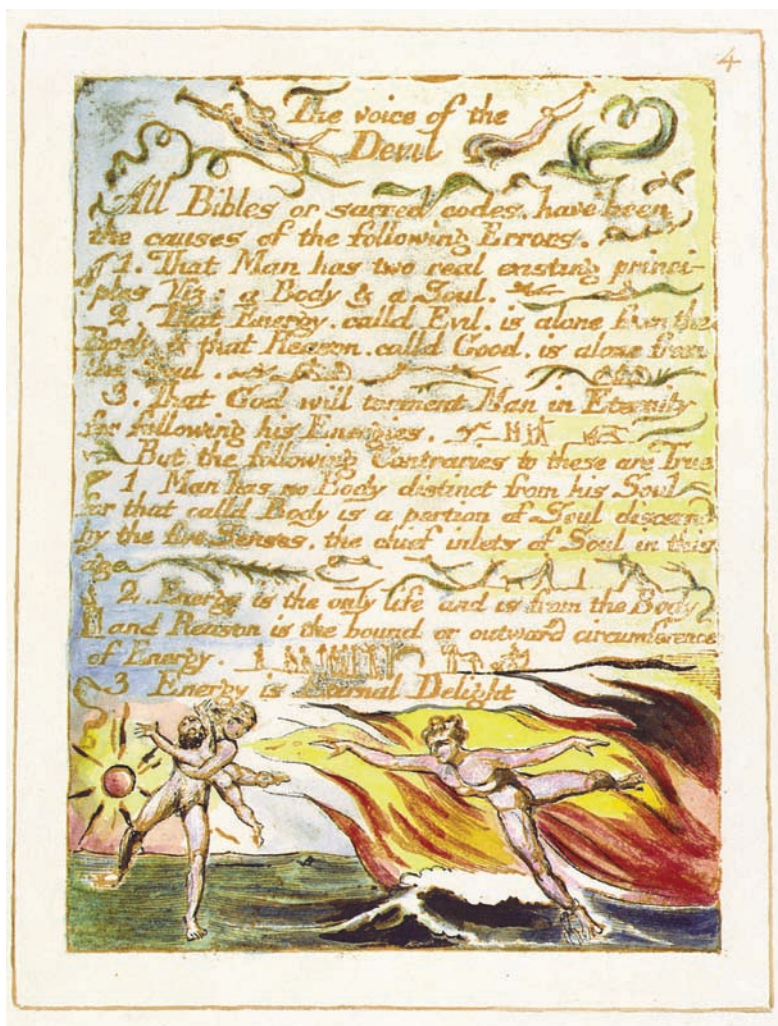


FIGURE 1. Plate 4, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy G [Lowell.1217.17]. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

different in scale and in relation to the overall page layout. This, perhaps, has prevented other commentators from noting their significance to each other and their mutual relation to the text.

Blake often embellished his illuminated books with tiny interlinear and marginal pictures. Many of these are comparable to today's emoticons and, like their twenty-first-century counterparts, provide affective responses to the text. For example, in plate 4 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (fig. 1), a bird and three trumpeting figures in ascending flight serve as visual fanfare to the passage of text, titled "The



FIGURE 2. Plate 5, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy A [fTyp 6500.36].
 Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Voice of the Devil.” On the same page, a miniscule kicking horse follows the word “Energies” (line 11), emphasizing it. Yet others of these nearly microscopic decorations show more complex images that add more than emotional inflection to the text.

Similarly, plate 5 includes a pair of little figures (fig. 2), one of them reclining, the other seated and apparently holding a stick. Behind the seated figure, filling out the space to the margin of the text, is a horizontal serpentine line with a forked end. The

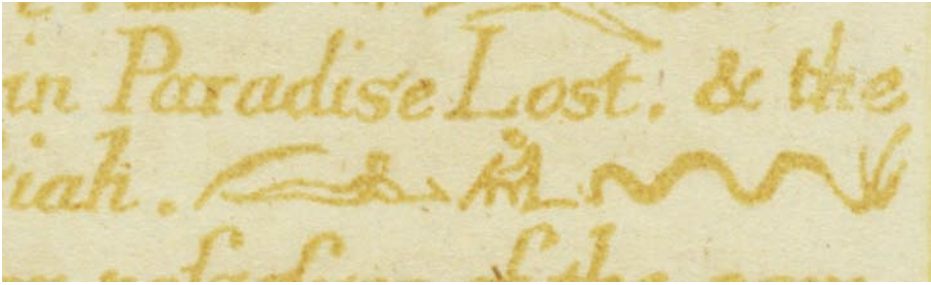


FIGURE 3. Plate 5 (enlarged detail), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy A [fTyp 6500.36]. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

figures are embraced by two lines of text, “The history of this is written in Paradise Lost. & the / Governor or Reason is call’d Messiah,” and they appear directly beneath the words “Paradise Lost” (fig. 3). Blake often altered with ink or watercolor the printed pages of his illuminated books, but this was more often the case with the text or larger images. As is usual with the interlinear embellishments, the image under discussion is consistently represented in all copies of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.² Copies H and G do differ slightly from the other copies in that they have added water-coloring. The former has a wash of pink watercolor underscoring the figures. Copy G has a blue wash over them as well as the other interlinears, which connect to the line of green at the bottom of the page, thus turning the space behind them into a small, simple landscape. But in neither of these versions are the poses, accessories, or relationship of the figures altered.

Previous scholars have interpreted the stick in the seated figure’s hand as a compass. Geoffrey Keynes suggests that the reclining figure is Milton holding a pen,³ perhaps in the act of writing the poem whose title is in the line above. This is untenable; neither Blake nor his contemporaries could have imagined the great Puritan in such a luxuriating pose. Erdman suggests that the reclining figure is being instructed by the seated one.⁴ Michael Phillips raises the possibility that the seated figure is “reading from a bookstand and turning pages.”⁵ The “Illustration Description” in the William Blake Archive website agrees that the reclining figure holds a pen and that the seated one holds a pair of compasses.⁶ As Keynes notes, compasses are a “symbol of the Governor, or Reason, typified elsewhere by Newton with his compasses,” as found in Blake’s great color print of Newton (1795)⁷—and, I would add, the image of Urizen

2. The nine complete extant copies are Copy A, Houghton Library; Copy B, Bodleian Library; Copy C, Morgan Library; Copy D, Library of Congress; Copy E, Fitzwilliam Museum; Copy F, Morgan Library; Copy G, Houghton Library; and Copies H and I, Fitzwilliam Museum.

3. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, introduction and commentary by Geoffrey Keynes (New York, 1975), plate 5 commentary.

4. *The Illuminated Blake*, annotated by David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y., 1974), 103.

5. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, ed. Michael Phillips (Oxford, 2011), 103.

6. The William Blake Archive, accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.blakearchive.org>.

7. *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1975), plate 5 commentary.

with his compasses from the first plate of *Europe* (1794). The text on the page under discussion is about the restraint of desire or energy by reason “till it is only the shadow” of itself (line 5). The lines near the two figures in question say that the history of the progress of restraining, governing reason “is written in *Paradise Lost*” (line 6). The logic of seeing the right-hand figure as a compass-holding restrainer is obvious, but I believe another identification fits the figure more comfortably.

Recall that Milton did not *write* his great epic: he dictated it. If we take the clue that the reclining figure is writing and the short diagonal line is a quill pen, along with Erdman's suggestion that the reclining figure is taking instruction from the seated one, then it seems most likely that the left-hand figure represents one of Milton's daughters taking dictation from her father, who is seated before her. One might suggest, frivolously, that taking dictation in a prone position must be nearly impossible, but we should not expect realism from Blake. He uses body language to show inner states, not outward appearances. So the figure prone on the floor reflects the daughter's subservience to her blind father. Not only do the blind Milton and his daughter appear directly beneath the words “*Paradise Lost*,” but the text that states “written in” also makes it especially apt for the depiction to be of the daughter writing down her father's words. In this understanding of the figures, it becomes clear that the seated Milton is holding a blind man's walking stick in his hands, not compasses. A walking stick is the only indicator of sightlessness possible on such a tiny scale.

Painters contemporary with Blake, in every depiction of Milton dictating *Paradise Lost* that I have found, conceived of the poet as seated in an armchair like Blake's figure. In the picture most relevant to Blake, by his friend Henry Fuseli (fig. 4), a walking stick rests by Milton's side.⁸ Blake also admired the work of James Barry, and that artist's etching of “Milton Dictating to Ellwood, the Quaker” (1804–5) shows Milton seated, with his stick. I do not want to deny that Milton's walking stick can recall the delineating compasses of Newton/Urizen, but it does so as an allusion contained within its primary meaning.

The penta-curved line behind the seated figure has been interpreted as a snake.⁹ If the seated figure is Milton, then the adjacent line would be the Satan of *Paradise Lost* in his guise as the serpent tempter of Eve and Adam, thus indicating the moment when Eve accepts the serpent's argument to not restrain herself from tasting the tempting forbidden fruit.

On plate 5 Blake writes,

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs / is weak enough to be
restrained; and the restrainer or / reason usurps its place & governs the

8. Depictions include those by George Romney, Private Collection, 1792; Richard Westall, Soane Museum, London, 1802; and Henry Fuseli, Art Institute of Chicago, 1794. The depictions that are later than the *Marriage* are relevant because they show the inevitability of this way of imagining the aged Milton at home.

9. *The Illuminated Blake*, 103.



FIGURE 4. Henry Fuseli, *Milton and His Daughters* (1794), oil on canvas. Preston O. Morton Memorial Purchase Fund for Older Paintings, 1973.303. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

unwilling. / And being restrain'd it by degrees becomes passive / till it is
only the shadow of desire. / The history of this is written in *Paradise Lost*,
& the / Governor or Reason is call'd Messiah. (Lines 1–7)

He adds, “in the Book of Job Miltons Messiah is call'd Satan” (lines 11–12). Job's Satan and Milton's Messiah are the same for Blake because both act to accuse man of sin. In the second version of *The Gates of Paradise* (ca. 1818), Blake refers to this Satan as “The Accuser who is The God of This World,” writing,

Truly, My Satan, thou art but a Dunce,
 And dost not know the Garment from the Man.
 Every Harlot was a Virgin once[.] (Plate 19, lines 3–5)

As accusers, Job's Satan and Milton's Messiah both mistake actions for essences and seek to restrain desire and govern actions. Blake consistently opposes, throughout his writings, Milton's ethics of restraint and judgment. In the *Marriage* Blake explicitly mocks Milton's theology, saying that, "in Milton: the Father is Destiny, the Son, a ratio of the five senses & the Holy-ghost, Vacuum" (plate 6, lines 8–9). He is critical of not only Milton's Puritanical ideas but also Milton's poem: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when / he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of / Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and / of the Devils party without knowing it" (plate 6, lines 10–13). The interlinear decoration of Milton and his daughter suggests that Blake's disapproval extended to Milton, the man whose mind-forged manacles tyrannically oppressed his three wives and three daughters. The one daughter here in the interlinear illumination, taking dictation submissively on the ground, is a synecdoche for the subjugation of all of these women.¹⁰

Let us now consider the half-page illustration (fig. 5) at the end of "Proverbs of Hell," on plate 10 of the *Marriage*, which shows a scene of dictation, an expansion and transformation of the interlinear decoration on plate 5. John B. Pierce, in his interesting discussion, to which I shall return presently, dubs the illustration on plate 10 the "infernal scriptorium."¹¹ A bat-winged devil kneels on the ground before a cushioned stool. He turns to look toward the seated figure to his right, who is studiously writing. A long scroll is unrolled before the devil, to which he gestures, as though giving instruction from it. To the left of the devil, an animated sitting figure turns toward the writing figure, his profiled face echoing that of the devil.

This scene has received a variety of interpretations. In his description of the page, Keynes estimates that the animated one is more clever than the other seated figure and even determines that the studious one is "stupid."¹² Why Keynes believes a mental laborer concentrating on his work should be considered stupid is not clear to me; Keynes's suggestion that one figure seems to be struggling with his task while the other is already finished seems unnecessary. One could just as easily think that the animated figure is not finished at all but has lost his place in taking dictation, so he looks to the other for help. An alternative view is that the writer is the focus of the devil's lesson, and the other angel is left out and curious. None of these readings necessarily follows from what is visible in the image. What we do know is that the devil addresses the one who writes while the other looks on.

10. An unsympathetic account of Milton's personal and political life that Blake certainly knew is Samuel Johnson's *Life of Milton* in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1781).

11. John Benjamin Pierce, *The Wondrous Art: William Blake and Writing* (Madison, N.J., 2003), 153.

12. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1975), plate 5 commentary.



FIGURE 5. Plate 10, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy A [fTyp 6500.36]. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Morris Eaves, Robert Essick, and Joseph Viscomi describe the relation of the three figures differently: “the devil . . . points to the scroll on his lap, while the seated figure . . . to the left writes down what he [the devil] says and a second seated figure . . . to the right looks over his [the devil’s] shoulder and copies from the scroll to the tablet in his lap.”¹³ Their very interesting commentary, which expands upon the distinction between scrolls and tablets in Blake’s iconography, is unfortunately not relevant to what is in the image. The figure on the right is not looking at the devil’s scroll at all, but leans back to look around the devil at the writing figure. There is also no way to determine whether he holds a tablet or scroll in any of the copies of the plate, except for copy G, in which Blake redrew the outline to show it in that instance, at least, to be a scroll (fig. 6), not a tablet.

For a reading of the three figures that has an actual basis on the illustration, we might look to the plants that grow next to them. Keynes identifies them as having their source in Erasmus Darwin’s *Botanic Garden* (1791). According to Keynes, the spiky one next to the writer is *Dionaea muscipula*, the carnivorous Venus flytrap.¹⁴ Keynes identifies the flowing foliage with the other figure as *Gloriosa superba*, an exotic lily-like plant. I do not see in Blake’s picture the degree of botanical specificity needed for such precise identifications, but there is enough to see for these plants to be read symbolically. In the world of ironic inversion that is the *Marriage*, where angels are enslaving and bad, where devils are liberating and thus good, and where Milton’s Messiah is Satan, the spiky plant would be of the devil’s party (liberating and good) and the curvilinear one more angelic (enslaving and bad). Keynes suggests that the spiky demonic plant is there to help enlighten the “stupid” figure, but since we could as easily say that this plant is an appropriate attribute for a figure engaged in inspired mental labor, we need to look further for insight into this image.

To best understand these two figures and to read their attributes, we must first consider the devil kneeling between them. Erdman, Tom Dargan, and Marlene Deverell-Van Meter see him as a parody of Christ in the Last Judgment, so that his two companions are like the angels who hold the books of the blessed and the damned.¹⁵ The similarity is there, but I do not believe it is relevant to understanding the image. Joseph Wittreich offers a different reading that is more compatible with the image. He writes, “I prefer to think of it as directly parodic of a famous episode in Milton’s life.”

13. Blake, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi (Princeton, N.J., 1993), 134.

14. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1975), plate 10 commentary. Keynes and Phillips (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [2011]), following him, are both careless in conflating the Venus flytrap (*Dionaea muscipula*) with the sundew (genus *Drosera*). Both plants are carnivorous but very different in form. Erdman (*Illuminated Blake*, 107) does not make this mistake, but I believe he is overly optimistic in his identification of the plants to the right.

15. David V. Erdman, T. Dargan, and M. Deverell-Van Meter, “Reading the Illuminations of Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,” in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, ed. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford, 1973), 182.



FIGURE 6. Plate 10, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy G [Lowell.1217.17]. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

By this he means Milton dictating *Paradise Lost* to his daughters. Wittreich sees this as a “pictorialization of Blake’s entire criticism of Milton, which is presented verbally on plates 5 and 6: Milton is of the Devil’s party and is thus depicted in hell: the bat wings signal the poet’s errors.”¹⁶ In other words, Wittreich is saying that Blake is accusing

16. Joseph Anthony Wittreich, *Angel of Apocalypse: Blake’s Idea of Milton* (Madison, Wisc., 1975), 310. Phillips (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [2011], 114–15) has discovered a print by Isaac

Milton of being in the Devil's party, as indeed he is—but for Blake this is not a criticism. Insofar as Milton writes and acts as a member of the Devil's party, Milton is not in error. Blake blames Milton not for his alliance with the Devil but for Milton's self-deception about the alliance. To read this illustration in a manner that agrees with Blake's discussion of Milton, it is fitting that we understand the devil of plate 10 to be Milton not as he acted in life—a domestic tyrant—but as he truly was—an inspired poet and a member of the Devil's party. And the two figures who are his daughters¹⁷ also are shown not as they were in life, Milton's female drudges, but as they are in an idealized version of Milton's household—deeply engaged, one in dictation and the other eager to see what is being written.¹⁸

Pierce discusses plate 10 in the conclusion to his book *The Wond'rous Art*, a study of the meaning of the act of writing for Blake.¹⁹ He argues that, in Blake's theory of writing, the origin of a text “is conditioned by the social, political, and personal contexts of its construction.”²⁰ When we recall the method of production of Blake's books, we must also recognize the centrality of the personal contexts in the construction of *his* texts. It is well known that his wife, Catherine, assisted him by hand-coloring his etchings.²¹ The “infernal scriptorium” easily fits an interpretation in which William is the devil in charge and Catherine is doubled as his assistant and admirer. Or, the third figure who is so interested could be the concubine that some have speculated William longed to add to his ménage²²—an episode that possibly coincided with the creation of

Cruikshank, “The Friends of the People,” that resembles the composition of the illustration on plate 10, but it was published in 1792, two years after the *Marriage* was first printed. So, unless Blake had seen the Cruikshank watercolor on which the print is based, this cannot be a source. If Blake *could* have seen it in some form earlier, his use of it would be consistent with the meaning of plate 10, as presented here. The devil in the Cruikshank image is perched on a table between two advocates of revolution, Thomas Paine and Joseph Priestley. For Cruikshank and Blake, both of these men were friends of the revolution and thus of the devil's party, although, of course, Cruikshank and Blake had opposing opinions regarding both the American Revolution and devils.

17. Milton had three daughters, but only two were helpers to him. The third had a mental disability of an unknown nature. Most depictions of Milton and his daughters show only two. The famous painting by Mihály Munkácsy (1877), in the New York Public Library, is unusual in including the third.

18. That both of the figures are also androgynous is beyond the scope of my discussion here, but it is consistent with Blake's later thought. See Tom Hayes, “William Blake's Androgynous Ego-ideal,” *ELH* 71, no. 1 (2004): 141–65.

19. Pierce, *Wond'rous Art*, 153. Pierce, who does not see Milton in this illustration, is the only previous commentator who has read the straightforward and obvious body language of these figures simply and as it is shown.

20. *Ibid.*, 156. Pierce unfortunately undermines the importance of the third of these, the personal. He quotes, with approval, Henri-Jean Martin, who claims, “writing has hardly any role in relations within primary groups like the family,” in *The History and Power of Writing*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago, 1994), 86. Hardly the case, perhaps, but not never, and not for Blake's view of Milton's household project—the production of *Paradise Lost*.

21. G. E. Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven, Conn., 2001), 70–73.

22. The origin and history of this rumor is summarized in Marsha Keith Schuchard, *William Blake's Sexual Path to Spiritual Vision* (Rochester, Vt., 2008), 1–10.

the *Marriage*. In Pierce's reading, the "infernal scriptorium" of plate 10 does not have this personal cast. He sees it as an allegorization of the process that occurs in the construction of any text. The scroll held by the kneeling devil is the original inspiration, conveyed by him to the writing hand, represented by the busy scribe. The curious figure on the right is the consciousness, which reads and evaluates the text as it is written.²³

All of these readings fit the image on plate 10, and I would not argue that any of them is either incorrect or primary. Blake depicts, in the relationships of the three figures in this image, a structure that can accommodate various readings with equal ease. What I do assert is that, in the context of Blake's reflections on Milton as presented in the *Marriage*, this illustration was understood by its maker to show Milton demonically unfettered.

That this is Blake's own reading of the image on plate 10 is reinforced by a consideration of the history of Blake's versions of it. No two copies of the *Marriage* are identical. Blake varied the colors of ink when he printed them and would then, usually, embellish them with watercolor. These variations create a harmony throughout the pages of each copy and affect the general mood of both the page and the entire work, from sober to exuberant. Changes were sometimes made to the design of the image as well. Six of the complete copies of the *Marriage* (A, B, C, D, E, F) show the figures seated or kneeling on an earthy floor that is sometimes verdant, barren, or nondescript; in copy D the bright green ground seems to float over a black abyss.

Although none of these variations is insignificant, they are minor compared to the treatment of the foreground in the other complete copies: G, H, and I. In each of these three, the figures appear on the shore of a body of water (fig. 7). Blake does not treat the water in the same way, and the differences inflect the mood of the page in each case.²⁴ In spite of the differences, the depiction of water and a shoreline lends particular significance when one considers the events in Blake's life at the time. Copy G is dated 1818; copy I is dated 1827; and copy H, though printed in 1790, has watercolor additions from 1821.²⁵ Therefore, all three were painted after the three years, from 1800 to 1803, that Blake resided near the ocean in the village of Felpham and after he completed his long poem *Milton*.

While at Felpham, Blake wrote a letter to his friend Thomas Butts that describes a vision he had had by the ocean.²⁶ Blake later used this vision as the seed for the apocalyptic finale of *Milton*.²⁷ The climax of the poem relates the transformation of the judging, puritanical Milton into an individual who realizes his allegiance to the forgiving

23. My presentation of Pierce's reading is greatly simplified (*Wondrous Art*, 152–59).

24. All versions can be viewed and compared on the William Blake Archive.

25. Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton, N.J., 1973), 134.

26. Blake to Butts, November 22, 1802, *The Letters of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 59–63.

27. For more on the relationship of the letter to Butts and the conclusion of *Milton*, see Jonathan Roberts, "William Blake's Visionary Landscape near Felpham," *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2013); and Anthony Apesos, "Poet in the Poem: Blake's *Milton*," *Studies in Philology* 112, no. 2 (2015): 379–413.

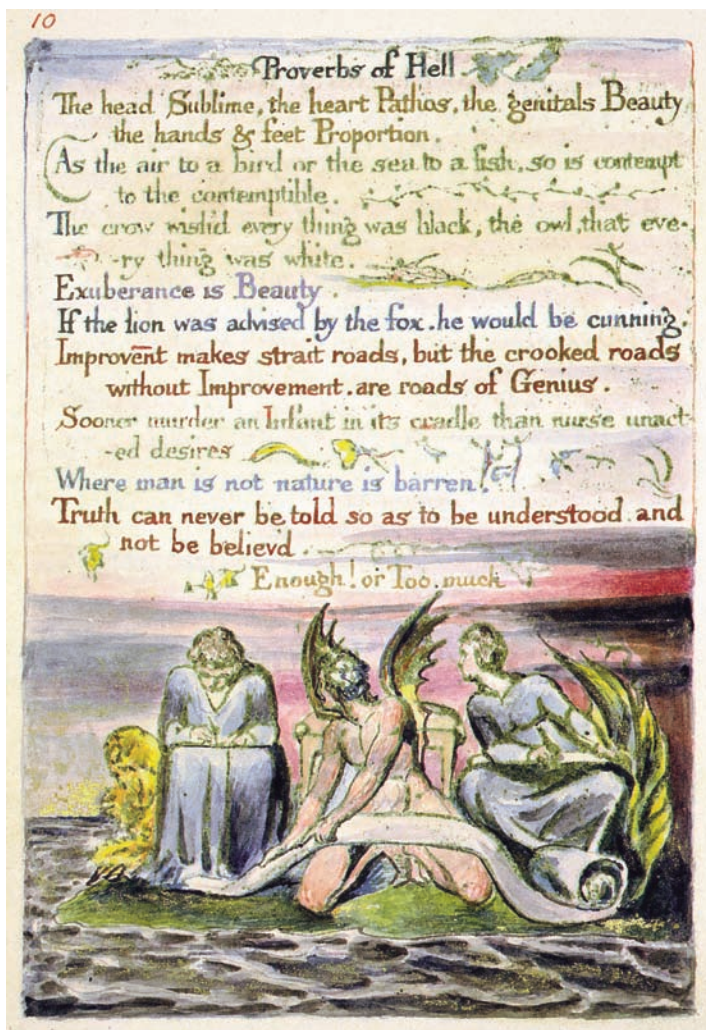


FIGURE 7. Plate 10, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy H. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Christ. In the terminology of the *Marriage*, Milton puts off the repressive angel that shrouded the liberating devil. In *Milton*, Milton's transformation is described as occurring before an oceanic backdrop. In these three late variations of plate 10 of the *Marriage*, all of them painted after Felpham and after Blake wrote *Milton*, it is easy to see why Blake would amend his earlier depiction of Milton as an inspired devil to place him on the banks of the sea,²⁸ the same location where Blake had envisioned his great predecessor's redemption.

28. Joseph Viscomi (personal communication, 2015) suggests that the watery location shown in the three late copies could serve to locate the devil on the English island; I would add that such a location would be consistent with the devil as Milton, the Island Nation's bard.

The interlinear decoration on plate 5 and the illustration on plate 10, if understood as I present them, point to Blake's later treatment of Milton in the poem named for him. Blake says in the text of the *Marriage* that the history of repression is told in *Paradise Lost*, but he reminds us in the interlinear illustration on plate 5 that Milton the man lived in moral error and needed to be saved. The illustration on plate 10 indicates the energetic devil that would be revealed within the repressed and repressing Puritan by the salvation envisioned for him by Blake and enacted in *Milton*.

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ANTHONY APESOS is a painter and Professor of Fine Arts at Lesley University. He is the author of *Anatomy for Artists: A New Approach to Discovering, Learning, and Remembering the Body* (2007). He is working on a book on historical painting methods.