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Mulhallen: William Blake’s Milton Portraiture and Eighteenth Century Milton

Fig. 1. Blake, water-colour painting of Milton (c. 1801); Manchester City Art Gallery.

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William Blake's Milton Portraiture and Eighteenth Century Milton Iconography

by KAREN MULHALLEN

IN 1786 WHEN, at a dinner party at Josiah Boydell's in November, the national Shakespeare project was conceived, one of the stated aims had been to establish an "English School of Historical Painting." Within two decades an English school had taken root and become part of an European iconographic tradition. London establishments, like Rudolph Ackermann's Repository of Arts, at Number 101 on the Strand, with collections of drawing materials, patterns and ornaments, consolidated for the public, and for the amateur and professional artist alike, a visual lexicon, a storehouse of commonplace images. It was on this repository that Blake and his contemporaries drew. "To learn the Language of Art," Blake asserted, "'Copy for Ever' is my Rule."  

The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is: The Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great deal. The Good one Really Does Copy a Great deal. (K 455-456)

An understanding of the manner in which this copy house grew is essential knowledge for an analysis of the visual arts at the turn of the nineteenth century. English portrait engraving in particular offers a special opportunity for study, since the native school had begun only a century or so before Blake's time with the work of the elder William Faithorne (1616-1691). Depictions by British artists, like George Vertue (1684-1756), of British heroes, such as John Milton, reveal the emergence of this home tradition and the specific way a special subject iconography is established. This paper will examine the Milton iconographic tradition as it is reflected in three portraits by William Blake.

Blake painted his Head of Milton (fig. 1) for William Hayley's library at the Turret House, Felpham, Sussex. Milton's Head was one of eighteen Hayley commissioned from Blake. The Blakes had moved from Lambeth to Felpham the third week of September, 1800, and by November Blake was "Absorbed by the poets Milton, Homer, Cameons, Ercilla, Ariosto and Spenser, whose physiognomies have been my delightful study."  By September of the following year Blake had probably completed his paint-

1. There are numerous examples in Ackermann's (1764-1834) periodical, The Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions and Politics (London, 1809-1827).
Fig. 2. Faithorne, engraved portrait of aged Milton for John Milton, *The History of Britain. That part Especially now call’d England* (1670); The British Museum.
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ing of Milton since he wrote to Thomas Butts (11 September, 1801; K809) that he would "shew you M' Hayley's Library, which is still unfinish'd, but is in a finishing way & looks well."

Only four studies have considered Blake's Head of Milton. Each points out the importance of William Faithorne as a source (fig. 2), though only the work of Joseph Wittreich explicates the meaning of the iconography of the Head of Milton and the importance of this, and other depictions by Blake of the poet, for an understanding of Blake's relationship to the poet. My study fundamentally agrees with Wittreich who contends that Blake follows no one of the "earlier depictions but instead assembles a variety of motifs previously used." Even when Blake abandoned established iconography he continued "to have important conceptual links with tradition." My work, however, seeks to extend Wittreich's by showing how Blake's altering of his sources illuminates his iconography.

There is certainly a kinship between Blake's Milton and that of Faithorne (fig. 2), from which many of the portraits of the poet in his later life are derived: each shows Milton in an oval frame; in each his large, puritan collar and long, centrally parted hair are prominent. There are, however, several important differences: Blake's Milton is without the elaborate, elegant, continental draperies of Faithorne's; his hair curls more amply on his collar; his eyes are without pupils; his jaw is full and firm; unlike Faithorne's he is a man in his middle years. Blake's poet is enclosed in a wreath of fruiting bay and oak leaves. On the lower right side an apple hangs from the wreath which itself is born on the back of a snake, writhing from right to left, biting an apple. To the left and to the right, framing Blake's portrait are palm trees, leaning against which on the left is part of a harp and on the right pastoral pipes. The crucial differences between Blake's and Faithorne's Milton can be traced in the emerging Milton iconography.

By the beginning of the twentieth century 327 engraved portraits of Milton had been catalogued, but it is likely that fewer than thirty were well-known in Blake's time. A 1793 catalogue of engraved British portraits, for example, list only twenty-five. Yet, twenty-five engravings was sufficient to establish a Milton portrait iconography, and the topography of the tradition is quite clear. Apart from eccentric depictions, such as Vertue's portrait of the poet cavorting like one of Botticelli's three graces (fig. 3), Jonathan Richardson's (1665–1745) medallion-Milton (fig.

5. Angel of Apocalypse, p. 8.
6. Angel of Apocalypse, p. 4.
Fig. 3. Vertue, Milton in company (n.d., c. 1720); The British Museum.
Fig. 4. Richardson, profile view of aged Milton (1738); The British Museum.
who resembles a head from Lavater's *Physiognomy* or even one of Blake's own visionary heads, and apart from the even more unusual and later anecdotal scene by James Barry (1741–1806) of Milton dictating his poems (fig. 5), most of the portraits are derivative of four types, a microcosm of the ages of man. These are clearly embodied in what appears to be a composite proof sheet by Giovani Battista Cipriani (1726–1785) (fig. 6), which he elaborated into foliage-framed views of the poet at each phase of his development (figs. 7–10).

It is these foliage-framed views, executed by Cipriani for *The Memoirs of Thomas Hollis* (1780), upon which Blake clearly drew. In all of Cipriani's frames the vegetation resembles laurel—an appropriate leaf for a poet—but Milton, at the age of ten, also appears to be enclosed in garlands of rose-buds, open, spring-like, just about to bloom (fig. 7). The leaf of the poet at twenty-one (fig. 8) seems even more clearly laurel-like, and similar to that in Blake's design (fig. 1). In the third, the exuberant frame of youth is smoothed, bound and elaborated into the image of the middle-aged, blind poet (fig. 9), and it is these palm-like fronds which Blake borrowed, perhaps as a sign of the poet's martyrdom and triumph, for the outer frame of his picture. The face of Blake's firm-fleshed, blind poet with rich, flowing locks also owes a great deal to Cipriani. Finally, and surprisingly, Cipriani's poet's life is completed, the leaves in his frame joined together (fig. 10), as also in Blake's portrait, the fruit turned to berries.

Cipriani's series allows us to establish that Blake's poet, unlike Faithorne's (fig. 2), is a man in his middle years. Blake wanted the viewer to contemplate Milton at the height of his powers, blind yet vigorous and full of flesh. He seems set in a frieze, an object of contemplation, surrounded by laurel. He rests above the serpent of the fallen world, smiling slightly, victorious, strong, and alive for all time.

Though Blake's interpretation owes something to Cipriani's series, several puzzling details still need to be considered. How did those waving palm fronds to the left and right of Blake's portrait become detached from Cipriani's middle-aged laurel wreath (fig. 9)? And what of the serpent with an apple in his mouth? Is he related to the one on plate 11 of Blake's *America* where children riding it show their mastery over, and transcendence of, a fallen world? Or did the tradition of Milton iconography suggest the standing fronds and the serpent to Blake? Though, as I have stated, the combination of details is Blake's own, with the exception of the oak and the pipes of Pan, each of the elements in his Head of Milton can be found in the tradition.

For the fronds, Blake may have turned to another portrait of Milton by

10. Wittreich contends that Blake's palm-trees were his own addition to the traditional motifs; see *Angel of Apocalypse*, p. 8. Wittreich argues that these palms are images of paradise (p. 8), iconoclasm (p. 8), and pilgrimage (p. 11).
Fig. 5. Barry, anecdotal portrait of Milton dictating (1807); The British Museum.
Fig. 6. Cipriani, Milton at four stages of his life (c. 1760); The British Museum.
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Cipriani (fig. 11). This shows the poet as a middle-aged man, with herbivorous arms and a monument body. From this grotesque, which might have graced the corridors of Fontainebleau, Blake seems to have taken the waving fronds in the lower left and right foregrounds. The snake, apple in mouth, appears to have an even longer history. The serpent with an apple is a leitmotif in Milton illustration and derives from conventional depictions of the fall. Wittreich points to the first example of this motif in Pigne's 1713 frontispiece to Paradise Regained.11 But there is an even earlier serpent, albeit with his tail in his mouth, who surrounds the inscription plaque on Robert White's frontispiece for the fourth edition, 1688, of Paradise Lost.12 And the snake with an apple also appears in a 1751 design by Vertue (fig. 12), itself after a pastel portrait in the Princeton University Library collection.13 Yet in this Vertue design the poet, although Christ-like, dwells in a world ruled by the serpent. In Blake's design this is not the case.

The positioning of Milton above the serpent is not Blake's own invention. There are other examples of this motif, such as the one by Jonathan Richardson and George Vertue (fig. 13) and another by Jacob Houbraken (1689–1780), who collaborated with Vertue in Thomas Birch's Heads of Illustrious Persons of Great Britain (1743–1752). Houbraken used the serpent as an emblem of Milton's Paradise Lost subject matter (fig. 14), for he has the serpent curled around the poet's lyre. But his portrait is of the poet as a youth. Richardson's design (fig. 13)—executed before his Milton engraving for Samuel Say's Poems on Several Occasions (1745) for which it was a model—shows the poet transcending the serpent, as in Blake's painting (fig. 1). Richardson's poet, based on the same plaster cast as Cipriani's middle-aged poet, is sightless and vigorous in appearance. Most important, for our purposes, he is middle-aged, as in Blake's work. Richardson, Cipriani and Blake come together in this Milton iconography.

Richardson, Cipriani and Blake are disparate figures in the history of English portrait engraving and I have cited only intrinsic evidence, certain common motifs and images, to unite them. Blake often tells his reader that his art is copied yet he rarely says—apart from Dürer, Michelangelo, and Raphael—from whom. Though Richardson, Cipriani, and even Houbraken, at first seem unlikely models for Blake, there is some extrinsic evidence to confirm their importance. While working in William Hayley's library, Blake had ample opportunity to view its collections. When Hayley's pictures, drawings, prints and old oriental china, were sold at Christie's, on 15 February 1821, a special category in the catalogue, "Rare Portraits of British Poets," listed (p. 7), as items 51 and 53: "Eleven of

Fig. 7. Cipriani. Milton at ten, from Memoirs of Thomas Hollis (1780); The British Museum.

Fig. 8. Cipriani. Milton at twenty-one (1780); The British Museum.
Fig. 9. Cipriani, Milton in middle age (1780); The British Museum.

Fig. 10. Cipriani, Milton at sixty-two (1780); The British Museum.
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Fig. 11. Cipriani, Milton triumphing over Salmasius (1780); The British Museum.

Fig. 12. Vertue, Milton at forty-two (1751); The British Museum.

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Fig. 13. Richardson and Vertue, plaster bust of Milton at forty-two (c. 1745); The British Museum.

Fig. 14. Houbraken, Milton at twenty-one (1741); The British Museum.
celebrated Poets, by Vertue, fine impressions” and “Ten various heads of Milton, by Cipriani, Faithorne, Vertue, &c.” Blake obviously then has used Hayley’s Milton portraits, wisely borrowing details and combining them to present a special view of the poet.

Blake’s Milton has transcended the fallen world, though he is still attached to it by the coils of the serpent and the wreath of laurel with its apple. He is in the prime of his life, not an old man, as in Faithorne (fig. 2). Blake’s Milton smiles serenely above his large, puritan collar. Although his pupilless eyes might have given him the appearance of stone, the face of Blake’s Milton glows with life and vitality. He is set like a cameo in a frame but the fullness of his hair and face, and the slight turn of his lips, make the viewer feel Milton is about to move his head and speak. He is accompanied by the symbols of his triumph, the pipes of his pastoral poetry and the harp of the orator-prophet, hung on palm trees. Inter-spersed among Milton’s laurel leaves are oak which Wittreich (Angel, p. 9) considers to be representative of error. Whether the oak is emblematic of faith and virtue, as in Christianity, or whether it carries for Blake its association with Druidism can not be determined either from the tradition of Milton portraiture or from Blake’s painting. But there is ambiguity enough in the entanglement of his wreath in the coils of the writhing serpent. And there is confirmation of Milton’s triumph in the other emblems which accompany him and in the visage he presents to us.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Blake’s use of the Milton tradition extended beyond the painting in Hayley’s library into his own epic poem Milton. Three designs which we have already examined, two by Cipriani (figs. 9, 10) and one by Vertue (fig. 12) resonate in two portraits of Milton in the poem. In one, he strides toward the viewer, light beaming from his head; in the other, with his back to the viewer, he seems to dispel the clouds which surround him. Blake’s use of the Milton tradition in each is instructive in different ways than his borrowings for the Hayley commission. Milton is, after all, a private venture and Blake’s use of the tradition in it reflects the liberty his own poem allowed him.

A re-examination of two Cipriani designs reveals a detail not found in his proof sheet (fig. 6)—in the published version rays of light emanate from the head of the middle-aged (fig. 9) and the aged Milton (fig. 10). As we have noted, Cipriani’s middle-aged Milton is clearly based, like Richardson’s (fig. 13), on a plaster bust of the poet; his aged poet is an adaptation of the original crayon drawing for Faithorne’s portrait ad vivum (fig. 2). Neither of Cipriani’s sources shows beams of light about the poet’s head. They seem original to Cipriani and do not appear anywhere else in the iconographic tradition except on plate 16 of Blake’s Milton (copy D; plate 13, copies ABC). Blake depicts Milton casting away his robes as he prepares to combat Urizen with wrath and mercy. The inscriptions on the two Cipriani engravings, which Blake must have known, appear anachronistically to corroborate this Milton plate. Each inscrip-
tion is a testament of a kind of faith. In the first, a sonnet "To Mr. Cyriack Skinner upon his Blindness," Milton bears up under his affliction because he suffered for liberty's sake. Blake's portrait of Milton on plate 16 shows a vigorous man whose striding and sight seem almost a response to the passive, suffering sonneteer on Cipriani's engraving. For the design of the aged Milton, Cipriani chose a few lines from the opening of Book VII of Paradise Lost, the well-known passage where Milton calls for "a fit audience . . . though few." There is a fascinating parallel to Blake and Milton's progress in Milton in this selection from Paradise Lost, for Milton has in his own poem just put aside both the world of "Bacchus and his Revellers" as well as "the Heav'n of Heav'ns" and is preparing to dismount from his fiery Pegasus not on the desolate Aleius Campus but in his "Native Element." And similarly for Blake's Milton the descent "To Annihilate the Self-hood" in the form of a star is accomplished in the plate immediately following (ABC 14; D 17).

Plate 16 of Blake's Milton (ABC 13; D 16) might be viewed as a companion to the title page of Milton, since each is a full page depiction of the poet striding and each is a white-line engraving with colour. The title page also has a precedent in the Milton iconographic tradition (fig. 12). A Christ-like John Milton, evidently loosely based, as the inscription seems to indicate, on the Princeton crayon once owned by Jonathan Richardson, stares out backed and topped by swirling clouds and accompanied by emblems based on Genesis. Again, if we may assume his knowledge of this Vertue design, Blake seems, as in the example from Cipriani, to be responding to the passive depiction which preceded his own. Vertue's Milton has the symbols of creation and fall above him. Blake's Milton reaches through the billowing clouds and his gesture is a visual analogue to the lightning rod which dispels the billowing clouds above the head of Vertue's Milton.

In evaluating the tradition and using its iconography for his own view, Blake also made the poet Milton his own. Unlike Faithorne's, Blake's poet is a man still in the prime of his life. Like Cipriani's Milton (fig. 9) and unlike Richardson's (fig. 13), Blake's Milton appears vigorous, at the height of his intellectual powers. No passive sufferer, he carries his poetic emblems with him (fig. 1), and unlike Vertue's Milton (fig. 12), his life is inextricably connected with the Fall, but not ruled by it. By the time Blake came to compose Milton, the poet had assumed a full body, left behind his wreath and stridden into his "Native Element."

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