“A MADMAN’S SCRAWLS”: THE VIRTUES AND LIMITATIONS OF WILLIAM BLAKE’S METHODS AND MEDIA

Louisa Morillo

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to explore William Blake's methods, discuss their alignment with his beliefs about art, and demonstrate their relationship with his imaginative, vision-based mode of perception. Four of Blake's most innovative and notable artistic methods have been selected for discussion: tempera ("fresco"), relief etching, colour printing, and watercolour. These are assessed in terms of their advantages and disadvantages, their alignment with Blake's beliefs and aims, and their reception both during his lifetime and in the present. Examples of each method are considered. Existing scholarship is used in order to provide an overview of Blake's complicated relationship with the artistic conventions of his time, and also to summarise his beliefs about authority and the purpose of art. His refusal to use oils is identified as a significant influence upon his choice of methods and his legacy. The vulnerability of Blake's extant works - which is a result of his methods - is identified as a drawback in light of his ambitions of becoming a public artist. It is concluded that whilst each of the four key methods discussed possessed ideological and practical virtues and drawbacks for Blake, they are, to varying extents, indicative of his beliefs about art, the product of his visionary mode of perception, and the products of limitations themselves.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 9: William Blake, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*, c.1803-05, 43.7 x 34.8 cm. New York, Brooklyn Museum.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation aims to identify the benefits and shortcomings of four of William Blake's key methods of executing artworks: tempera (which he called "fresco"), relief etching, colour printing, and watercolour drawings. The evaluation of each of these media will take into account their alignment with Blake's beliefs and aims, their practical benefits and difficulties, their reception during his lifetime, and their legacies in the nearly two centuries since his death. This discussion seeks to unite disparate examinations of his prints, watercolours, and tempera works, and will use existing scholarship to provide a broad understanding of Blake's background and worldview, an overview of his visionary approach and beliefs about the purpose of art, and an evaluation of each medium which is to be discussed. This will be paired with visual analyses of exemplary works. As Blake abandoned and resumed projects and methods as his situation required, and dated some works with their year of original conception rather than their year of production, the artworks examined below will not necessarily be presented in chronological order. Given the complexity of Blake's views, the variety within his oeuvre, and the various advantages and disadvantages of each method, the aim will not necessarily be to rank his methods according to any one measure of success, nor to extensively detail or debate the precise ideas depicted in each image. Rather, the objective is to explore the interaction between Blake's beliefs and his artistic processes.

BLAKE'S BACKGROUND AND BELIEFS

William Blake was born in 1757 in London. He showed promise as an artist from a young age, but his lower-middle-class background meant that expensive training as a painter was out of the question. Instead, at the age of fourteen he began a seven-year apprenticeship under James Basire, the official engraver to the Royal Academy of Arts, which had been founded in 1769, just three years before Blake's apprenticeship commenced. Blake's ire towards Joshua Reynolds - the Academy's founder and first president - is well-documented, but his feelings regarding the Academy were complicated. Engravers were regarded not as artists but as producers of reproductions, and enjoyed no more than partial membership. For an indeterminate length of time Blake did in fact attend drawing classes at the Academy, and had seven paintings accepted into exhibitions there in the early 1780s. In keeping with Reynolds's preferred Grand Manner style, teaching at the Academy revolved around classical forms, whilst Blake prized medieval religious art for its aesthetic and spiritual qualities.[1] It is through his disagreements with Reynolds that many of Blake's key beliefs about art may be ascertained. Reynolds promoted history painting as the genre to which artists should aspire. Blake produced many historical works, and whilst at the Academy he was the only member of his class to exhibit history paintings.[2] However, he took umbrage with the hypocrisy of Reynolds, who primarily produced lucrative commissioned portraits.[3] Even these were often partially completed by the wealthy Reynolds's assistants - Blake, meanwhile, meticulously undertook every stage of his artistic process, availing himself of the continual opportunities to imbue a work with the fruits of his imagination. Imagination was something Reynolds abhorred in artists, and he proclaimed that they should seek to depict nature whilst using generalisation in order to smooth out its

[1] Robert Ross, "The Place of William Blake in English Art," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 9, no. 39 (1906): 156.
[2] Aileen Ward, "'Sr Joshua and His Gang': William Blake and the Royal Academy," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (1989): 79.
[3] David Bindman, "Blake as a painter" in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 86.

imperfections.[4] To Blake, the observance of nature was a foil to the imagination - he believed that the purpose of art was to reveal unseen truths.[5] He felt that every detail of an artwork, intended or otherwise, was of vital importance.

Blake's complicated relationship with the Royal Academy can be regarded as indicative of his general disdain for authority.[6] The radical circles in which he moved were disbanded following the French Revolution due to persecution and disillusionment. Blake, whose politics were more visceral than intellectual, began applying his principles to internal matters.[7] Much of his work contains biblical themes, and his approach was a deeply spiritual one filled with mystical metaphors. He took issue with organised religion, viewing its emphasis upon self-restraint as an impediment to the exercise of imagination and therefore to the uncovering of truths. As one writer put it, "[the] political revolutionaries whose energies he admired [...] were materialists, without God. And the religious people of his day were one and all living in a state of reactionary negation".[8] Blake was too emotional and spiritual for engagement with mainstream politics, but also wary of the impulse-destroying repression demanded by Christian institutions. He investigated a sect known as the New Church, but was troubled by the fact that its founder, Emanuel Swedenborg, claimed to have received information via visions but still (in Blake's opinion) got things wrong.[9] Blake believed that truths were revealed not through sensory experiences of tangible entities, but via visions and imagination.[10] Thus, any visionary revelations which conflicted with his own had to be discarded.

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[4] Anthony Blunt, "Blake's Pictorial Imagination," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 6 (1943): 208.
[5] Marcia Brown Bowman, "William Blake: A Study of His Doctrine of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 10, no. 1 (1951): 53.
[6] Ward, "'Sr Joshua'", 86.
[7] Blunt, "Blake's Pictorial Imagination", 192-93.
[8] John Gould Fletcher, "William Blake." *The North American Review* 218, no. 815 (1923): 527-28.
[9] John Higgs, *William Blake vs the World* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2021), 117.
[10] Marcia Brown Bowman, "William Blake: A Study of His Doctrine of Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 10, no. 1 (1951): 53.

BLAKE'S VISIONS

Before discussion of Blake's physical methods of production can commence it will be necessary to emphasise the importance of visions and imagination within his artistic process. It is widely documented that Blake recounted seeing the face of God and a tree full of angels as a child, and he claimed to experience visions throughout his life. Peter Ackroyd has suggested that Blake may have possessed what is known in psychology as eidetic vision - in other words, he was able to see mental images as vividly as real ones.[11] David Bindman's 1977 biography, meanwhile, regards Blake's accounts of conversations with angels as "a metaphor for the process of artistic inspiration".[12] Of course, it is difficult to determine the precise nature of Blake's supposed visions. However, even if they amounted to no more than the products of a very active imagination, they were a critical component of Blake's artistic methods, and will henceforth be referred to as visions. Blake wrote: "Imagination is My World; this world of Dross is beneath my Notice", and opined that "The Man who never in his Mind and Thoughts travel'd to Heaven is No Artist".[13]

In Blake's view, "The difference between a bad Artist and a Good One Is: the Bad Artist Seems to copy a Great Deal. The Good one Really does Copy a Great deal".[14] To him, art was a language with which feelings and ideas could be conveyed, and the production of copies was the process of learning this language.[15] This would appear to lend credence to Ackroyd's theory - the mental cataloguing of an image for future reference would be extremely useful to the owner of an eidetic memory. At the very least, it is unsurprising that an engraver would consider the reproduction of images to be a valuable skill.

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[11] Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: The Folio Society, 2008), 24.
[12] David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), 66-7.
[13] Blake capitalised words at random in his writing - where possible, this has been preserved where he is quoted.
Blake quoted in Blunt, "Blake's Pictorial Imagination," 208; Bowman, "William Blake " 55.
[14] Blake quoted in Bowman, "William Blake," 66.
[15] Blunt, "Blake's Pictorial Imagination," 210.

Blake would request that his wife Catherine fetch him his writing and drawing implements when he was struck with inspiration.[16] He wrote: “I labour incessantly and accomplish not one half of what I intend, because my Abstract folly hurries me often away while I am at work, carrying me over Mountains and Valleys, which are not Real, in a Land of Abstraction where Spectres of the Dead wander”.[17] This indicates a working style which was spurred on by fits of imagination. He claimed that he recorded his visions as they appeared, although there is evidence that he produced preliminary drawings.[18] Regardless of whether these visions were perfect eidetic images or mere rough outlines, what is significant is that Blake sought divine guidance so that he could reveal truths, whilst the artistic establishment demanded that he look to nature and cover its blemishes.[19]

[16] Ackroyd, *Blake*, 81.
[17] Blake quoted in Bowman, “William Blake,” 55.
[18] Blunt, “Blake’s Pictorial Imagination,” 207.
[19] Bowman, “William Blake,” 59.

FOUR METHODS

Blake worked as a commercial engraver throughout his life to support himself and his wife, although money was perpetually scarce. He therefore produced many conventional intaglio prints, and also dabbled with woodcuts. However, here it is argued that four of his media are noteworthy enough to warrant individual evaluation. The first three of these - “fresco”, relief etching, and colour printing - are identified by Bindman as Blake’s three “great technical innovations”.[20] The fourth, watercolour, was not a technical innovation - however, Blake’s watercolours are some of his most unusual and well-known works, and they reveal a great deal about his beliefs and artistic process. Therefore, watercolour has in this instance earned a place as Blake’s fourth significant medium.

“Fresco”

The first of Blake’s notable methods is what he called fresco. This name is inaccurate. True fresco is the application of pigments mixed with water to a wet plaster wall, whilst Blake used carpenter’s glue to bind his pigments and painted on a variety of surfaces such as canvas, wood, metal, and paper.[21] Therefore, this method of Blake’s is usually known as tempera. Tempera, a medium which had by Blake’s time long been replaced by oil paints, normally uses egg yolk. It would seem that Blake opted for glue because he believed alternatives to be too susceptible to cracking - unfortunately, this glue has darkened considerably with age, dulling and clouding his colours.[22]

Some of Blake’s tempera works are arguably the least overtly Blakean of any of the examples featured in this essay. For all his nonconformity, he longed for renown. He attributed his lack of mainstream success neither to his own eccentricity nor to the mere snobbery of the

[20] David Bindman, “Blake as a painter,” in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 95.
[21] Raymond Lister, *Infernal Methods: a Study of William Blake's Art Techniques* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1975), 52-54.
[22] Lister, *Infernal Methods*, 53.

Academy, but rather to a conspiracy against him.[23] In 1809 he held an exhibition in his brother's shop and distributed his corresponding *Descriptive Catalogue*. Within this catalogue he aired his grievances with the Academy, which almost always rejected his paintings, and expressed concerns that he was widely rumoured to be no more than the maker of "a Madman's Scrawls".[24] He also extolled the virtues of his temperas, advertising them as convenient "portable frescos".[25] The exhibition included his largest known (and now sadly lost) tempera, *The Ancient Britons*, which depicted a legendary historical scene and was more than four metres wide.[26] Clearly, he intended to impress his public.

The exhibition was a failure, attracting only a handful of attendees and one scathing review. That his "fresco" was an attempt at achieving mainstream artistic success is evident, as some of Blake's subversive artistic aims seem to be compromised. In his *Descriptive Catalogue* he expressed his belief in the importance of outline, writing: "the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art".[27] However, he seems to have been willing to subdue his outlines in order to produce works which bear traces of the artistic establishment's beloved Grand Manner. The faces of his tempera figures generally wear serene expressions and hold sedate poses - they resemble the plaster casts of classical statues which Blake would have been instructed to draw during his lessons at the Academy. One such cast is shown in a 2019 book on Blake by Martin Myrone and Amy Concannon, and is illustrated here in fig. 1. An example of a classically-inspired face can be seen in *Adam Naming the Beasts* (fig. 2). Faces such as these only vaguely resemble the expressive ones which feature in Blake's printed or drawn works. Classical influence is also apparent in his *Heads of Poets* tempera paintings - for an example, see *Dante Alighieri* (fig. 3), which shows a bust encircled by a wreath of olive leaves. The colour palettes of both *Adam* and *Dante* are harmonious and subdued - they are

[23] Higgs, *William Blake vs The World*, 239.
[24] Blake quoted in Higgs, *William Blake vs The World*, 237.
[25] Lister, *Infernal Methods*, 51.
[26] Martin Myrone and Amy Concannon, *William Blake* (London: Tate Publishing, 2019), 146.
[27] Blake quoted in Bowman, "William Blake," 64.

quite dissimilar to the lurid, boldly outlined colours used in the prints and watercolours which are more instantly recognisable as Blake's works.

It is not that decisive outlines could not be incorporated into tempera works - fig. 4 shows *Satan Smiting Job With Sore Boils*. With its contorted poses, anguished faces, clashing colours, and fierce outlines, it is a much more characteristically Blakean image - however, it is tempera on mahogany with pen and ink. Therefore, Blake's departure from his usual style in many of his other temperas can only have been a conscious decision. *Satan Smiting Job* was produced in approximately 1826, shortly before Blake died - perhaps it can be regarded as an acknowledgement that nothing he did with tempera would win him mainstream approval. His use of the medium had been a compromise between his admiration of medieval art and his desire to exhibit large paintings, but it had been an inadequate one.

In a 1904 article praising Blake's tempera works, Roger E. Fry compared Blake's art to music and architecture, writing that it "makes a direct appeal to the spirit", and seeks to evoke a feeling rather than replicating a form.[28] Much as this is an apt summary of the experience of viewing his artwork, I would argue that it is more applicable to the following three significant media than it is to the tempera works discussed, whose appeals to the spirit and ability to evoke a feeling are diminished by Blake's conflicting aim of producing works which would achieve mainstream success.

Relief Etching

For all the effort they demanded, Blake's relief-etched illuminated books were not commercially viable endeavours - however, this can only constitute a limitation to the extent that he intended them to be a profitable enterprise, and it would not appear that he did.[29] Copper relief etching

[28] Roger E. Fry, "Three Pictures in Tempera by William Blake," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 4, no. 12 (1904): 205-206.
[29] Joseph Viscomi, "Illuminated printing," in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 60.

was a laborious process. Blake would take a copper plate and use an acid-resistant varnish in order to add mirrored words and images. He would then add raised wax edges to the plate and cover it with aquafortis (nitric acid). The acid would erode any unvarnished areas of metal, leaving the varnished areas raised. These raised areas were covered in ink using a leather dauber and could then be printed onto paper in a press. In contrast, the commercial etchings and engravings he produced were intaglio. In intaglio, lines are gouged into a metal plate - either with a burin, or with acid. Ink is rubbed into these recessed lines, and then wiped off the plate's surface. The ink in these scratches is then transferred onto paper, again in a press.

The virtue of Blake's relief method was that it allowed him to weave together text and images in his illuminated manuscripts - these were inspired by medieval art, which Blake regarded more highly than the Renaissance art favoured by the Academy and its ilk.[30] He did produce some intaglio illuminated books, such as *The Book of Ahania*, but in these his verses and illustrations do not intermingle (fig. 5). Relief plates are generally more able to survive multiple print runs than intaglio plates, whose recessed lines gradually lose their ability to hold ink. However, Blake's relief plates were extremely difficult to etch and ink. The slow process of acid erosion required supervision, and any attempt to expedite it by using a stronger acid would result in damage to the plate.[31] A surviving fragment of one of Blake's plates indicates that it was necessary to reapply varnish during the etching process, and also to polish the recessed surfaces so that they could easily be wiped of stray dabs of ink.[32] It was extremely difficult to avoid smearing ink onto the recessed regions of the plate, and it had to be built up in layers in order to ensure that it did not ooze or appear patchy.[33] The ink would behave unpredictably, but this did not trouble Blake - his tolerance of variations between copies of his books is evidence of

[30] Blunt, "Blake's Pictorial Imagination," 199.
[31] Michael Philips, "The Printing of Blake's *America a Prophecy*," *Print Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2004): 25.
[32] Philips, "The Printing," 24.
[33] Philips, "The Printing," 31.

his fondness for these “Minute Particulars”, which afforded him new opportunities to exercise his imagination.[34]

For Blake, the chief advantage of relief etching was that it enabled him to combine words and images, and convey his ideas without the intervention of anyone - a typesetter, for instance - who might corrupt his message.[35] The method was bestowed upon him in a vision by the spirit of his favourite brother Robert, obviously lending it great significance, and Michael Philips has argued that it was because of this that Blake was willing to undertake increasingly arduous and inefficient ways of producing his illuminated books.[36] Certainly, this method does seem to have been dear to Blake. That he added touches of gold to some copies of *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion* - a work which took twenty years to complete - surely proves the extent to which he was willing to expend resources in order to actualise his visions.

Relief etching was the perfect medium through which to demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of thick, wiry outlines, such as those in *Jerusalem*. Fig. 6, an uncoloured plate from *Jerusalem*, shows that Blake’s use of outline alone in depicting expressive, contorted figures is deeply evocative even before the addition of colour. Working into his prints with pens and watercolours would only have increased this emotiveness, and provided Blake with further opportunities to incorporate the ideas bestowed upon him by his visions.[37]

Blake did manage to sell some copies of his illuminated books, but he certainly didn’t make his living from them. The greatest limitation on the number of copies he could produce was not the durability of his plates but rather the constraints on his time and money - paper and metal were some of his main outgoings.[38] Clearly, though, he felt that the expense incurred by

[34] Stephen Leo Carr, “William Blake’s Print-Making Process in *Jerusalem*,” *ELH* 47, no. 3 (1980): 520, 523-524.
[35] David Bindman, “Introduction” in William Blake, *William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books* (London: William Blake Trust: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 7-8.
[36] Philips, “The Printing,” 38.
[37] Carr, “William Blake’s Print-Making Process,” 520.
[38] Viscomi, “Illuminated printing,” 54.

the production of his books was worthwhile, as it afforded him the hope that he would be able to distribute his prophecies on his own terms.[39]

Colour Printing

Blake's innovation of colour printing can be likened to the conventional printing method of monotype, in which oil-based inks or paints are applied to a smooth, flat surface and then transferred onto paper in order to generate a single impression. Blake, however, would produce two or three impressions from each inking, and likely used his glue-based tempera instead of oils.[40] His colour prints seem, at times, to contravene his belief in the supremacy of outlines over colour. Take for instance the mottled, ambiguous forms which illustrate the *Book of Ahania*'s final page (fig. 5) - they are colour printed with no outline added.

Bindman points out that Blake's use of colour printing tends to appear in scenes with themes of chaos and despair.[41] For an example, see *Elohim Creating Adam* (fig. 7), which utilises both the stormy texture of colour printing in its cloud and abundant outline on its figures in order to powerfully convey Adam's agony. The texture of the colour prints is evident even in photographic reproductions, and it draws the viewer's attention to the artist's process, something Blake believed to be almost sacred - according to him, "Prayer is the Study of Art. Praise is the Practise of Art".[42] Each print would differ in its texture and opacity, producing the "Minute Particulars" he valued. Clearly, the texture and unpredictability of colour printing was appealing enough to Blake that he was willing to forgive its lack of outlines (and as we have seen, these could be added with other media anyway).[43] Raymond Lister suggests that Blake gradually abandoned colour printing in favour of less laborious ways of colouring such as

[39] Lister, *Infernal Methods*, 65.
[40] Lister, *Infernal Methods*, 61.
[41] Bindman, *Blake as an Artist*, 89-90.
[42] Blake quoted in Bowman, "William Blake," 53.
[43] Bindman, *Blake as an Artist*, 89.

tempera and watercolour.[44] This seems likely, given that Blake and his wife occupied smaller homes each time they moved and painting requires far less bulky equipment than printing does.[45] Given his willingness to undertake incredibly arduous processes in order to produce the prints his visions demanded, it seems improbable that he would have discarded colour printing purely for the sake of convenience. Therefore, it must be the case that ultimately, he found that it fulfilled no communicative function that his other media did not.

Watercolour Drawings

Watercolour is not classified by Bindman as one of Blake's pioneering methods - however, it warrants a mention as a significant one, as Blake's use of watercolour on paper emphasises some of his key beliefs. The medium was not highly regarded by the artistic establishment of the time, and watercolourists, like engravers, were only granted partial membership of the Academy.[46] As a result, most of them sought to replicate the effects achieved by oils. Blake, meanwhile, used lines and bold, clashing colours in order to emulate the medieval art he admired, and in order to translate his visions into an image which possessed the greatest possible clarity.[47] Given his use of outlines, Bindman suggests that these works may more accurately be called "tinted drawings".[48] Blake's belief in the importance of outlines meant that he was using an unpopular medium as unfashionably as possible, limiting his prospects of being taken seriously as an artist by those who vouched for Grand Manner.

One of the Blake watercolours examined by conservator Louise Wilson in a 2015 video by the National Gallery of Victoria is *Capaneus the Blasphemer* (fig. 8), part of an unfinished series of illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Wilson notes that the white highlights in the image were created by abrading already-painted portions of the page in order to remove the top

[44] Lister, *Infernal Methods*, 62.
[45] Viscomi, "Illuminated printing," 40.
[46] Ward, "'Sr Joshua,'" 80.
[47] Blunt, "Blake's Pictorial Imagination," 196-200.
[48] Bindman, "Blake as a painter," 87.

layers of the paper.[49] This is among Blake's last artworks, and it is almost impossible that an artist as prolific as Blake would not have had the foresight to leave an area of a lightning bolt white in order to create a highlight. The fact that it was scratched out is instead evidence of Blake's fervent, vision-inspired working style, and his belief that art was something which revealed truth rather than smoothing out imperfections. For him, the damaged surface of the paper would not have constituted a ruinous error, but rather a "Minute Particular". In scraping at the image until it peeled and tore, he was not spoiling it - he was removing a mistake which was obscuring what he intended to convey.

Perhaps the most famous of Blake's watercolours is *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (fig. 9) thanks to its appearance in the 2002 film *Red Dragon*, which is based upon Thomas Harris's 1981 novel of the same name. *The Great Red Dragon* was part of a commission produced for Thomas Butts, one of Blake's patrons, and is based upon Revelation, the Bible's most explicitly apocalyptic book. That *The Great Red Dragon* was used as a plot point in a psychological horror story surely demonstrates Blake's success in using his art to convey "impassioned thought and feeling".[50] It is not a physically large work - its dimensions are 43.7 x 34.8cm. Therefore, the fact that it was deemed fearsome enough to inspire and terrify a fictitious serial killer would appear to affirm Roger E. Fry's claim that Blake's art is "more concentrated than most" - it also suggests that this description is highly applicable to his watercolours.[51] Over the past two centuries, the watercolours have faded - one can only imagine how emotive they must have been when freshly painted with bold colours and outlines.[52] In a 1999 essay on Harris's book, Nicholas M. Williams discussed the incorporation of Blake's *The Great Red Dragon* - which he identified as high art - into the lower art form of a

[49] "Examining William Blake's Watercolours: A Conservator's View," National Gallery of Victoria, accessed January 20, 2022, https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/examining-william-blakes-watercolours/.
[50] Fry, "Three Pictures," 205.
[51] Fry, "Three Pictures," 206.
[52] Bindman, "Blake as a painter," 98.

novel.[53] Given that Blake used the unstylish medium of watercolour in an especially archaic way, it is interesting to note this rehabilitation of watercolour's reputation, and therefore also of Blake's. It emphasises that one of the main limitations of this medium was the supremacy of oil in Blake's time.

A Note on Oils

Perhaps as important as the media Blake did use is a crucial one he did not. Bindman describes Blake's refusal to use oils as "fatal", given the extent to which it prevented him from forging a viable career as a painter at a time when oil was held to be the supreme medium.[54] Blake's glue-based paints would have dried quickly and been fairly impervious to water, making them ideal for layering.[55] Oil paint, meanwhile, dries slowly by oxidising, and it is likely that this made it an unsuitable medium for an artist who felt compelled to accurately depict visions as they appeared to him. The impatient application of oils before previous layers had dried would have resulted in the muddying of colours, a feature of oils he strongly disliked. It is an unfortunate irony that Blake's paintings containing carpenter's glue have fared poorly in the centuries since his death, as his dislike of oil paint was partly due to his belief that it formed a "yellow mask" over time.[56]

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The light sensitivity of some of his pigments means that most of Blake's works are extremely vulnerable to fading and can only rarely be displayed. As Alexander Gourlay points out, this makes it difficult even for those with an existing interest in Blake to see his works in person - in order to do so, they have to gain advance approval from a prints and drawings

[53] Nicholas M. Williams, "Eating Blake, or an Essay on Taste: The Case of Thomas Harris's 'Red Dragon.'" *Cultural Critique*, no. 42 (1999): 139.
[54] Bindman, "Blake as a painter," 87.
[55] Anne Maheux, "An Analysis of the Watercolor Technique and Materials of William Blake." *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 17, Issue 4, (Spring 1984): 124.
[56] Lister, *Infernal Methods*, 36.

department.[57] Given Blake's aspirations of becoming a public painter, the unlikelihood of a museum visitor happening upon one of his works is unfortunate.

After Blake's death, his wife Catherine produced some prints from the plates he left, and Frederick Tatham did likewise when he took possession of Blake's art when Catherine died. Tatham, a young artist who had been a follower of Blake's, later joined a millenarian sect and allegedly destroyed any works he deemed sexually suggestive or blasphemous, although Blake's biographers seem to disagree on whether we can be sure of this. At the very least, it would appear that he sold Blake's copper plates as scrap metal.[58] Whether or not any deliberate destruction occurred, what is certain is that Blake fell into obscurity. As a result of his unconventional methods he was little-known in life, and also for decades after his death. Even those who had remunerated him for his work had derided him as a "lunatic", damaging his professional reputation.[59] In the 1860s, the publication of a biography of Blake caught the attention of artists such as the Rossettis who, as Pre-Raphaelites, shared Blake's disdain for Grand Manner and his admiration of medieval art. In 1906 Robert Ross noted that it was "chiefly among literary people" that his reputation had increased.[60] Now, he is remembered more for his poetry than for his visual art - his best-known composition is probably the discarded preface to his book *Milton a Poem*, which became the lyrics of the 1916 hymn "Jerusalem".[61] Perhaps this sidelining of his illustrations is because his unusual prints and paintings are wrongly perceived as lacking skill.

[57] Alexander Gourlay, "Seeing Blake's art in person," in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 294.
[58] Viscomi, "Illuminated printing," 60.
[59] Myrone and Concannon, *Blake*, 83.
[60] Ross, "The Place of William Blake," 150.
[61] Blake, *William Blake*, 245.

CONCLUSION

In 1923, John Gould Fletcher wrote that Blake was born “at least a century ahead of his time”.[62] Certainly, Blake was a pioneer and a standalone figure in art history who evades categorisation as a member of any particular artistic movement. But his beliefs, and the processes which were borne of them, are undeniably the product of his training as an eighteenth-century engraver and the passionate emotions provoked by the issues of his time. His methods are a response to the then-newly-founded Royal Academy - they are in some ways a rebellion, in others a plea for acceptance. Rebellion would appear to have prevailed - even his “portable frescos” are evidence of his refusal to use oils. The impact of Blake’s beliefs upon each of his methods is the strength and limitation which unites them. The media he used allowed him to forcefully convey feelings in a manner so unique that his work was posthumously rescued from obscurity, but also contributed to his inability to be taken seriously as an artist by his contemporaries. His visionary method of gaining inspiration connects his media in much the same way. Not only did he claim that some of his processes were invented thanks to instructions received in visions, but they were often compatible with a vision-fuelled artistic process, and they bear the traces of this. Visions and imagination motivated him to produce meaningful artworks with limited resources, but also saw him regarded as insane, and led him to use materials which made his art less resilient to the passage of time.

Blake’s processes can also be regarded as the products of limitations, these being his social class, his eccentricity, his tight budget, and the dogmatic art culture which prevailed in his time. He cannot be considered an obscure figure, but the frailty of his extant works - which is the result of his methods - limits the range of people who may view them in person. The naive appearance of artworks such as his relief and colour prints belies the skill and resourcefulness employed in their production; they should be regarded as innovative expressions of an artistic ideology which prized imagination and communication above all else.

[62] Fletcher, “William Blake,” 527.

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IMAGES

Fig. 1: Anonymous, *Cincinnatus*, 18th century, plaster, 162 x 80 x 42 cm. London, Royal Academy of Arts.

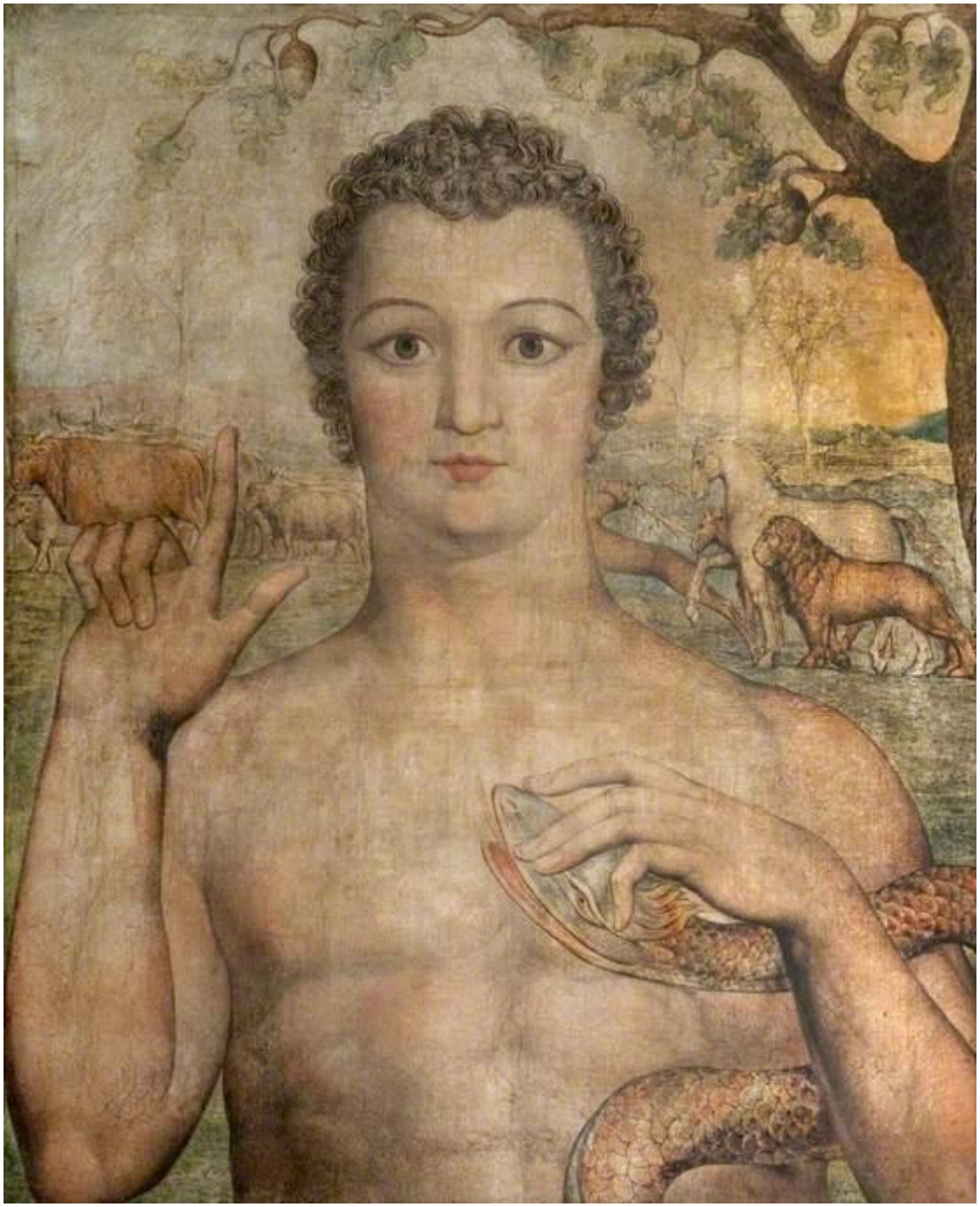

Fig. 2: William Blake, *Adam Naming the Beasts*, 1810, tempera on canvas, 74.9 x 61.6 cm.

Glasgow, Pollok House.

Fig. 3: William Blake, *Dante Alighieri*, c.1800, tempera on canvas, 42.5 x 87.8 cm. Manchester, Manchester Art Gallery.

Fig. 4: William Blake, *Satan Smiting Job with Sore Boils*, c.1826, tempera with pen and ink on mahogany, 32.6 x 43.2 cm. London, Tate.

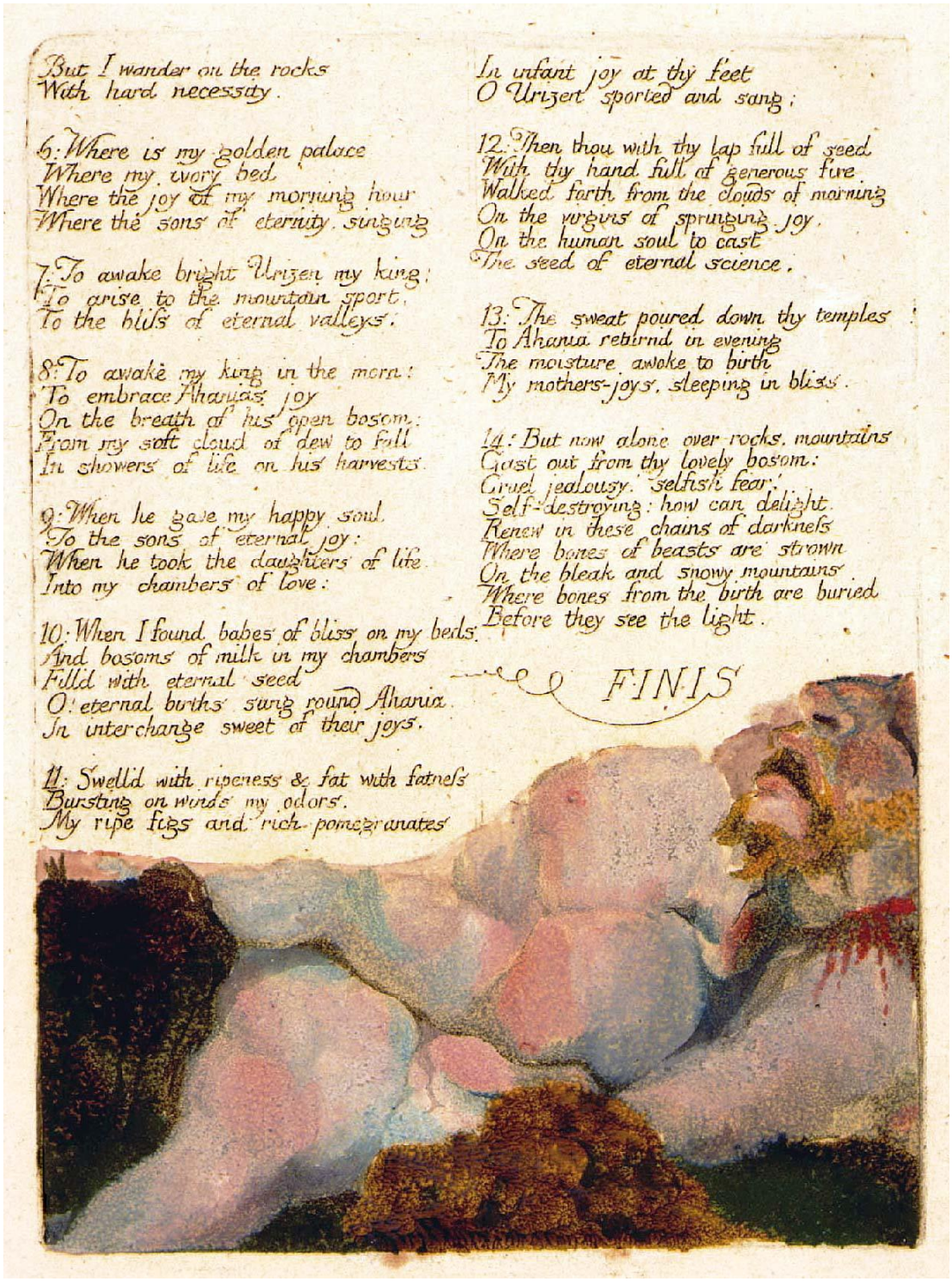

Fig. 5: William Blake, *The Book of Ahania [Plate 6, Copy A]*, intaglio and colour print on paper, 13.7 x 10 cm. Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection.

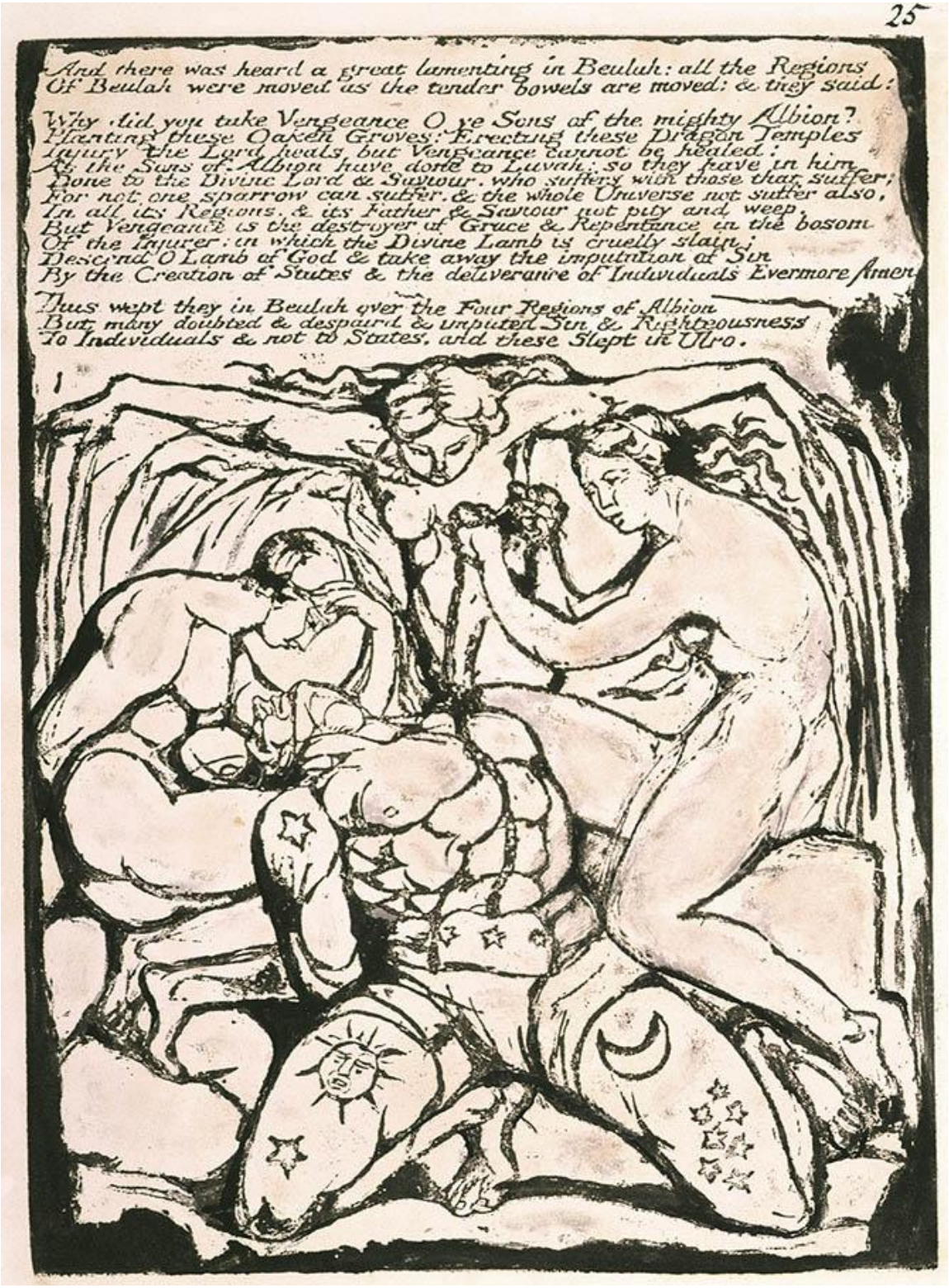

Fig. 6: William Blake, Jerusalem *The Emanation of The Giant Albion [Plate 25, Copy A]*, c.1804-20, relief print on paper, 22.2 x 16.3 cm. London, British Museum.

Fig. 7: William Blake, *Elohim Creating Adam*, 1795, colour print with watercolour and ink on paper, 43.1 x 53.6 cm. London, Tate.

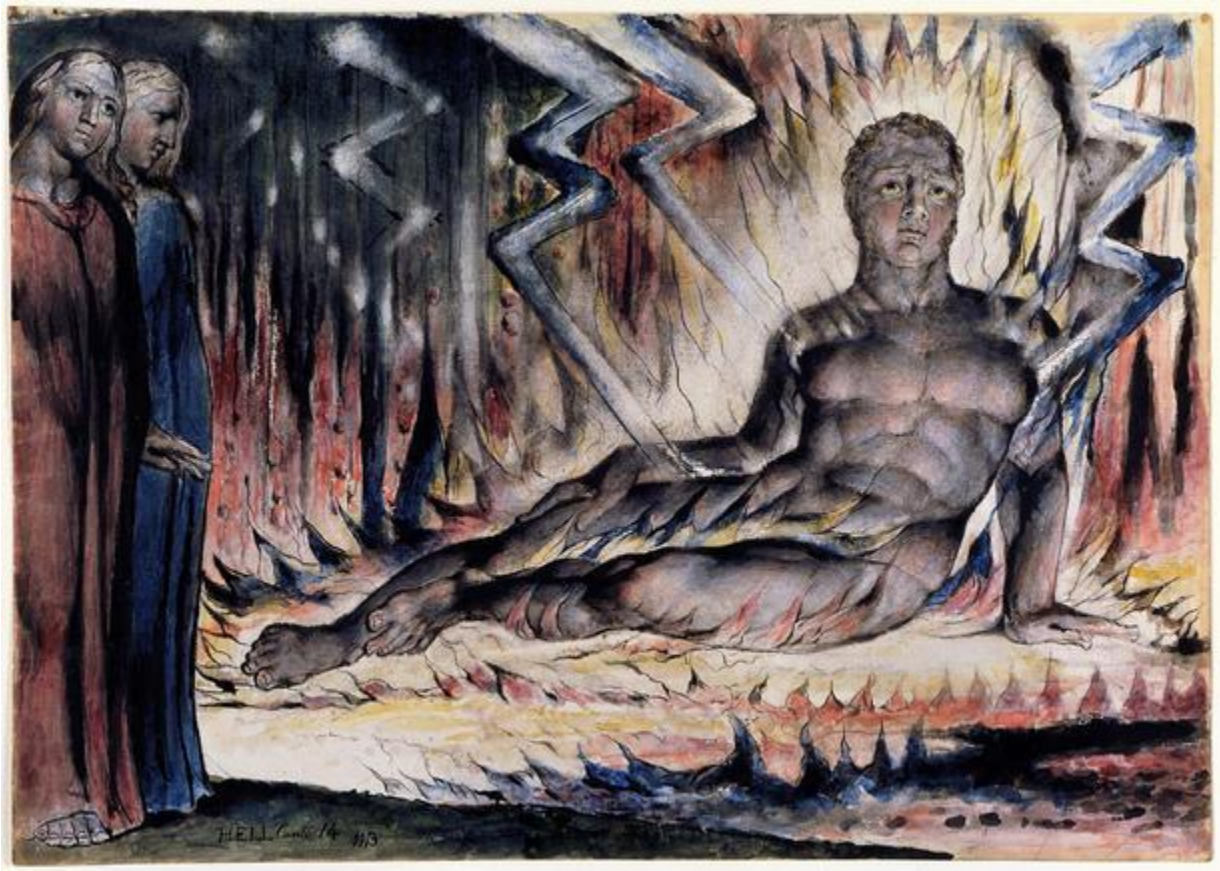

Fig. 8: William Blake, *Capaneus the Blasphemer*, pen, ink, and watercolour on paper, 37.4 x 52.7 cm. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

Fig. 9: William Blake, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*, c.1803-05, 43.7 x 34.8 cm. New York, Brooklyn Museum.