

***Teaching History or Retelling Ancient Stories with Pictures:
William Blake and the School Version of Virgil***

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Abstract

History is not only told by words but also images and objects. This paper looks into the book illustrations of an early 19th-century British school book and their means and purposes for history education. The English poet and printmaker William Blake made a famous set of woodcuts for Dr. Robert Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil* (1821) which later became the inspiration for Romantic art. Scholars have observed that Blake's unconventional engravings caused Thornton's hesitation and cutting down the blocks to fit the book. The controversial style of Blake's woodcuts was much discussed and justified by his followers 'the Ancients' and modern scholars. In my book *William Blake and the Art of Engraving* (Pickering & Chatto, 2009), I have also discussed an early imitator of Blake's woodcut which reflects his contemporary aesthetic view. However, the context and motivation of Robert Thornton and his editions of *Virgil* have not been considered fully. This paper asks why Blake's woodcuts were not considered to fit the book. By comparing the three editions of Thornton's *Virgil*, I would argue that the 3rd edition was an 'improved' version from Thornton's point of view for publishing and educational purposes. From the observation of the extant woodblocks engraved by Blake (in the British Museum) and other artists used in the Thornton edition (discovered by me in the Huntington Library), one may understand the contemporary contrast aesthetics and the early 19th-century norm for teaching young people history.

Keywords: Blake, Thornton, Virgil, school book, illustration

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1. Introduction

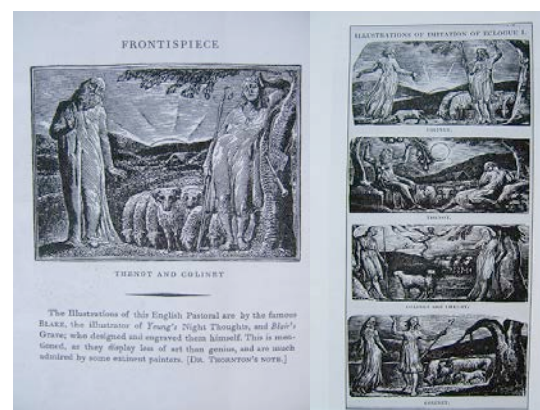
History is not only told by words but also images and objects. This paper looks into the book illustrations of an early 19th-century British school book and their means and purposes in education.

Robert Thornton's *School Virgil* is a school book unknown to most people today. Scholars believe that it is known for one reason alone: the seventeen wood engravings by William Blake that appear in the 1821 edition, *Pastorals of Virgil*.¹ The English poet and printmaker William Blake (1757-1827) in his later life made a famous and his only set of woodcuts for Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil* (1821) which became the inspiration for artists from Samuel Palmer to Graham Sutherland. However, it is also well documented that Blake's unconventional engravings caused Thornton's hesitation about using and eventual cutting down the blocks to fit the book. The controversial style of Blake's woodcuts was much discussed and justified by his followers 'the Ancients' and modern scholars. In my book *William Blake and the Art of Engraving* (Pickering & Chatto, 2009), I have also discussed an early imitator of Blake's woodcut which reflects his contemporary aesthetic view.

Nevertheless, the context of Blake's woodcuts and the motivation of Robert Thornton and his editions of *Virgil* have not been considered fully. This paper asks why Blake's woodcuts were not considered appropriate to the book, what Blake and Thornton's conflicting aims were. By comparing editions of Thornton's *Virgil*, I would argue that the 1821 edition with Blake's woodcuts was a compromised version for Thornton between his educational ideal or personal ambition and financial struggle. From the observation of the extant woodblocks engraved by Blake (in the British Museum) and another artist in the Thornton edition (which I discovered in the Huntington Library), one may understand the contemporary contrast aesthetics and the role of early 19th-century book illustrations in history or classics education.



Frontispiece & title-page of Thornton's *Virgil* (1821)



Blake's woodcuts for Thornton's *Virgil* (1821)

¹ Morton Paley, *The Traveller in the Evening: The last works of William Blake* (2003), p. 20.

2. Thornton, the publisher

Robert John Thornton was a medical doctor by profession with a passion for publishing botanical books. He was the family doctor of the artist John Linnell, who introduced William Blake to him.

Thornton was best known for his extravagant book the *New Illustration of the Sexual System of Linnaeus* (1799-1807, also known by its 1804 title of *The Temple of Flora*). The huge cost of illustration and printing seriously eroded Thornton's personal fortune. To the end, he never recovered the losses from *The Temple of Flora* leaving his children on the edge of poverty.²

The *School Virgil* was published at the same time and after *The Temple of Flora*. The first edition published in 1812 has two versions, one with 3 illustrations and the other with 53 illustrations which cost 8 and 12 shillings respectively. In 1814, Thornton published a picture-only edition *The Illustrations of the School Virgil* taking out of the texts and adding the illustrations to 123. The 1821 edition consists of 2 volumes with 230 illustrations. In the last edition, Blake engraved 6 portraits on copper, designed 21 and engraved 17 woodcuts. While the copper engravings are neo-classical in style, Blake's woodcuts are shockingly unconventional. To the contemporary conventional eye, the dark tone and rough lines look like works by someone with no experience in wood engraving.

3. The controversy of Blake's woodcuts for Thornton

Under the first woodcut by Blake, Thornton wrote,

‘The Illustrations of this English Pastoral are by the famous Blake, the illustrator of *Young's Night Thoughts*, and *Blair's Grave*; who designed and engraved them himself. This is mentioned, as they display less of art than genius, and are much admired by some eminent painters.’³

What Thornton meant is that Blake was famous for his design but the cutting skill of this work is inferior.

According to the *Life of William Blake* by Alexander Gilchrist (1863), when Blake ‘sent in these seventeen the publishers, unused to so daring a style, were taken aback, and declared ‘this man must do no more;’ nay, were for having all he *had* done re-cut by one of their regular hands.... Doctor Thornton had, ...himself, no knowledge of art, and, despite kind intentions, was disposed to take his publishers' view. However, it fortunately happened that meeting one day several artists at Mr. Aders' table, -- Lawrence, James Ward, Linnell, and others, -- conversation fell on the Virgil. All present expressed warm admiration of Blake's art, and of those designs and woodcuts in particular. By such competent authority reassured, if also puzzled, the good Doctor began to think there must be more in them than he and his publishers could discern. The contemplated

² See Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

³ ‘Illustrations of Imitation of Eclogue I’, *The Pastorals of Virgil* (1821), p. 12.

sacrifice of the blocks already cut was averted....⁴

According to the evidence of two surviving proofs now in the British Museum, Blake's original woodcuts were trimmed on the four edges to reduce the size in order to fit in the book with extra texts underneath each picture.



4. Thornton's idea of book illustration & education

For Thornton, the illustrations were meant to be educational aids as the subtitle of the book says, 'in which all the proper facilities are given, enabling you[m] to acquire the Latin language, in the shortest period of time, as words'.⁵

In the 1814 supplementary volume, Thornton took only the illustrations from the 1812 edition and added some more pictures. He wrote in the preface 'Address to school-masters, parents, and others' about the importance and benefits of pictures in children's learning.

'The impression made on the *memory* will also be such as never afterwards to be obliterated; for the new art of memory is by *association*, ...here the *words* and the *pictures* correspond as much as possible. Every person must recollect, from his childhood, what an impression even the *bad* wood-cuts to the Fables in Dilworth's Spelling-Book created,⁶ especially where the Huntsman is beating his old faithful Dog. Boys will likewise feel eager to know the meaning of the different cuts, and this will surely spur them on to the diligent reading of the original matter, to which these allude.'⁷

In the first glance, Thornton's emphasis on picture is totally justifiable. However, a question about this statement arises: how do the boys associate the pictures with the

⁴ 'Introduction', *William Blake XVII designs to Thornton's Virgil* (1899), quoting Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, ps. xiv, xv.

⁵ Subtitle for the 1821 edition.

⁶ Dilworth, Thomas, d. 1780, *Dilworth's spelling-book, improved : a new guide to the English tongue ...* Philadelphia, [Pa.] : Printed and sold by John McCulloch, 1796 (3rd ed.) <https://archive.org/details/dilworthspellin00dilw>

⁷ 'Address to School-Masters, Parents and others', *Illustrations to the School-Virgil* (1814).

text in this 1814 publication, which has no text attached to the illustration? Was it only intended for purchasers of the original 1812 edition with only 3 illustrations?-It is therefore questionable that Thornton's motivation for publishing the book was really for the sake of education.

In the succeeding paragraph, Thornton mentions Benjamin West, the president of Royal Academy at the time, who believed book illustrations could also encourage children's love for art.

‘Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy, thinks *such a plan* will rouse the British youth to a love for painting; and we could have wished the designs had been more perfect, but the increased expense would then have defeated the intention, and this will apologize with the discerning, for our not making them of a more splendid nature. Even now it is to be feared, that the expense will deter several from the purchase of such a desirable adjunct to Virgil; ...’⁸

The reality is Thornton's lack of finance, which limited his ambition.

5. Thornton's financial problem & publishing strategy

Looking back at Thornton's life, the *Virgil* publications were probably a compromise under his ambition in publishing career under the financial pressure. The first edition of 1812 was published with only a few illustrations probably because Thornton was short of money. Earlier from 1799 to 1807, Thornton spent a huge amount of fortune publishing *The New Illustration of the sexual system of Linnaeus* in large folios with fine engravings by famous artists and engravers of the time, especially its third part *The Temple of Flora* with colour plates. Although it was criticized that the book has little scientific value⁹ but perhaps showing some romantic aesthetics, the publication won him national and international fame. It was sent to Queen Charlotte and Prince Regent, and to the Emperor of Russia who returned a ring to acknowledge his achievement. Thornton's ambition was to create a tradition of British botanical publication to parallel Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery.¹⁰ However, worse than Boydell's financial failure, Thornton almost drained his inheritance with little return. By 1812, Thornton was struggling with finance and trying to make up with minor publications. He held an exhibition of the botanical illustrations, but did not make enough money by selling the tickets. In 1812, Thornton issued a smaller edition of *The Temple of Flora* but this did not seem to have many subscribers.

The *School Virgil* was therefore perhaps Thornton's venture of another subject on a smaller scale. After publishing the luxurious *Temple of Flora*, Thornton turned to small and easy reading for children. *Juvenile Botany: Being an easy introduction to that delightful science, through the medium of familiar conversation* (1818) was written in simple language with conversations between son and father.

⁸ ‘Address to school-master, parents, and others’, preface to Thornton's *Illustrations of the School-Virgil* (1814), ps. iii, iv.

⁹ Blunt Wilfrid, *The Art of Botanical Illustration*, London: Collins, 1950, p. 203.

¹⁰ *Thornton's Temple of Flora*: with plates faithfully reproduced from the original engravings: and the work described by Geoffrey Grigson; with bibliographical notes by Handasyde Buchanan, London: Collins, 1972, p.4.

Thornton was reusing the materials at hand and made simple versions out of them. Likewise, the publications of school book show a reduced ambition. The *School Virgil* is small in size, cheaply produced with wood engravings, but still includes works by famous artists and could possibly make a profit.

In the 1821 edition, Thornton in the Address named some designers and engravers of this edition.

‘In order to render this work worthy, as much as possible, of public patronage, and the distinguished honor conferred upon it, by the approbation of the learned, Messrs. *Thurston, Craig, Cruikshanks, Blake* and *Varley*, with others of great merit, have been selected for the *designs*; whilst the most eminent engravers on wood have been employed, as *Nesbit, Clennell, Branston, Bewick, Thomson, Hughes, Byfield, Williams, Lee, Mackenzie, and Sears*, for the *Cuts*, so that *Boys* will now learn Latin with *greater facility* and *pleasure* to themselves, *deeper impressions* be made, and *ideas*, as well as *words*, be acquired.’¹¹

Bewick was named as an engraver, but none of the illustrations were done by him but by his workshop.¹² Similarly in Thornton’s *New Family Herbal* (1810), Bewick is advertised on the title page but all the engravings are by workshop. Blake was named as a designer but not engraver though he did engrave both on copper and wood.

The style overall is neo-classical in the earlier editions and became more ornamental in the 1821 edition. However, the mixture of fine and crude illustrations shows that Thornton seemed to have chosen whoever whose fame could help the sale, or whose work was cheaply available.

Blake was, in contrast to Thornton, sincerely opposed to formal and classical education.¹³ The reason why Blake participated the project was probably also financial in spite that he had John Linnell as a patron at this time.¹⁴

6. The woodblock evidence

If we compare Blake’s woodblocks (British Museum) with the block engraved by another hand which was more to Thornton publishers’ taste (Huntington Library, one can detect from the surface that Blake’s cut lines are much more irregular and rough whereas the other hand shows regular and uniform dots and lines. Blake seems to treat the block as a canvas, filling in lines and ‘colours’ (so to speak), rather than cutting away the white areas. It is unique and revolutionary in style and in spirit.

¹¹ ‘Address to school-master, parents, and others’, preface to Thornton’s *The Pastorals of Virgil* (1821), p. iv.

¹² Preface by Kenneth Clark, *The Wood Engravings of William Blake* (British Museum, 1977), p. 7.

¹³ ‘Dark Pastoral: illustrations to Thornton’s *Virgil*’, *The Traveller in the Evening: The last works of William Blake*, by Morton Paley, Oxford University Press, 2003.

¹⁴ *The Traveller in the Evening: The last works of William Blake*, by Morton Paley, p. 23.



William Blake, *Virgil* woodblocks (British Museum)



Armstrong woodblock 3608, Huntington Library



Blake



Anonymous

The block used to illustrate page 8 of Volume 2 *School Virgil* (1821) typifies the standard printing block used in a mechanical printing process. The engraving on the recto shows clear contrast of relief and incised lines, the regular white lines popularized by the Bewick School. The top side of the block has stamped into the wood a mechanical number, which would have been done by the manufacturer.

In contrast, the woodblocks Blake used were not standard and he did not engrave on the end-grain as was the practice of Thomas Bewick and his pupils and followed throughout the 19th century. The two proofs of Blake's *Virgil* before cut separately and cut down in size in the British Museum show that Blake originally engraved on a larger than usual piece of boxwood, simply cut from a tree trunk instead of a standard block from the regular block-makers. This means that the images were quite possibly engraved on the plank side rather than on the end-grain part. They are rightly called 'woodcuts' and not 'wood engravings' specifically in the 19th century printmaking terminology.



In this aspect, Blake was going back to the old tradition of woodcut instead of following contemporary fashion.

7. Conclusion: Blake & Thornton's conflicting ideas of education

If both Blake and Thornton shared a financial rather than educational incentive, at least Blake spoke out a visual protest against the classical tradition, whereas Thornton was the embracer of an old world of classical culture. The supposed aim of the *School Virgil* book is to educate. Whether this is true for Thornton and Blake, the two obviously had very different ideas about it.

Thornton has experience as a lecturer on medical topics & has developed a theory of education centring on the use of visual images to aid learning. William Blake rejected all formal schooling.

‘Thank God, I never was sent to School
To be Flogg’d into following the Stile of a Fool.’¹⁵

¹⁵ Blake, *Notebook*, p. 42.

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