

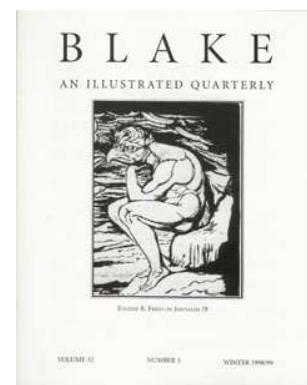
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**An Unrecorded Copy of Blake's 1809 Chaucer
Prospectus**

J. B. Mertz

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MINUTE PARTICULAR

An Unrecorded Copy of Blake's 1809 Chaucer Prospectus

BY J. B. MERTZ

In August 1830, shortly after his visit to Oxford in the company of his friend Isaac D'Israeli, the antiquarian and collector Francis Douce made his will, directing that his extensive collection of printed books, drawings, prints, illuminated manuscripts, coins and medals should be left to the Bodleian Library.¹ After his death in 1834 the library received one of its most valuable bequests, which included several works by Blake: *The Book of Thel* (I), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (B), *A Descriptive Catalogue* (H), and the print *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims* (impression 3D).² Douce kept a record of his purchases in a set of three notebooks entitled "Collecta," which show that he acquired "Blake's marr. of heaven & hell" in April 1821 from "Dyer"³ and "Blake's print of Canterbury pilgrimage" in November 1824 from the publishers and print sellers "Hurst [and Robinson]."⁴ Four months later, in March 1825, Douce returned to Hurst and Robinson's shop, recording the acquisition of "Blake's Canterbury Pilgr." Joan Stemmler suggests that this is "probably a double entry" for the print of the *Canterbury Pilgrims*,⁵ but more likely it refers to the hitherto unknown second copy of Blake's 1809 Chaucer Prospectus in the Bodleian Library. Douce pasted the prospectus onto the fly-leaf inside the back cover of his copy of the first volume of *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer* (edited by Thomas Tyrwhitt and published in 1798).⁷ Like the sole copy (A) in the British Museum Print Room recorded by G. E. Bentley, Jr., the Bodleian copy is a broadsheet approximately 18.65 x 22.7 cm., printed on the recto with the verso blank.⁸

¹ [Samuel Weller Singer], "Francis Douce, Esq. F. S. A.," *The Gentlemen's Magazine* 156 (1834): 216-17.

² G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford, 1977) 128, 134 and 298, and Robert N. Essick, *The Separate Plates of William Blake: A Catalogue* (Princeton, 1983) 63. Only *Thel* and *A Descriptive Catalogue* are listed in the *Catalogue of the Printed Books and Manuscripts Bequeathed by Francis Douce, esq., to the Bodleian Library* (Oxford, 1840) 32.

³ Bodleian Library, MS. Douce e. 67, fol. 40^v.

⁴ MS. Douce e. 68, fol. 2^v. The "Collecta" do not indicate when or from whom he acquired *Thel* or *A Descriptive Catalogue*.

⁵ MS. Douce e. 68, fol. 3^v.

⁶ "Undisturbed above once in a Lustre": Francis Douce, George Cumberland and William Blake at the Bodleian Library and Ashmolean Museum," *Blake* 26 (1992): 18n145.

⁷ See the *Catalogue of the Printed Books and Manuscripts Bequeathed by Francis Douce*, 63, and G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records Supplement* (Oxford, 1988) 132.

⁸ *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford, 1978) ii, 823-24 and 1692.

We also have evidence that Douce's interest in illustrations of Chaucer extended beyond Blake's print. Facing Blake's prospectus in Douce's Chaucer (i.e., pasted on the inside of the back cover) is the prospectus for a rival project: Robert Hartley Cromek's print after Stothard's "The Procession of Chaucer's Pilgrims to Canterbury." This prospectus is dated "London, Feb. 10th, 1807." Douce praised Stothard's painting in his book *Illustrations of Shakspeare, and of Ancient Manners*, claiming that the "attention to accuracy of costume which it displays has never been exceeded, and but very seldom so well directed."⁹ In a notebook listing books received, he also records in 1809 that "Cromek" gave him a copy of "Carey's description of Stodart's picture of the pilgrimage to Canterbury,"¹⁰ but Douce apparently never purchased the print. Should he have desired a copy, Douce certainly had the means, especially after his receipt in 1827 of an estimated £50,000 as residuary legatee of the estate of his friend Joseph Nollekens. He was clearly aware of Cromek and Blake's projects, even placing their prospectuses facing one another in a volume of Chaucer. But perhaps he concluded, on the basis of his antiquarian expertise, that Blake's print was the more historically accurate representation and (like Charles Lamb) "preferred it greatly to Stoddart's."¹¹ There is a small engraving (approximately 5.1 x 17.6 cm.)¹² by W. H. Worthington after Stothard's painting pasted onto the titlepage of the same copy of Chaucer, but it is obviously not the print "3 Feet 1 Inch long, and 10 1/2 Inches high" that Cromek undertook to deliver to his subscribers. Although no definitive catalogue of the prints bequeathed by Douce to the Bodleian has been compiled, there appears to be no copy of Cromek's print after Stothard's painting in the present collection. Most of Douce's print collection (as well as some of the manuscripts and drawings he owned) was transferred to the Ashmolean Museum in 1863, and more prints and drawings were added from the Bodleian holdings in 1915.¹³

⁹ Francis Douce, *Illustrations of Shakspeare, and of Ancient Manners: with Dissertations on the Clowns and Fools of Shakspeare; on the Collection of Popular Tales Entitled Gesta Romanorum; and on the English Morris Dance* (London, 1808) ii, 285 fn.

¹⁰ MS. Douce e. 69, fol. 9^v. William [Paulet] Carey, *Critical Description of the Procession of Chaucer's Pilgrims to Canterbury, Painted by Thomas Stothard, Esq. R.A.* (London, 1808) 11, reprints Douce's commendatory remarks on Stothard's painting. Cromek circulated Carey's essay to promote the sale of the print. See *Blake Books*, 777 and G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books Supplement* (Oxford, 1995) 431-32.

¹¹ G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford, 1969) 538.

¹² This engraving was published by "W. Pickering & R. & S. Prowett London 1822."

¹³ See Arthur Cornwallis Madan and George Rodney Scott's rough handlist *A Catalogue of the Collection of Engravings, &c. in Portfolios bequeathed by Francis Douce in 1835*, 2 vols. (1913-15, 1916). Douce's copies of *Theil*, *The Marriage*, and *A Descriptive Catalogue* remain in the Bodleian collection. I would like to thank Ursula Mayr-Harting of the Ashmolean Museum for her kind assistance.

R E V I E W S

Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III*. New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1996. viii + 248 pp. \$65/cloth; \$30/paper [Yale University Press, 1998].

Reviewed by ALEXANDER S. GOURLAY

Upon seeing it, most scholars of Blake and Romanticism will immediately want to read and even to own this book, which promises to cover a lot of material, little of it easily available elsewhere, that is essential background for any literary or art-historical study of the period. The book includes 210 high-quality reproductions of satirical prints, many in color and most in a large enough scale to permit study, and the text is extensive. Once one starts reading it, it becomes clear that Donald knows a great deal about these prints and that she thinks about them in sophisticated and original ways. But many readers are likely to be somewhat frustrated, not so much by shortcomings of the book as by the fact that the topic is simply too large and too complex to be susceptible to summary on this scale, however astute the summarizer. Each of the chapters could have been a lavishly illustrated book in itself, and while it is obvious that Donald has enough good ideas to fill a dozen volumes, this book provides only tantalizing and sometimes exasperating glimpses of the main topics. Donald knows well that works in popular culture embody and convey meaning in extremely complicated ways, and she tries gamely to indicate how various audiences would have responded to these works, but the result is barely adequate even as an overview. Other recent books that investigate the role of popular culture in Georgian political and literary discourse, such as those by Vincent Carretta, Iain McCalman and David Worrall, have been more satisfying and more coherent, mostly because they address similar material from well defined if comparatively limited perspectives. Donald's broader approach permits only cursory examination of the way a given constituency might read a few aspects of a given piece. As a result, we rarely get much feeling for the work as a whole, much less its place in the vast web of relevant contexts that inform it. It is captious to criticize a book for not being what it is not meant to be, but a narrower or a longer book would have been a better one.

A related problem is that the work of Gillray so thoroughly dominates the illustrations and the discussion of them. This is understandable—Gillray was the most powerful caricaturist of the period (perhaps of any period), and his works remain much more interesting than those of his

Chaucer's extensive reading of Latin poets such as Boethius also influenced his own work. Italian Period. A journey to Italy in 1372 kicked off what is now widely considered to be Chaucer's Italian period, which lasted from 1372 to 1385. The trip introduced him to the works of contemporary Italian writers, such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. At the end of this period, Chaucer wrote his longest poem, "Troilus and Criseide," a love poem that he adapted from Boccaccio's "Il Filostrato." English Period. Chaucer was born into a middle-class family of wine merchants around 1343. His work in the army and in various public positions enabled him to travel to France and Italy. He died in 1400. The Descriptive Catalogue of 1809 is a description of, and prospectus for, an exhibition by William Blake of a number of his own illustrations for various topics, but most notably including a set of illustrations to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, this last being a response to a collapsed contract with dealer Robert Cromek. As a result, he wrote his Descriptive Catalogue (1809), which contains what Anthony Blunt called a "brilliant analysis" of Chaucer and is regularly anthologised as a classic of Chaucer criticism.

Northrop Frye William Blake's prophetic books Peter Ackroyd Ro