VERB TENSE IN BLAKE’S “THE TYGER”

Considering the thoroughness and subtlety of recent critical analyses of Blake’s “The Tyger,” it is surprising that so little attention has been given to a small but basic problem in interpreting the poem. As the argument progresses, there is an apparent shift of tense each time the word dare occurs. Every other verb form in the lyric is clearly preterite: burnt, could, began, was, throw, water’d, did, made; only the use of dare (instead of dared, or dorste) is anomalous. Without attempting to explain or even to explore the poem’s larger mysteries, I should like in the present note to clarify, if possible, this one small enigma which confronts the reader of Blake’s lyric.

While most critics have sensed that the word dare is somehow very important (in one or more of its occurrences) to the general meaning of the poem, only one, so far as I can determine, has called attention to the linguistic cruc and tried to resolve it. John E. Grant, in “The Art and Argument of ‘The Tyger’,” states, “It should also be observed that ‘dare’ is probably the present subjunctive tense of the verb, a fact which tends to bring these presumably past events into the imagination’s present focus as the questioner meditates on them.”

I should like to check this identification of the grammatical function of dare against the earlier history of the verb and its status in Blake’s day. First, as to mood: presumably Grant decides that the verb is subjunctive because it lacks the present indicative ending -s; that is, instead of writing “what dread grasp / Dares its deadly terrors clasp,” the poet has written “Dare its deadly terrors clasp.” But a brief consideration of the origin of dare will show that such a conclusion is overhasty. Dare was originally a preterite-present verb; it belonged in Old English to the same conjugational system as did most of the modern “modal auxiliaries” such as can, may, and shall, verbs which are preterite in form but present in meaning. Therefore, like can, may, and shall, dare did not take an -s in the third person singular present indicative; the correct form was ‘he dare,” “she dare,” etc. In early Modern English, however, this original s-less form began gradually to give way before a new, analogical third-person form dare, a form which has now replaced the original one in all but a very few contexts such as “He dare not speak.” In Blake’s day, the two forms were still in vigorous competition, and so for the third person singular Blake could have said dare or darest pretty much as the whim took him. This freedom of choice is exactly what we find in his writings, as the following quotations will show:

Who is this, that with unerring step dare tempts the wilds?

none his hand / Dares stretch to touch her Baby form

For who dare touch the frowning form, / His arm is wither’d to its root.

the Rose still sleeps, / None dare to wake her

Have you known the Judgment that is arisen among the / Zoas of Albion, where a Man dare hardly to embrace / His own Wife . . . ?

But Los himself against Albion’s Sons his fury bends, for be / Dare not approach The Daughters openly

No other living thing / Dare thy most terrible wrath abide.

As these quotations suggest, Blake preferred the older s-less form to darest, the latter occurring, I believe, only twice in the entire corpus of his writings. The important point, however, is that in indicative functions the forms dare and darest were in free variation, and therefore little can be concluded about the mood of the verb merely by reference to the poet’s choice between the two contrasting forms.

Must we conclude, then, that dare in “The Tyger” is present tense, mood indeterminate, and that there is, after all, a shift in verb tense each time the word appears? To answer the question it will be necessary once more to examine the history of the word. The past tense of dare in Old English was dorste, and this form comes down into modern English as durst (or, in some areas, dorste). But as the verb dare began to be dissociated from the group of preterite-present verbs, the preterite form durst (which corresponds precisely to the modal preterites should and could) began to be replaced in common speech by the new

1 See, for example, Martin K. Nurmi, “Blake’s Revisions of ‘The Tyger’,” PMLA, LXVI (1956), 680: “The real climax, of course, which resolves everything, is the word ‘Dare’ that is substituted for ‘Could’ in the closing return to the strophic stanza,” and Joseph X. Brennan, “The Symbolic Framework of Blake’s ‘The Tyger’,” CE, xxii (1961), 406-407: “Into the word dare . . . converge all the terrifying implications of the question posed with mounting intensity and deepening significance in the foregoing stanzas.” Equally emphatic statements about the importance of dare are made by Joseph Wicksted, Blake’s Innocence and Experience (London, 1928), pp. 199-200; Roy P. Basler, Sex, Symbolism, and Psychology in Literature (New Brunswick, N. J., 1946), pp. 22-23; Hazard Adams, “Reading Blake’s Lyrics: ‘The Tyger’,” Discussions of William Blake, ed. John E. Grant (Boston, 1961), p. 60; and others, all of whom leave unclarified the ambiguity as to the tense of dare.

2 Discussions of William Blake, ed. John E. Grant, p. 67. Some of the consequences of this assumption of a present subjunctive dare are developed further on pp. 73 and 75. The same points are made in an earlier version of this essay published in Texas Studies in Literature and Language, ii (1960), 38-60.


4 “The Mental Traveller,” ll. 46-47.

5 Ibid., ll. 97-98.

6 “Milton” ll.xxxi.56-57.

7 “Jerusalem” ll.xxxvi.44-46.

8 Ibid., l.xvii.6-7.

9 “Vale” (Night the Seventh [al]), ll. 46-47.
analogical preterite dared, which brought the conjugation into conformity with “regular” (i.e., weak) verbs such as care-cared, glare-glared, share-shared, etc. Thus in Blake's day there was no single, “correct” past tense form for the verb dare; a glance at the lexicons of writers like Spenser, Pope, Burns, Coleridge, and Wordsworth will show that durs% and dared% (and occasionally dorse) occurred freely and interchangeably in their writings. Now since the preterite of dare was such an unsettled matter, it seems reasonable to ask whether the form dare itself might not have been used sometimes as a past tense form.19 (Such a development would not be, strictly speaking, an innovation, but rather the restoration of a preterite meaning to an originally preterite form, though the original function of the form had, of course, been forgotten in the ancient past.) I am convinced that this was in fact the case, that dare in Blake's day was not only a present form, but also was an available preterite form of the verb. For as early, at least, as Chaucer uses of dare in a preterite sense begin to appear, and by the latter half of the eighteenth century the usage becomes increasingly frequent. In the first half of the nineteenth century, and especially in the twenty-five years immediately following Blake's death, evidence for the form bulks very large. In this period dare-preterite is not merely an occasional variant, but a regular grammatical form which occurs repeatedly and often within the works of individual writers. In the face of this evidence it would be difficult to argue that dare in Blake's time was not an available preterite form. The following selection of examples illustrates adequately, I believe, the trend which I have described.20

To chambræ he went; of no thing took he hede,
Ne non to hym dar speke a word for drede.
Chaucer, Troilus v.202–203

how one knight alone had the hardynes to have dare come toward hym.21

Great ruth in all the gazers harts did grow,
Seeing the gored wounds to gape so wyde,
That victory they dare not wish to either side.
At last the Paynem cha unst to cast his eye
Spenser, Faerie Queene
i.v.9.7–10.1.

he pretended that the marquis dare not appear abroad by day . . .
The Impostors Detected: or, the Life of a Portuguese (anon.), (1760), i, 232.

If I were not chained to the floor, you dare as well eat your fingers as use such language.22
William Godwin, Caleb Williams, 3d ed. corrected (1797), p. 267.

Then Would th’ affrighted Spirit humbly wait,
Nor dare th’ appointed Hour anticipate.
Would bear all ills that he could not prevent,
Nor dare the Deed which no Man can repent.23

Occasionally O’Brien crept into a cabaret, and obtained provisions; but as we dare not be seen together as before, we were always obliged to sleep in the open air.
Frederick Marryatt, Peter Simple (1834), p. 173 (here quoted from the Leipzig ed., 1842, which agrees in each case with the British editions).

the danger was so great that they dare not venture to assist us.
Ibid., p. 188.

He considered . . . that those who would hold back in the night dare not do so during the day.
Ibid., p. 257.

Far off the farmer came into the field
And spied her not; for none of all his men
Dare tell him Dora waited with the child.
Tennyson, “Dora,” ll. 72–74 (from Poems in Two Volumes, 1842).

You may judge how happy I was, looking out upon the bleak country side . . . watching an old windmill that had

19 Choices among various possible past tense forms still exist, of course, in several modern English verb paradigms. Compare, for example, the situation of the modern speaker who wants to express the past tense of bid: Is it bade, bade, bidden, or simply bid (which is identical with the present)?

20 In quoting works published in the eighteenth century or later I have cited, unless otherwise stated, first editions. Where I have not cited first editions, I have cited early editions which are still widely available. In all cases I have, of course, checked the readings in several editions to guard against the possibility of typographical errors or tacit modernization.

21 Although a past participle rather than a simple preterite, this form is of special interest as an illustration of the flux within the paradigm of dare and particularly of the surprising range of tense functions which dare could be made to serve. See further the following note.

22 Here dare seems to be serving as a preterite subjunctive, the more common form of which would be durs% or would dare. The preterite subjunctive use of dare occurs more than once in the nineteenth century. Robert Southey received a letter from the distinguished clergyman Andrew Bell which contained the sentence, “I wish I dare put them down among our books.” (26 December 1811; see The Life of the Reverend Andrew Bell, i, by Charles Southey, London, 1844, 651.) And as late as 1861 Charlotte Eliza Riddell provides a particularly clear example of the preterite subjunctive dare following, in this instance, a preterite indicative dare: “He dare as much have opposed his wife’s whims during the time she dwelt in the Mansion House, as he dare have committed high treason . . . ” (City and Suburb, London, 1861, p, 267).
gone clean mad, and went round at such a pace that nobody dare go near it.

Charles J. Lever, Our Mist, 1 (1843), 161.

when the dogs came bounding up to welcome her, she dare hardly touch them

Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights (1847), 1, 114-115.

For I dare not go in myself again just then.

Ibid., ii, 396.

Many of the girls... were not pure-minded at all, very much otherwise; but they no more dare betray their natural coarseness in M. Paul's presence, than they dare tread purposely on his corns

Charlotte Bronte, Villette (1853), i, 280.

he was on the windward side of the cover, and dare not light a cigar

Charles Kingsley, Yeast (1848), p. 6 (quoted here from Charles Kingsley's Works, MacMillan, 1883-84).

I dare not ask my mother for books, for I dare not confess to her that religious ones were just what I did not want.


Could he, dare he, confess to him the whole truth

Kingsley, Hypatia (1852), p. 5.

Orestes knew well enough that the felows must have been bribed to allow the theft; but he dare not say so

Ibid. p. 308.

At least, they may say, 'She was a- a- but she dare die for the man she loved!'

Ibid., p. 449.

Her restlessness wakened her little bedfellows more than once. She daren't read more of Walter Lorraine: Father was at home, and would suffer no light.

W. M. Thackeray, Pendennis (Leipzig ed., 1849-50), m, 83.

This development of a past tense dare identical with the present tense form seems surprising at first, but there is ample precedent for such a phenomenon. Two other preterite present verbs—must and ought—followed the same process of syncretism as did dare,14 the major difference here being that in these verbs the coalescence of tense-functions within a single form has become the accepted "normal" paradigm today, the original present forms mote and owe having died out (as auxiliaries). Moreover, there are numerous other verbs in English which have identical present and past tense forms—e.g., beat, bid, cost, cut, hurt, let, put, spread; these too would strengthen the analogy which fostered the preterite dare. I suspect, however, that there was yet another kind of analogy—what might be called a "literary-linguistic" one—which was in exercise at the time of Blake and his successors and which was probably the strongest of all. It is interesting to note that nearly all the examples cited are either from poetry or from works of fiction, which, given the conventions of the day, tended generally to affect a more or less "literary" diction. Among the archaic or poetic forms of verbs which writers of the late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries would encounter in the Bible, Milton, and Spenser (to cite only three that were particularly influential upon Blake) were such present-past pairs as hear:bare, swear:ware, tear:tare, wear:ware. The similarity between the phonetic pattern established by these pairs and that in the present-past pair dare:dare is obvious, and to a poet's ear a past tense dare may well have suggested the same poetic or faintly archaic associations as a past tense bare,ware, or the like. This at any rate is the connotation of dare which would seem to be the most appropriate one in Blake's poem, and I suggest that it may well have been this which prompted him to select dare from the available preterite forms dare, dared, dirst, and durst, as well, perhaps, as considerations of euphony (which would probably rule out the forms durst and dirst, if not dared).15 In any case, there can be little doubt that

14 In these two verbs, of course, it was the preterite rather than the present form which came to usurp the function of both past and present tenses. But in the case of must, at least, the direction of the syncretism was not always the same. The OED s.v. Mote vi, 2b, indicates that on occasion Spenser and Henry More used the present form mote in preterite sense. Moreover, the preterite dirst has sometimes been employed in present tense functions (see OED s.v. Dare vi, 1, 5; Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," ll. 2918-2919; Shakespeare, Othello iv.ii.12-13). Joseph Wright states that in British dialects "the preterite is constantly used for the present" (EDD s.v. Dare vi, 1, 1). Finally, in modern English we have examples of two recently developed modal auxiliaries—need and use (to)—which are following negatively, which I have documented above, I feel that the phonetic explanation needs supplementing, at very least, and the analogies I suggest here must have been an important, if not the sole, factor.

My explanation of the origin of dare-preterite through analogy differs from that offered originally, I believe, by Gregor Sarrazin in Engische Studien, xxxviii (1897), 350-402. Sarrazin concludes that the sound was crowded out phonetically... and that this form was then transferred to other cases. (See A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles, Part iv, Vol. iii: Time and Tense, Heidelberg, 1931, 12.) Considering the early date and the frequency of dare-preterites without a following negative, which I have documented above, I feel that the phonetic explanation needs supplementing, at very least, and the analogies I suggest here must have been an important, if not the sole, factor.
dare, in the environment of other verbs exclusively in the past tense, could only have been intended as a past tense by Blake in "The Tyger." One last piece of evidence may be mentioned, however, in support of the dare-preterite usage in Blake's poem. We are fortunate in having not only Blake's final version of "The Tyger," but also his working drafts, in which he made numerous trials and substitutions before arriving at the text as it now stands. Several of his substitutions were for verbs, and two facts about these changes are worth stating: (1) Not one of the verbs which were tried out and then excised is in the present tense; apparently Blake conceived of the tense of the poem undeviatingly as preterite. (2) In four instances Blake made substitutions involving the word dare: Twice he inserted dare as a replacement for the verb did (and later went back to did); once he substituted could for an original dare; once he temporarily altered dare to could and then went back to dare. The fact that whenever dare is interchanged with another verb the old verb is always preterite suggests strongly that Blake regarded dare as a preterite form too.

As I acknowledged at the outset, the question I have tried to answer here is a small one in relation to the general question of the poem's total meaning, and yet it is not a negligible one. Surely the problems of interpreting "The Tyger" are multiplied alarmingly if we must reckon with a shifting time-reference within the narrator's questions, as Dr. Grant has suggested, nor will all readers be satisfied with his explanation of the presumed shift. But the preterite function of dare, which philology restores to the text, allows us to see that the dramatic situation in the poem is in fact relatively simple. The speaker is contemplating the image of the tiger and uttering exclamatory questions about its origin in the primeval past. This amazed questioner has no direct access to that ancient moment of creation; he is bound fast in the poem's present time, just as his understanding is bound by the material world of the present, where "the roaring of lions, the howling of wolves... are portions of eternity, too great for the eye of man," and where it is impossible for the average human intelligence to understand that "the wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God." The preterite dare, in its first three occurrences in stanzas two through four, keeps the questioner fixed in his present world, wondering distantly at the tiger's origin: What powers must the creator have possessed, he asks in lines 7–8, that he had the audacity to snatch from distant regions the fiery substance of the tiger's eyes? What force and skill was his, asks stanza three, that he could spin the sinews for the tiger's living heart? What awful might, ask lines 15–16, gave him the courage to bold the brain at forge and anvil? Finally, in the climactic use of dare (line 24), the questioner asks what appalling strength it could be that dared, in that dimly conjectured moment of creation, to compose from these elements—eye, heart, and brain—such a terrifying complement to its own power. The framing of the tiger, like the "distant deeps or skies" from which his creation proceeded, is above all remote from the amazed questioner and is not at any time brought into his "imagination's present focus." It is this temporal remoteness, maintained consistently through the varying past tense form of the verbs, which communicates most forcefully the dramatic speaker's sense of a tremendously powerful and—to his limited understanding—inscrutable creator who has expressed himself through such apparently contradictory creations as the tiger and the lamb.

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