

AN AFTERWORD

[to Peter Larkin's '[David Jones and The Ancient Mariner](#)']

Alan Halsey

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Douglas Cleverdon's insistence that David Jones' illustrations for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* should be engraved on copper rather than wood raises two distinct but in this case related questions. One is simply biographical, the relation between artist and publisher. The other is more fundamental in that it concerns the link between technical and aesthetic considerations in the visual arts. Since both questions impinge on Jones' visual interpretation of the poem and on Peter Larkin's reading of it I hope a few more words on the subject might not be out of place.

There can be no doubt that for Cleverdon practical considerations would have been uppermost during the early stages of the project. He was an inexperienced publisher and understandably anxious. If he was concerned about the technical problems of printing from wood-blocks his doubts were to be justified by the poor printing (due to the use of

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undampened paper) of Jones' wood-engravings for the Golden Cockerel edition of *The Chester Play of the Deluge*.

But was Cleverdon simply exchanging one risk for another? We must view Jones' apparent diffidence with some caution and bear in mind that his doubts might not have been wholly concentrated on the practical business of working in copper. His first copper-engravings had been made two years before and he had agreed to use copper to illustrate *Seven Fables of Aesop* for the Lanston Monotype Corporation. He had also worked with copper to make drypoints, a technique of relief printing from the raised burr. It is possible, therefore, that his doubts were aesthetic: that his imagination ran more easily to designs in wood, and that he had already begun to see the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations in that way. Unless, that is, his expression of diffidence was a means of making sure that his publisher realised what the consequence of using copper would be.

The similarity of the terms 'wood-engraving' and 'copper-engraving' masks their essential difference. The artist cuts directly into the surface of the block or plate in both techniques: but whereas in wood-engraving the print is made by inking the uncut surface ('relief') a copper-engraving is printed by working the ink from the inked lines ('intaglio'). The difference in effect is obvious: the print-

surface of a wood-engraving is predominantly black, and of a copper-engraving predominantly white. It is obvious too that at the crudest level the predominant blackness or whiteness will play some part in determining the interpretation of the image.

It must be remarked here that wood-engraving does offer a choice to the artist between 'white line' and 'black line'. In 'white line' the engraver cuts his lines out of the wood, resulting in a white image on a black ground. In 'black line' the wood is cut away from the line; the artist might achieve quite a fine line with this method but clearly sufficient wood

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surface must be left on the complete block to allow for relief printing. A skilled artist might combine both techniques, as Jones did in *The Book of Jonah*, engraved for the Golden Cockerel Press in 1926. My illustration shows one of those plates, *Jonah Seized by the Sailors*.



The *Jonah* designs probably allow us to see how the *Ancient Mariner* illustrations might have appeared if Jones had engraved them on wood. (It is, incidentally, worth noting that all Jones' major book illustrations take the theme of the sea-voyage: Gulliver's, Jonah's, Noah's, the Ancient Mariner's.) Despite use of the combined techniques the overall effect is black and it seems unlikely that in this medium Jones would have been able to avoid a 'gothic' effect - and it is essentially the avoidance of the 'gothic' which sets his designs apart from practically all other illustrations of the poem.

Allied to this is the fact that even the best of Jones' wood-engravings are influenced by the pseudo-medievalism of the Gill circle. *Jonah Seized by the Sailors* will again serve as illustration, although here as elsewhere the slanting perspective allows the image a crafty medieval-modernist interplay. One's first thought, perhaps, is that this pseudo-medieval style might have been a perfect match for Coleridge's pseudo-archaic ballad. Possibly Jones had this in mind when he voiced his doubts about using copper. He would have used a different terminology, certainly, and I must stress that my 'pseudo-' is not intended to be offensive. I merely mean to indicate that Coleridge's adoption of 'archaic' diction and Jones' of 'medieval' figuration serve a similar purpose. They both know that the genuinely 'archaic' or 'medieval' is fundamentally irrecoverable, and that their audiences will be equally aware of the fact: at the same time as they know that the pretence is an artifice which makes a certain kind of creative work possible.

And yet Jones did not use wood as the medium for his

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Ancient Mariner illustrations and on reflection it is not difficult to see why. If the combination of Gillian medievalism with Coleridge's poem had any chance of avoiding 'gothic' it could easily have fallen into something far worse. By adopting copper Jones was freed into an illustrative interpretation which was not available to his Jonah manner. The engravings are arguably not in the mainstream of modernist book illustration but in their use of line and space they emphasize that Jones' affinities lay as much with the pro-abstractionist Seven & Five group as with the more conservative Society of Wood Engravers. They show a way of reading the anguish of Coleridge's poem which is unremittingly closed to the neo-medievalist or neo-romantic illustrator. We are left to speculate whether we owe that reading in the first place to the artist or his publisher - or whether, for that matter, it was one of those bits of good fortune which do sometimes follow a decision made for a quite different reason.