

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

A Minute Particular in Blake's Songs of Innocence,
Copy O

Theresa M. Kelley

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 17, Issue 1, Summer 1983, pp. 18-19



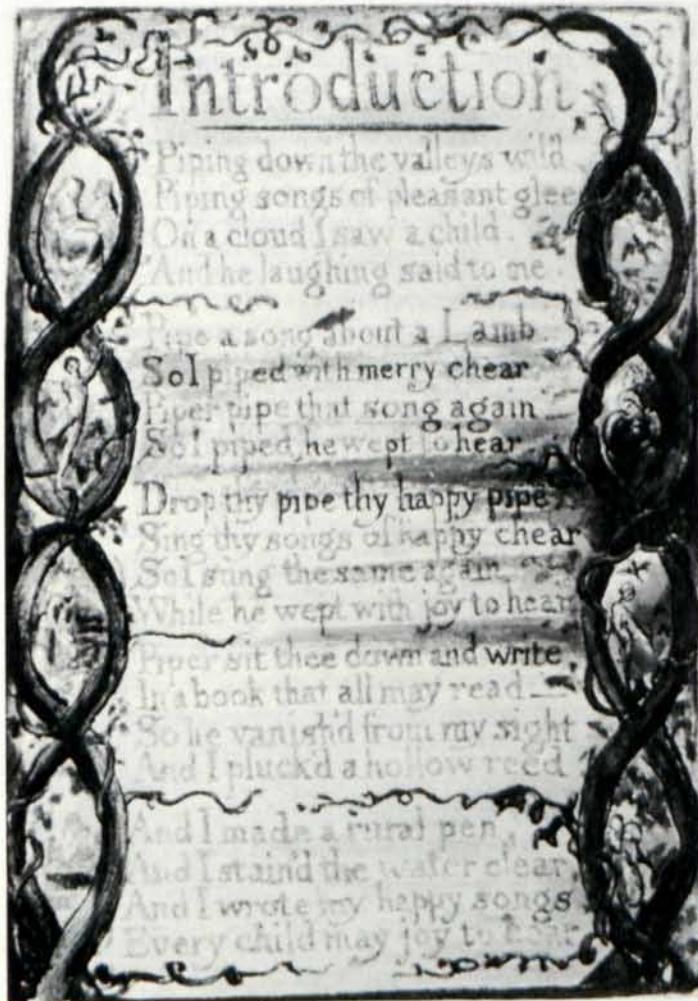
A Minute Particular in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, Copy O

Theresa M. Kelley

As several commentators have remarked, the eight tiny vignettes or panels which frame the text of the "Introduction" in Blake's *Songs of Innocence* are difficult to decipher, if indeed they can be deciphered at all.¹ Yet as a group these vignettes are clearly derived, as Sir Geoffrey Keynes has argued, from "a medieval manuscript illustrating the Tree of Jesse."² With this antecedent in mind, recent commentators have suggested that the sixth vignette, the second from the top in the group of four to the right of Blake's text, may be Jesse. David Erdman summarized much of earlier commentary when he described this figure as "huddled" with "legs crossed, head on hand; Jesse himself (suggests Essick) as in the Sistine fresco; or regarding or working at something in his lap,

perhaps writing."³ However, in *Songs of Innocence*, Copy O, the figure is well defined. It is not Jesse, but a woman who holds a baby in her lap (illus. 1).⁴ This figure is clearly a deliberate variant, of interest not only because it may be unique among copies of the *Songs*, but also because it demonstrates Blake's atypical attention to this minute particular in the "Introduction" of *Songs of Innocence*.

Impressions of this plate that have not been retouched show, in the sixth vignette, a figure that appears to be sitting, the legs slightly crossed, and the left arm possibly bent.⁵ Otherwise, little can be distinguished. A similar figure appears in retouched or tinted copies, although a few exhibit variations in the definition of the arms and legs (illus. 2).⁶ In still other copies there is something—but it is unclear what—in the lap of the figure.⁷ Finally, two Muir facsimiles respond with admirable inventiveness to the muddled as well as huddled figure of most copies by altering its seated position or by having the figure stand.⁸ Even in *Innocence*, Copy N, one of three copies which Blake produced shortly before and after Copy O, the figure is indistinct.⁹ Yet if the clearly depicted image of a mother and child in Copy O is unusual in the context of



other versions of the same plate, it is typical of its immediate context, Copy O, which displays extensive ink modeling of individual figures and designs, particularly notable in the frontispiece, "Introduction," "The Little Black Boy" (1 and 2), "The Little Boy Found," "The Chimney Sweeper," and "Night" (1). Together with applications of color specific to this copy, such modeling either gives sharper definition to principal figures or permits some redefinition of smaller ones, as is the case with the "mother and child" vignette discussed here. Because there may be other variants of this figure in copies which I have not consulted, this note invites additional notes and queries concerning the "Introduction" of *Songs of Innocence*.

¹ See, for example, Edwin J. Ellis's introduction for the facsimile edition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), xviii. For easier reference, my citations of specific volumes of the *Songs* follow G. E. Bentley Jr.'s practice of referring to *Songs of Innocence* as *Innocence*, and to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as *Experience* (*Blake Books*, 1977). The Ellis facsimile is of *Experience*, U. See Bentley, *Blake Books*, p. 436. Bentley describes the vignette as "a man reading" in *William Blake's Writings*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), I, 24, and in *Blake Books*, p. 389.

² Keynes's commentary for *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (London: Trianon, 1967), pl. 4. Facsimile of *Experience*, Z. See Bentley, *Blake Books*, p. 369.

³ Erdman's commentary for *The Illuminated Blake* (N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1974), p. 45. Facsimile of *Innocence*, I, with reference in this instance to *Experience*, U. See Bentley, *Blake Books*, pp. 407 and 422.

⁴ *Songs of Innocence*, O. Reproduced here as illus. 1 through the

courtesy of the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. See Bentley, *Blake Books*, p. 409.

⁵ Copies which show just the image printed from the copperplate or an image that is unretouched in the area of this vignette are: *Innocence*, E (New York Public Library, Berg Collection), U (facsimile, *Songs of Innocence* [Boston, 1883]) and *Experience*, C, b, h, A (facsimile, *Songs of Innocence* [London: Ernest Benn, 1926]). I am indebted to Robert N. Essick for descriptions of *Innocence*, U and *Experience*, c, b, h, and AA (see below).

⁶ Copies which are retouched or tinted but still show the same image as that of the unretouched copies include: *Innocence*, B (facsimile, London: Trianon, 1954), D and K (Morgan Library), I (reproduced here as illus. 2 through the courtesy of the Henry E. Huntington Library), N (Estelle Doheny Collection of the Laurence Doheny Memorial Library) and *Experience*, B (facsimile, David Bindman, *The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake* [N.Y.: Putnam, 1978], p. 217), E (Henry E. Huntington Library), I (reproduced in *The Illuminated Blake*, p. 45), V (Morgan Library), Y (Metropolitan Museum of New York), Z (facsimile, London: Trianon, 1967), AA. For additional information concerning the copies cited in these notes, see Bentley, *Blake Books*, pp. 365-438.

⁷ Two copies besides *Innocence*, O and possibly *Experience*, AA (see Erdman's note concerning Essick's reading of this figure in *The Illuminated Blake*, p. 45) appear to show something in the lap of the figure: *Experience*, U (mentioned by Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake*, p. 45) and T (facsimile, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* [Liverpool: Henry Young and Sons, 1923]). See Bentley, *Blake Books*, pp. 436 and 421.

⁸ *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (facsimile of *Innocence*, D [Edmonton: Muir, 1884]) and *Songs of Innocence* (Muir and Trumble facsimile of *Experience*, A [London: Bernard Quaritch, 1927]). See Bentley, *Blake Books*, pp. 434 and 488.

⁹ See Bentley's chronological list of the *Songs* in *Blake Books*, p. 367.

1. "Introduction," *Songs of Innocence* copy O, reproduced by permission of the Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin.

2. "Introduction," *Songs of Innocence* copy I, reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
