

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

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

“Infant Sorrow” and Robert Greene’s Menaphon

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 19, Issue 4, Spring 1986, pp. 142-143



MINUTE PARTICULARS

Blake, Thomas Boston, and the Fourfold Vision David Groves

The word "fourfold" or "four-fold" appears many times in Blake's longer poems, and is clearly one of his favorite expressions. Probably the best-known example occurs in his letter to Thomas Butts:

Now I a fourfold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given to me;
'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And threefold in soft Beulah's night
And twofold Always. May God us
keep
From Single vision & Newton's
sleep!¹

The word "fourfold" can be found twice in the 1611 Bible and once in *Paradise Lost*, but its frequent use by Blake is very striking. Contemporary readers may have detected an echo of Thomas Boston's book *Human Nature, in its Four-fold State*, a popular work of theology which went through at least two dozen editions in Britain between 1720 and 1800.

Thomas Boston was a Presbyterian clergyman until his death in 1732. He tried to modify the predestinarianism of the Presbyterian Church by proposing that human experience takes place on four distinct levels. A look at these levels or stages will show that they might well have inspired, obliquely, the "fourfold vision" of Blake. The first condition is a "State of Innocence, or Primitive Integrity" which exists only at birth. This is followed by the "State of Nature, or Entire Deprivation," in which the "natural man" can "do nothing but sin."² In the third state "The conscience is renewed" (p. 197), and one apparently experiences "a mysterious union" (p. 237), a "mystical union betwixt Christ and Believers" (p. 233).

The last of Boston's four stages is entered at death, when the ungodly see "the dark side of the cloud" while the righteous perceive "the bright side of it, shining on the godly, as they are entering upon their eternal state" (p. 341). This may perhaps partly explain Blake's reference, earlier in the poem cited above, to "my Brother John the evil one / In a black cloud making his mone."

It might at first seem unlikely that Blake would have been influenced by a Presbyterian minister. But Thomas Boston's literate, allusive, and metaphorical style did indeed appeal to people of imagination. Another

poet, writing in 1832, notes that

It has been the fashion for a good while past, with a certain class of professed Christians, . . . to sneer at the doctrines of Boston. I decidedly differ from them, and will venture to assert that there are no such fervour and strength of reasoning to be met with in any modern composition, as predominate in his. Let any person take up "The Four-fold State of Man," and peruse seriously and without prejudice one of the divisions, or say only twenty pages at random, and he will join with me. There is even an originality of thought and expression in old Boston which are quite delightful and refreshing.³

¹ William Blake, letter to Butts, 22 Nov. 1802, rpt. in *The Letters of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Cambridge, MA, 1968), pp. 59-63.

² Boston, *Human Nature, in its Four-fold State; of Primitive Integrity, Entire Deprivation, Begun Recovery, and Consummate Happiness or Misery* . . . (1720; 15th. ed. rev., Glasgow, 1761), p. 109. The names of Boston's states are taken from the table of contents. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

³ "Statistics of Selkirkshire, By Mr. James Hogg, 'the Ettrick Shepherd,'" in *Prize-Essays and Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1832), pp. 303-04.

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The origins of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in eighteenth-century children's hymns, nursery rhymes, cradle songs and the like are by now well documented, but cradle songs in particular were a popular Renaissance genre (the lullabies of Dekker and Gascoigne being the best known), and there is a source here for one of the *Songs*, "Infant Sorrow," that was suggested long ago by Foster Damon but has never, I think, been explored.¹ The source is "Sephestias Song to Her Childe" from Robert Greene's pastoral romance *Menaphon*. In particular, the opening lines of Blake's song,

My mother groand! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I lept

recall the opening lines of the last stanza of Greene's:

The wanton smilde, father wept;
Mother cride, babie lept.²

The echo here is plain enough, but I want to suggest that there are two ways in which "Sephestias Song" makes a particularly interesting context in which to read "Infant Sorrow."

The first is that "Sephestias Song" as a whole lends support to Norman Nathan's point that childbirth not only initiates the infant into sorrow but also brings sorrow upon the parents.³ The stanza just quoted from, for instance, continues thus:

More he crowde, more we cride;
Nature could not sorowe hide.
He must goe, he must kisse
Childe and mother, babie blisse:
For he left his pretie boy
Fathers sorowe, fathers joy.

Weepe not my wanton, smile upon my knee,
When thou art olde, ther's grief inough for thee.

The last line here, with its warning of what is in store for the child, might almost serve as a motto for the *Songs of Experience*, but it is the father's sorrow and joy that dominate the poem. In context, the father's tears are occasioned by his imminent parting from his son as a result of having been banished from that archetypal domain of innocence, Arcadia. The family has been cast adrift on a stormy sea, and it is after surviving a shipwreck that Sephestia sings this song, in which she recalls the joy of her husband (now presumed drowned) at the birth of a son, and his tears at the prospect of losing him. In short, the sorrow is as much the father's as the infant's.

The second point of contextual interest is that Greene goes on to develop the father's sorrow in an unexpected way. By means of various contrivances, Greene has the child (Pleusidippus) grow up to fall in love with Sephestia (now calling herself Samela) without knowing that she is his mother, and he becomes in due course a rival of his own father (Maximus,⁴ alias Melicertus), who in fact survived the wreck and has ended up courting Sephestia without knowing that she is his wife. Greene in his usual fanciful way asks us to accept the proposition that because Sephestia's identity is concealed she can find herself being wooed by her husband, her son, and even her father (Democles) at the same time. Given that commentators now tend to read "Infant Sorrow," both in its *Songs* version and in its longer *Notebook* version,⁵ as a poem which hints at the oedipal conflict between father and son ("Struggling in my father's hands"), it is interesting that this is precisely what *Menaphon* builds up to as its climax. Father and son angrily confront each other in single combat, and, in Greene's phrase, "they fell toughly to blowes."⁶ That fight is eventually stopped by Democles and the two are imprisoned, but all is at length resolved by the timely intervention of a sibyl. Sephestia is reunited with her husband, and her son craves "pardon for the fondnesse of his incestuous affection."⁷ He also apologizes to his father, then marries someone else.

While it seems certain that Blake knew "Sephestias Song," it may be that he knew little of its context: and

yet, considering its appropriateness to his own nascent theme in "Infant Sorrow," we can perhaps surmise that he sensed in Greene's lullaby the suggestion of potential oedipal conflict, and carried that suggestion over into his own song. Greene and Blake make, at first sight, an improbable coupling, but in the matter of Blake's sources we are repeatedly, it seems, like Lyca's parents on finding an angel in the eyes of a lion, "Filled with deep surprise."⁸

¹ S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), p. 282.

² My text is from vol. 6 of *The Life and Works of Robert Greene*, ed. A. B. Grosart (1881-86; New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), p. 44. The poem may also be found in several anthologies, such as *The Oxford Book of English Verse*.

³ Norman Nathan, "Blake's 'Infant Sorrow,'" *Notes and Queries*, 7 (1960), 99-100.

⁴ He is called Maximus at the beginning of the story and Maximus at the end.

⁵ For an oedipal reading of the *Songs* version see, most recently, Diana Hume George, *Blake and Freud* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 89-90, and of the *Notebook* version, Stewart Crehan, *Blake in Context* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984), pp. 113-14.

⁶ *Menaphon*, p. 133.

⁷ *Menaphon*, p. 144.

⁸ For some other out-of-the-way sources of Blake's *Songs* see especially chapter 2 of John Holloway's *Blake: The Lyric Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968).

