

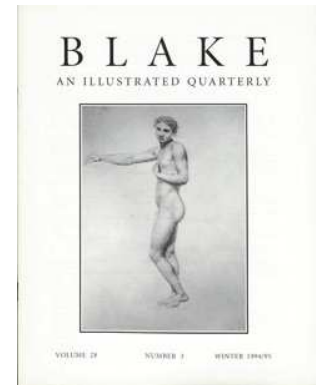
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M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

“What have I to do with thee?”

June Sturrock

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account, Robert must have been born sometime between February 1762 and February 1763. Apparently it was their independent testimony that persuaded Symons that the name of Richard in the parish register for June 1762 must have been a clerical error for Robert; and indeed their record of Robert's age at death is in the end the only explicit evidence we have for his birthdate.³⁴

Thus when all aspects of the question are considered, the conclusion seems almost inescapable: Robert was born in June 1762, not August 1767, and a slip of the pen accounts for the confusion over his name. More than merely revising the record, however, this investigation underscores a basic principle of biography. A single document, however impressive its credentials, cannot establish a fact apart from its total narrative context. The entry from the Schools register remains a tantalizing but isolated item, unsupported by any firm corroborative evidence, among the myriad minute particulars which the biographer of Blake must sift and assemble. Written evidence, while it can provide uniquely valuable information, can also be mistaken or misleading, and must therefore be scrutinized as carefully as all other kinds; conversely, non-verbal evidence may be admitted even where it appears to contradict the written evidence. In short, documentary evidence should not be privileged to the exclusion of all other kinds; we should remember how little of any life finds its way into written accounts, and keep our minds open to the mute testimony of things and circumstances and inferences from them. Every piece of biographical evidence, documentary or otherwise, must be viewed against the total experience of the biographical subject. It is the living context of each event that shapes isolated records into the semblance of biographical truth.

³⁴ Bentley points out in correspondence that even the evidence of a death date is not definitive: Blake's brother James's age at death is given wrongly as 71 in the perfunctory six-word entry in the Bunhill Fields Burial register when he is actually 73 and a half (cf. *BR* 340 and n4). However, James's death was not the subject of any biographical interest that would have corrected the record, while Robert's death was a matter of concern to Blake's early biographers. Unfortunately his age is not given in the Bunhill Fields register as quoted by Bentley (*BR* 32). I wish to thank Professor Bentley for his generosity in reading the final draft of this article and offering perceptive criticism on this and other matters.

MINUTE PARTICULARS

"What have I to do with thee?"

BY JUNE STURROCK

The rejected "thee" of the fourth line of "To Tirzah" is Mary in that she was the original recipient of Jesus's snub at the marriage at Cana (John 2.4); she is also Tirzah because that is how the poem is addressed. Yet perhaps the preceding three lines may be read as directed (in rebuke? in consolation?) rather towards the two women who on the green hill below the text of the poem support the decaying corpse of a man:

Whate'er is Born of Mortal Birth,
Must be consumed with the Earth
To rise from Generation free.¹

This group suggests Mary and Martha of Bethany with their brother Lazarus² already decomposing, as Martha warns Jesus (John 11.39). Indeed the central figure resembles Lazarus in Blake's painting of *The Raising of Lazarus* in Aberdeen (B 487), in that Lazarus is emerging from the ground (not the sepulchre mentioned in John 11.38-41) and seems to be half in and half out of the grave. Certainly the inscription on the robes of the old man bending over the corpse—"It is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15.44)—suggests Blake's reading of the raising of Lazarus as a spiritual resurrection misinterpreted by a materialistic church

¹ Blake is quoted from Erdman's edition, which is abbreviated as E with page numbers following in the parenthetical references. Other abbreviations include B (Butlin's catalogue) and IB (Erdman's *Illuminated Blake*).

² Both Mellor and Lincoln speak of Lazarus in this connection, but neither identifies Mary and Martha, or deals fully with the implications of the Lazarus story. Mellor says of this design "an old man pours a reviving, baptismal water upon a corpse held by two women. This iconographic fusion of the descent from the cross and the raising of Lazarus is summed up in the lines engraved upon the old man's robe—'It is raised a Spiritual Body.' Mortal existence is totally evil; only through death can fallen man be freed from his corrupted human form and redeemed as a spiritual, purified body" (p.189). Lincoln, who foregrounds the negative reading of the design allows that "seen as an image of redemption the design shows humanity 'Raised a Spiritual Body, 'brought back from the grave like Lazarus (whose two sisters had faith in his resurrection,' but qualifies this by saying that "the Saviour who presides over this vision of Liberty is not Jesus but his Father, the God who promotes the vision of human nature as sinful" (201-02).

which completed its creed with the assertion of belief in "the resurrection of the *body* and the life everlasting."³

The comforting of Martha and Mary by the promise of resurrection for their brother is a repeated note in *Vala, or The Four Zoas*, where they appear as Daughters of Beulah:

The daughters of Beulah saw the Divine Vision
they were comforted
And as a Double female form loveliness & perfection
of beauty
They bowd the head & worshipping & with mild
voice spoke these words

Lord. Saviour if thou hadst been here our
brother had not died
And now we know that whatsoever thou wilt
ask of God
He will give it thee . . .

.....
The Saviour mild & gentle bent over the corse
of Death
Saying If ye will Believe your Brother shall
rise again

(FZ 55.13-15; 56.1-18, E 337)

This dialogue follows closely the gospel version of the exchange between Martha and Jesus (John 11.21-27).⁴ Again in *Night the Seventh* the daughters of Beulah find comfort in these same words in the face of death when they write on "all their tombs & pillars & on every Urn" the eternal promise "If ye will believe your B[r]other shall rise again" (FZ 87.4-6, E 367). The daughters of Beulah are still identified with the sisters of Bethany in *Night the Eighth* when in praising the Lamb of God "they anoint his feet with ointment they wipe them with the hair of their head" (FZ 113.37, E 377) just as Mary of Bethany tends Jesus in the brief interval in John's gospel between the raising of Lazarus and the passion narrative (12.3). Flowing hair is a distinguishing mark of Mary of Bethany (as of Mary Magdalene), and in the "To Tirzah" design, as in *The Raising of Lazarus*, the two women are distinguished by their hair, one loose and flowing and the other bound or (in the painting) covered.

The old man offering a pitcher is more mysterious. He looks like the Ancient Bard in "The Voice of the Ancient Bard," which follows soon after "To Tirzah" in seven copies of the *Songs of Experience*,

³ The Apostle's Creed in the translation of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer: my emphasis.

⁴ Johnson and Wilkie note that Mary and Martha form the "Double female" (222).

but also resembles Blake's portrayals of Joseph of Arimathea, with his long hair, long beard and robes: this is how Joseph is represented in three of the four versions of *Joseph of Arimathea Preaching to the Inhabitants of Britain* (B 262, 286, 780).⁵ He is long-haired, bearded and old in two other paintings, *The Body of Christ Borne to the Tomb* (B 426) and *The Entombment* (B 427). Joseph is associated with the dead body of Jesus, as the follower who takes him away for burial. If the old man in the "To Tirzah" design is Joseph of Arimathea, Mellor's suggestion of "an iconographic fusion of the raising of Lazarus and the descent from the cross" (189) is strengthened.

Joseph of Arimathea is associated not only with British Christianity but also with the figure of the artist, for Blake sees him as "One of the Gothic Artists who Built the Cathedrals in what we call the Dark Ages" (E 671).⁶ The dead man (Lazarus) is thus possibly flanked by, on the one hand Mary and Martha, and on the other hand by Joseph of Arimathea; that is on the one hand by two women identified by Blake as daughters of Beulah, and thus as Muses, and on the other hand by the image of the Gothic artist. If both Joseph of Arimathea and the sisters of Lazarus are too concerned with physical death in the biblical narratives that concern them, all three believe in the power of Jesus and are associated with what can transform their vision, the work of the arts. Thus indeed in this design the sexes rise "to work and weep" (8). Work after all is essentially redemptive in the poems that are roughly contemporary with "To Tirzah" and with the Joseph of Arimathea inscription.⁷

The first three lines of "To Tirzah" may thus be read as words of comfort in that they speak not only of the certainty of death and corruption but also of the certainty of rising again spiritually: and the design addresses this element in the poem.⁸ These lines are an affirmation followed by a strong rejection: the words of the fourth line are as abrupt

⁵ In the other version he is shown naked, but bearded and old (B 76).

⁶ Presumably this is why Bindman speaks of him as a figure of the artist (124).

⁷ Erdman implies that the date of "To Tirzah" is approximately 1803-06 (800). The Joseph of Arimathea inscription is from 1809-10 (889). *Jerusalem* and *Milton*, texts in which work is central, date from approximately 1804-15 (809) and 1804-10 (806) respectively.

⁸ Erdman seems to prefer such a "hopeful vision" suggesting that we could "see the two women and the pitcher-offering old man . . . as spiritual comforters As the "Mortal part" is consumed, the "Spiritual Body" is welcomed into the garden, and love does give support" (1B94).

and disconcerting in the poem as they are in their original biblical context. The various verbal elements of the poem—the harshness of these repeated words, their added impact as Jesus' own words, their allusion to the mother of Jesus, the later address to "thou Mother of my Mortal part" (9), the knowledge that Tirzah is elsewhere (*Milton* 19:49-60, E 113; *Jerusalem* 67:44-51, E 221) the cruel prisoner of the senses, the apparent clumsiness of the repetition in the first line (born, birth)—all work together to foreground birth as death. Read as a visual text, however, the poem with its greater complexity of biblical allusion—referring not only to the Jesus who denies his mother and dies as an act of liberation, but also to the Jesus who loves his friends and whose death leads to the life of a "spiritual body"—addresses death as birth. This sense is strengthened by the allusion to the story of Lazarus in the second stanza: "Mercy changed Death into Sleep" (7). Jesus the merciful, the forgiver of sins, associates the death of Lazarus with sleep when speaking to his disciples: "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth, but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep" (John 11.11). The rising from such a sleep ends *Jerusalem* and is besought by the bard who introduces the *Songs of Experience*.

The fourth and the last eight lines of the poem are so absolute in their rejection of the maternal and the natural⁹ that they have often obscured the other implications of both song and design. Thus the female figures have been seen as necessarily negative—as useless Sex-Love and Mother-Love (Keynes 52), as "Tirzah-like" figures (Lincoln 201), or as Rahab and Tirzah (Lindsay 83). Yet while "the extreme hostility and contempt for the female and the maternal" as Mary Lynn Johnson says (61) cannot be easily dismissed, the presence of the sisters of Bethany in the design suggests not the overpowering anger of the third and fourth stanzas, but the power of belief and the power of human art.

Rajan speaks of this song's "deeply pessimistic antinaturalism" (222); Leader sees it as "the Bard's nadir" (202); Lincoln's long and judicious discus-

sion of the poem suggests that it can be seen in two ways, either as showing "a clarification of vision" or as emphasizing the death of Jesus, which emphasis "may confirm the power of Tirzah by reinforcing a self-denying attitude" (201). I would add this qualification: the figures of Mary and Martha of Bethany (and perhaps of Joseph of Arimathea) in the design, together with the obligation "to work" ("and weep") in the text suggest that the song is not a pure rejection of human life. Art remains, work remains (as the last plate of *Jerusalem* shows Los and Enitharmon still laboring at the forge and the loom). If as Lincoln suggests "as the fruits [on the tree in the design] indicate, the myth of Eden predominates here" then Adam's biblical curse—work—is seen here as his blessing. The preceding reading is intended not so much to elucidate as to complicate: after all, the song itself, like "The Tyger" (but with no final modification), ends with a repetition of its initial question.

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