

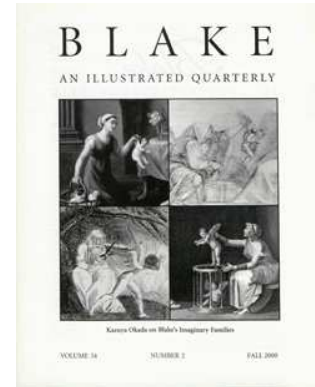
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## Orc under a Veil Revealed: Family Relationships and their Symbols in Europe and The Book of Urizen

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## Orc under a Veil Revealed: Family Relationships and their Symbols in *Europe* and *The Book of Urizen*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Attention has often been drawn to the veil of Enitharmon (illus. 1a, 1b), representing her relationship to her child, Orc; and its symbolic importance to Blakean mythology is generally agreed upon. But the attendant discussion has produced several, often problematic, arguments. To understand the deeper significance of the imagery, we have to re-examine Orc's figure in the light of a reconsideration of the traditional mythic sources which throw light upon the meanings of family relationships. These relationships, which provide Blakean mythology with their interlocking dimensions, in effect systematize his idiosyncratic cosmology. His mythology is activated especially by the interaction of certain names which are identified with each character: namely, Los as father figure, Enitharmon as mother, and Orc or Oothoon as child. Elucidating the significance of family relationships thus helps us realize how Blake's proto-mythological framings are fundamentally based on certain family relationships, extending from the earlier works—such as *America* or *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*—all through to such later works as *Vala, or The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*. More important, perhaps, attention to these relationships can throw light upon transitional works, particularly, *Europe* and *The Book of Urizen*. Here in particular, the relationships, when more deeply analyzed, enable us to take a fresh look at Orc, to recognize Urizen with Jupiter as a greater father figure, Los with Vulcan as the father, or Enitharmon with Venus as the mother of Orc. I wish to argue here that this new light reveals the so far hidden position of Orc's figure as the son between Vulcan and Jupiter, i.e., Cupid. It is not common to see a Cupid figure implied within the characterization of Orc; but it is my contention that this construction leads us to discover a more significant profundity which Blake intends in the figuration of Orc. The discussion will work towards the ultimate aim of encouraging Blake readers to reinterpret the creation of Orc as a challenge to

<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally read at BARS (British Association for Romantic Studies) 6th International Residential Conference, Keele University, in the summer of 1999. I acknowledge with gratitude a grant from the English Literary Society of Japan which enabled me to give the presentation at the conference.

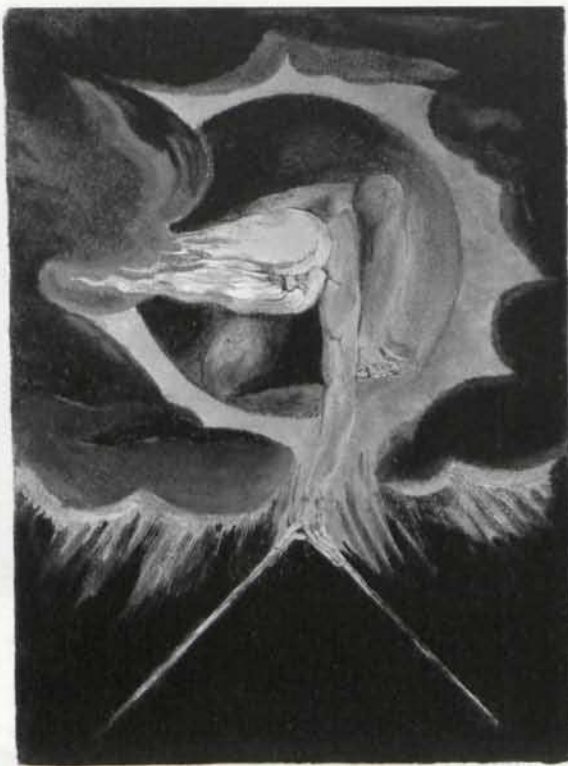


1a *Europe* plate 4. Glasgow University Library.



1b *The Book of Urizen*. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. PML 63139 copy B, plate 19 (Bentley 21).





2 Frontispiece to *Europe*. Glasgow University Library.

restore Cupid's original position: a move in which Blake can be seen as discursively aligned with the contextual revolutionary ethos, which in turn poses the larger question of radicalism in romanticism.

### Infant/Infinity Compassed

A rough sketch of the *Ancient of Days* in the Notebook is an original design of the frontispiece to *Europe* (illus. 2).<sup>2</sup> The original sketch contains an inscription of five words, quoted within the following lines cited from the Prophecy:

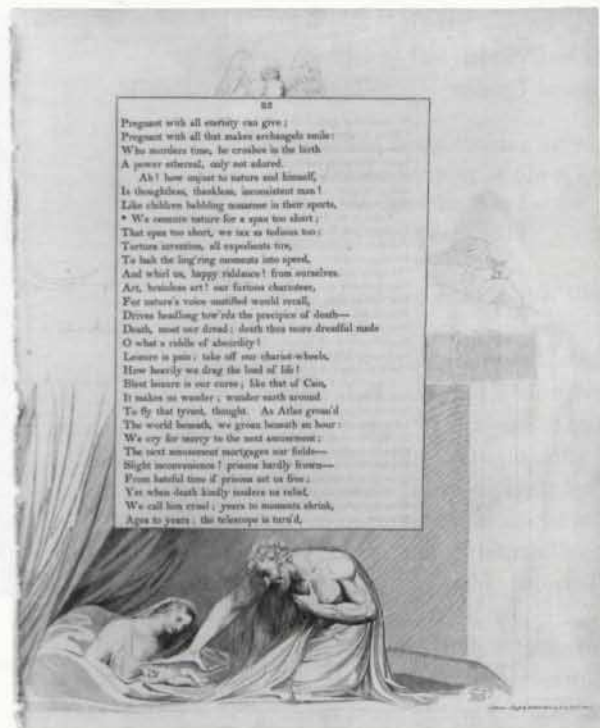
... who shall bind the infinite with an eternal band,  
To compass it with swaddling bands? and who shall  
cherish it  
With milk and honey?

[E 61: italics mine<sup>3</sup>]

The act of "bind[ing] the infinite" or "compass[ing] it" has provoked several interpretations in the history of Blake studies. One major interpretation derives from the point of view which sees it as a biblical allusion to the charting out

<sup>2</sup> *The Notebook of William Blake* 96.

<sup>3</sup> Blake texts are quoted from the Erdman edition, cited as E followed by the page numbers.



3 One of Blake's illustrations to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. Courtesy of The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

of the seven days of creation, i.e., a view which regards it as the depiction of "the Divine Circumscriber."<sup>4</sup> Critics on the side of the latter prefer to depend on the following description of Urizen in chapter VII of *The Book of Urizen* as a supplementary citation: "... formed golden compasses / And began to explore the Abyss" (E 81).

Although the act of encompassing has long been thus understood in conceptual terms, in the following discussion I want to draw the point of emphasis, at least at first, away from this to the question of the form of the compasses as an iconic symbol. To collate the various instances of the form, a subject seemingly oft noticed but little investigated, will illustrate with fresh clarity how a degree of repressive authoritarianism is elaborated within Blake's connotative vocabulary.

To try to understand the elaboration more deeply, let us examine Blake's illustration to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (illus. 3: later used as the plate representing Night the Fifth of *The Four Zoas*). This illustration seems to allude to the holy family. However, we may explain the parent figures, especially the father figure shown in an encompassing gesture, as Blake's ironical protest against the repressive nurture of infants.

<sup>4</sup> Sutherland, "Blake and Urizen," 248. See also M. Tolley's comment; the act of "[t]he compasses of this ratio form the circular horizon which limits man, spatially and mentally" (117).

4a *The Christ Child Asleep on the Cross*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



4b *The Christ Child Asleep on the Cross*. Private Collection. On loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



As for the image of encompassing the infant, we may well remember that the image of compasses itself is a well known signifier in the iconography of the Christian tradition; when God as creator is compared to a carpenter, the image of compasses can represent him in the role of designer or builder of the world, and the meanings of the icon are in this same tradition, further elaborated to identify Christ as a carpenter. Interestingly, this development of the Christian connotation of the image can help explicate some of Blake's illustrations of the biblical stories, such as, for example, *The Christ Child*

*Asleep on the Cross* (illus. 4a). In the illustration, the Christ child is sleeping on a cross beside a scaffolding of timber, and just next to the cross a set-square is placed which seems to be emphasized by another pair of compasses leaning against the woodwork. The importance of this compasses icon gains in emphasis through his additional use of the shape in another illustration on the same theme (illus. 4b). In this illustration Joseph holds the compasses over the Christ child. We can decode this image conventionally, i.e., as an implied prefiguring of the Child's future as the one





5 *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

who will create the world of love; but, on the other hand, it might also be understood skeptically, for Blake uses the form of compasses to connote a disapproval of restrictive authority, which can be seen, for example, in Christ's resentment against such authority in his future ministry.<sup>5</sup> Such a skeptical interpretation seems warranted when we look at another piece of biblical illustration by Blake entitled *The Woman Taken in Adultery* (illus. 5), where Christ is shown in a stooping posture, and his hand in a gesture of compassing. Traditionally Christ is simply writing on the floor, but this gesture may be seen to imply Christ's ironical criticism of the fleeing crowd behind him, in that they are only compassing others, as well as themselves, within a repressive morality. We should emphasize that the shape of the compasses here signifies Christ's resentment against Urizenic power.

Curiously, this kind of emphasis on the image of compasses as denoting circumscribing authority may be deepened and enhanced by considering Blake's illustrations of the nativity. These offer confirmation of ironic interpretations of the imagery through the repeated appearance of the shape of compasses in the six illustrations to Milton's *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. One advocate of such a reading is Michael Tolley, through whose research we are in a

better position to appreciate Blake's ironical attitude towards the Miltonic understanding of the infant Christ (145). Tolley's interpretation is as follows:

... throughout *Europe* we find Blake looking very closely at Milton's Hymn [*On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*] and it is not going too far to say that *Europe* is primarily a reworking of Milton's poem. (119)

If, with this explication in mind, we assume that Blake here ironically indicts this type of Miltonic-Newtonic creator, we can go on to recollect Milton's account concerning God's use of "the golden compasses . . . to circumscribe / This Universe and all created things."<sup>6</sup> Once we can register Blake's resentment against the Miltonic notion of a rational great-father (creator figure), one to be regarded in the light of a confining and repressive power, we can be more confident in detecting the irony ingeniously implied by the compasses-like shape of the roof of the stable depicted in the illustrations of the series (illus. 6a and 6b).

A consciousness of this irony enables us now to take a fresh look at the frontispiece of *Europe* (illus. 2), where we might consider the form of the cloud as suggesting a womb from which a potential infant might just have been given birth and whom Urizen is now compassing.<sup>7</sup> This possibility may lead us further to identify the infinity, i.e., the unseen object below the compasses, with Orc as the potential infant. However, an Orc whose symbolic meanings extend beyond those connoted by the image of Christ leads us to further investigation of, in particular, the role of Los and Enitharmon as Orc's parents as well as reproducers of the Urizenic power of confinement; and this is the topic to which I now turn.

#### Parents: Los and Enitharmon

The Greek οὐριζειν ("to limit"), from which Kathleen Raine and others prefer to derive the name of Urizen,<sup>8</sup> may precisely summarize his character, a circumscriber. That Los as a father of Orc cooperates with Urizen so as to reinforce the confinement initiated by him is discernible, for example, in the last illustration of *Jerusalem* (illus. 7), where Los holds compasses-like tongs in his left hand. In fact, we might better characterize Los by designating him as a sustainer, or a reproducer, of Urizenic domination, since, as this plate shows, Los seems to be trusted with the charge of confining Orc.<sup>9</sup> The hammer in the other hand, for use in

<sup>5</sup> As for this illustration, George Goyder includes in his explanation: "the compasses of rational thought . . . symbolising the two ideals of love and truth, united and reconciled in Christ's sacrifice"; and David Bindman suggests that "the compasses in this work . . . may also indicate that Christ's death is to be at the hands of Reason in the form of the Law of Solomon" (cited in Butlin's *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* 2: 328).

<sup>6</sup> *Paradise Lost*, VII, 225-27.

<sup>7</sup> See Tolley's helpful argument, though my ultimate argument is different from this opinion; "The birth of Christ represented the crucial challenge to Urizen's compasses" (119).

<sup>8</sup> See Damon 419.

<sup>9</sup> This is in contrast to *The Book of Urizen*, where "Urizen explored his dens/ Mountain, moor, & wilderness, / With a globe of fire lighting his journey/ A fearful journey, annoyed/ By Cruel enormities . . ." (E 81).



binding Orc in chains on the mountain, emphasizes his character as a blacksmith.<sup>10</sup>

In the same plate appears another supporter of Urizen, Enitharmon, who is a mother figure of Orc. She is shown unwinding the "aching fibres of Los" (E 247),<sup>11</sup> who seems bound up in what looks very much like a version of the concealing veil, whose function is depicted in the illustration of plate 4 of *Europe* (illus. 1a), where it has the purpose of concealing Orc.<sup>12</sup> As the statement of the nameless shadowy female implies—she is a vague figure of Oothoon, the other rebellious child of Los and Enitharmon—Enitharmon is another figure of confinement: "Ah mother Enitharmon! / Stamp not with solid form . . .," "thou dost stamp them with a signet."<sup>13</sup> In addition to the veil, Enitharmon as an authoritative figure commands the use of a net so as to enforce greater restrictions.

... tell the human race that *Woman's Love is Sin*:  
That an Eternal life awaits the worms of sixty winters  
In an allegorical abode where existence hath never  
come:  
Forbid all Joy, & from her childhood shall the little  
female  
Spread *nets* in every secret path.

[E 62, italics mine]

These nets may be identical with the ones described in *Europe* with which Urizen is endowed in addition to his compasses, i.e., "the Net of Urizen" (E 83).

In this section we have mainly investigated the relationships between the parents of Orc and Urizen. In retrospect, we can now identify Urizen with Jupiter, and Los with Vulcan as a blacksmith, and in consequence we may go some way to acknowledging the further identification of Enitharmon with Venus as the wife of Vulcan. These identifications, re-

<sup>10</sup> The serpent temple illustrated in the background suggests by implication the idea that a blighting (and also blighted) system is sustained by the priestcraft of authoritarian regimentation. As for the serpent temple, cf. Dörrebecker 273-74; Mee 92-97.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Erdman's *The Illuminated Blake* 379.

<sup>12</sup> As for the argument as to whether she is concealing or revealing Orc in this plate, see Dörrebecker 269-70; Erdman's *The Illuminated Blake* 162; and Chayes 218 ("Above him [Orc], kneeling on a cloud, a nude woman who is probably Enitharmon leans forward in a sweeping gesture and lifts a cloth to reveal him"). Beer reproduces a Raphael Madonna and compares it to the plate, describing the Christ child under the veil as "[t]he Jesus who has been veiled by the Church" (Beer 374 and plates 53, 54).

<sup>13</sup> See also a similar image in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: "Stamp't with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun" (E 46). The description of her as a dominant queen figure, "Now comes the night of Enitharmon's joy" (E 62), may be associated with the annotation of Swedenborg's *Divine Love*, "When the fallacies of darkness are in the circumference they cast a bound about the infinite" [E 604, italics mine]. Cf. Tolley 119.

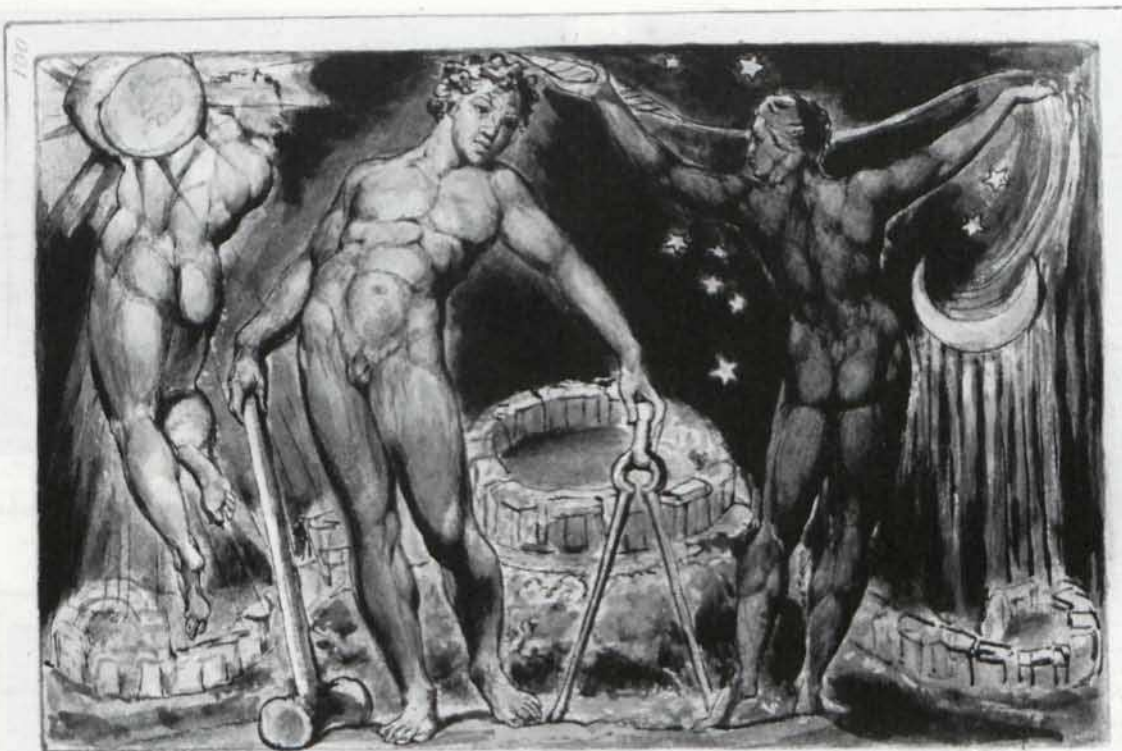


6a *The Descent of Peace*: Milton's *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.



6b *The Night of Peace*: Milton's *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.





7 Jerusalem, plate 100. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

viewed through the various family relationships in the myth, may lead us to infer that "Orc their son is Cupid."<sup>14</sup> It is not unusual to see a Cupid figure implied within the characterization of Orc, but to argue this construction will lead us to discover the more significant profundity which Blake intends in the figure of Orc as the child of Vulcan-Venus parents.

#### The Creation of Orc; or the Restoration of Cupid Revealed

Knowledge of contextual discourse is naturally requisite for any critical argument, but here I want to focus on one topic among others raised by the figure of Cupid, or the story of *Cupid (or Eros) and Psyche*. Although significant meanings for the topic have been adduced by various critics, such as, Irene Chayes and Erdman,<sup>15</sup> I shall argue the assumption that Blake may have intended to restore to Cupid some of his original meanings when creating the figure of Orc.

Interestingly, the plate entitled "Aged Ignorance," one of

<sup>14</sup> Tolley 130; it might be better to have a full citation of it; "... she (Enitharmon) was worshipped principally as Venus (as Los is the blacksmith Vulcan, and Orc their son is Cupid)."

<sup>15</sup> See Erdman's comment in Worrall's "Blake and the Night Sky I"; "... the Cupid and Psyche myth, one of the active strings in Blake's bow," 288).

Blake's illustrations of *The Gates of Paradise* (illus. 8), can serve to introduce the theme. In the design, the aged Urizen-like figure is depicted in an attempt to cut Cupid's wings. The glasses on his blind eyes seem to emphasize his "ignorance" in a kind of ironical inversion of the conventional notion of "the blind Cupid." Yet, we come to recognize that this illustration ought more properly to be contextualized within the contemporary discourse of "the selling of Cupid," or the captivated Cupid (illus. 9a and 9b).<sup>16</sup> Henry Fuseli's illustration of the theme (illus. 9c) exemplifies this discourse, and is important in reference to Blake, for Fuseli inspired and enlightened Blake as an artist as well as an engraver. Evidence that Blake was in fact conscious of this discourse can be found in his design for Cumberland's *Thoughts on Outline*, where the discourse itself seems to be betraying its own implied recognition of an oppressive captivity figured in terms of the inverted state of Eros being bound (illus. 10), rather than simply showing the poet-engraver's rendering of the story.

This significant image of a child restrained from flying, which is embodied in the discourse of the captivated Cupid,<sup>17</sup> stimulates a curious reading of the "Preludium" plate

<sup>16</sup> As for this contemporary discourse, cf. Rosenblum 3-9.

<sup>17</sup> Certainly, it should not be forgotten that there is another possible identification of Orc with Prometheus.





8 For Children *The Gates of Paradise*, pl. 13: "Aged Ignorance." Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

to *The Book of Urizen* (illus. 11). Although some critics want to see "an idealized image of the family" in this design,<sup>18</sup> it seems obvious that the mother figure looks quite severe and the child looks worried, or rather held captive. This mother figure, or an Entharmonian mother, with her restricting gesture, might be read to represent parents who educate their children in conventional morality, or transmit taboos to the young, and can be seen engaged in the economy of another relevant contextual discourse: that of the idealized marriage, as has been observed by Marilyn Butler.<sup>19</sup> The inscription, "Teach these Souls to Fly," on the headpiece, produced as a separate plate for *A Small Book of Designs*, should be considered as an ironical statement of Blake's resentment of repressive parentage. In a poem in which we can appropriately identify the birth of Orc, Blake depicts the reluctance of an infant to enter the world from which it immediately struggles to escape:

*My mother groan'd! my father wept—,  
Into the dangerous world I leapt:  
Helpless, naked, piping loud:  
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.*

*Struggling in my father's hands  
Striving against my swaddling bands,  
Bound and weary, I thought best  
To sulk upon my mother's breast.*

(E 28, italics mine)

<sup>18</sup> For example, Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art* 144 and Essick 133.

<sup>19</sup> Butler 132-33.



9a Joseph-Marie Vien, *La Marchande d'Amours*, 1763. Giraudon, Paris.



9b *The Selling of Cupids*, engraving by C. Nolli from *Reale Accademia Erolanese de Archeologia Le Antichita di Ercolano Expose*, Napoli 1757-92. Volume 3. Supplied by the Bodleian Library, Oxford.



9c Henry Fuseli, drawing, ca. 1775. Blunt Bequest, Courtauld Gallery, Courtauld Institute, London.





10 "The Conjugal Union of Cupid," engraving from *Thoughts on Outline* by George Cumberland (1796). Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

In addition to the apparent similarity on a visual level (see the design of the plate [illus. 12]), we should note that the description of the struggling infant includes the image of a band, i.e., "my swaddling bands," an image which has already been examined above; "[w]ho shall bind the infinite with an eternal band? / To compass it with swaddling bands?"

It is not Blake's ultimate aim to allow an infant "[t]o sulk upon [her] breast." What the discourse of captivity involves is an implied recognition that the infant, as a representative of fragile and weak existence, has no choice except to live as an obedient child. Yet, this is what is problematic from the point of the rebellious child, who is expected to overthrow such an oppressive authority. Being obedient to the economy of endlessly reproducing the Urizenic family of restriction will only result in repeating the cycle of domestic repression. Blake's is a protest, therefore, against this dominant economy of circularity in which no progress can ever be made.<sup>20</sup> Then the question must be asked; how is the infant to attain to a symbolic power sufficiently formidable to es-

<sup>20</sup> On this matter we have an interesting suggestion pointed out by Robert Essick, that "Paine unleashes a metaphor of consumption" in the discussion of the problem of the relationship between Blake and



11 *The Book of Urizen*. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. PML 63139 copy B, plate 2 (Bentley 2).

cape, or more precisely, to overthrow the system?

I would like to go back to the icon of compasses positioned over the infant. Among the six designs for Milton's "Nativity Ode," one plate, entitled *The Flight of Moloch*, presents us with the child who leaps out of the furnace as if marching through a cathedral window whose upper portion echoes the compasses shape (illus. 13). In the original text the infant is supposed to die according to the story of the sacrifice to Moloch ("that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire to Moloch"<sup>21</sup>). Here,

Paine; "'natural' feelings were contrasted 'to the aristocratic perversion of the family into an artificial system of power relationships'" (202). The anguish of the nameless shadowy female, who can be considered as an Oothoon-like figure, i.e., another rebellious child of Los and Enitharmon, is significantly related to this economy of consumption—"Consumed and consuming! / Then why shouldst thou accursed my mother bring me into life?"; or "O mother Enitharmon, wilt thou bring forth other sons? / To cause my name to vanish, that my place may not be found" (E 60).





12 *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1789 [c. 1789-94]. (Copy L) pl. 39[Bentley 48]: "Infant Sorrow." Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Blake's invention may be regarded as intending to imply the creation of a new and formidable type of infant. It might not be going too far to identify this infant with Orc, as Jean Hagstrum does in his discussion of this plate.<sup>22</sup>

My assumption is that the characterization of Vulcan as Los is reinforced as a result of Blake's aspiration to create a formidable infant, though the image of compasses might have been a more important factor in enhancing this aspect. For we can well imagine Blake to have been acquainted with the original significance of Cupid, as the child of Vulcan and Venus, in some versions of ancient mythology. As a possible engraver of Jacob Bryant's *A New System, or An Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, Blake would likely have been in a position to observe a reworking of the mythologies.<sup>23</sup> This would permit us to suppose that he welcomed the original version of the God of Love, whose figure seems capable of

being revitalized as an appropriately subversive force, and who is a child of Vulcan the compasses-tong holder. Bryant phrases his rediscovery in the following way;

... they [the Greek] gave him a material bow, with the addition of a quiver and arrows. Being furnished with these implements of mischief he was supposed to be the bane of the world. . . . This was different from his original character. He is styled by Plato . . . a mighty God: it is said . . . *That Eros was the cause of the greatest blessings to mankind.* The bows of Apollo and of Diana, were, I believe, formed from the same original.<sup>24</sup> [italics original]

Orc as a redeemed Cupid has the potentiality to break the conventional forms of oppression. His subversive aspect, whose most often noted feature is the serpent figure, is now brought to a further level of profundity as revealed by a reconsideration of family relationships.

Although these figures of Orc as Cupid are not immediately visible in his poetry—they must rather be deduced from within contextual discourses—<sup>25</sup> once we can conceive the possibility of this interpretation, we will find, at the level of the poetry's deep structure, the richest connotations of the Orc figure, which complicate and extend the original significance of Cupid. For instance, when we realize that the word "Eros" becomes "rose" by rearranging the letters of the word, the altered significance of the redeemed figure of Cupid / Eros requires as a consequence a thorough re-reading of Blake's works. This is because the anagram must prompt readers to reinvestigate the still-enigmatic image of the sick rose in relation to the sick Cupid who is degraded in the discourse of the Psyche story, and which may in this way have been intended as a contextual symbol of the repressed emotion of love. More curiously still, in the Notebook, c. 1791-92, just prior to the sick rose poem, there occurs another in which "Love" is winged. Of course, winged Love can easily represent Cupid. The lines are as follows:

Love . . .  
Always is to joy inclined,  
Lawless, winged and unconfined,  
And breaks all chains from every mind.<sup>26</sup>

Here, intriguingly, "winged" "Love" is described as "lawless," which can be seen to have political implications if we agree to trace the Cupid-Orc figure in the figure of "Love." Orc may well represent the contextual revolutionary ethos,

<sup>24</sup> Bryant 2: 345. It should be noticed that the same part is cited by Erasmus Darwin in the context of the notion that "the ancient God of love was of much higher dignity than the modern Cupid. He was the first that came out of the great egg of night" in *The Botanic Garden: Part I, The Economy of Vegetation*, 3rd ed. (London, 1795) 56.

<sup>25</sup> In his illustrations, nevertheless, there are some designs which clearly includes Cupid figures.

<sup>26</sup> Stevenson 158-59.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Kings 23: 10.

<sup>22</sup> William Blake 123-24.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Essick, *William Blake's Commercial Book Illustrations* 117.



and Blake may equally well be expressing his radicalism by way of the refiguring of Cupid. My assumption here, which I recognize needs further demonstration, is that "Unconfined Love" can share the same foundation as the figure of the unconfined Orc, and that for Blake the emotional emancipation of Love could be equated with the emancipation of the human spirit from political repression. I hope, however, that this discourse of liberty, seen in the light I have demonstrated here, will lead to a recognition of the deeper levels of significance within Blake's entire mythology, since Orc, hitherto veiled in Blake studies as an original figure of Cupid, now stands revealed as the subversive figure of Love, a breaker of psychic and, by implication, social chains.

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13 *The Flight of Moloch: Milton's On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.