

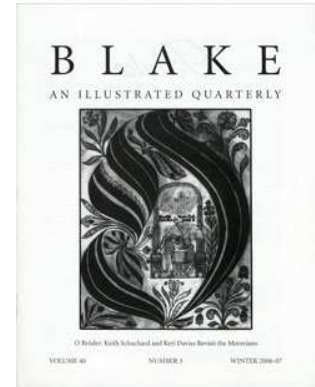
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Marriage of Heaven and Hell

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MINUTE PARTICULAR

An Analogue to the "Greatest Men" Passage in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

BY THOMAS R. FROSCH

In teaching *The Marriage*, I always found a stumbling block in the Devil's speech on plates 22-23: "The worship of God is. Honouring his gifts in other men each according to his genius. and loving the greatest men best, those who envy or calumniate great men hate God, for there is no other God." If "every thing that lives is Holy" (pl. 27), if, as in *The French Revolution*, all men are the equals of the king (line 193), how can there be great men—not just great gifts or great works, not just the particular genius of every individual—that should be worshiped?

It was not until I visited the Panthéon in Paris that the passage appeared to me in a different light. The building that became the Panthéon had originally been conceived as a church dedicated to St. Geneviève, patron saint of Paris, but in April 1791, just before its completion, it was converted into a secular temple for the remains of great men, with Mirabeau and Voltaire the first to be interred. Emmet Kennedy points to the desanctification of the church and its rededication to honor great men as the "ultimate expression" of a revolutionary "religion of humanity" (xxv).

The question of what constituted greatness provoked considerable debate, and indeed that debate and the interest in, or cult of, "grands hommes" had predated the Revolution, with Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau among the contributors. In general, though, a great man, in what Jean-Claude Bonnet calls a "métamorphose de la gloire" (29), was no longer a military hero, much less a man of status and wealth, but a man who had superior inner powers and had contributed in a disinterested way to the common good.¹ For the French revolutionaries, patriots and martyrs of the Revolution were particularly qualified.

For some, the "pantheonized" were even divine. In the radical *Révolutions de Paris*, Jesus was a prophet, Marat a God (Kennedy 336). As for Jesus, Leonard Bourdon called him no more than a man but a great one, "a friend of the people," Marat's sobriquet, and "the first sansculotte" (Kennedy 336). The Marquis de Villette, who had first suggested the idea of a Panthéon, spoke of making a cross into a lyre (Bonnet 267), and Quatremère, the architect in charge of remodeling the

1. This was specifically the formulation of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre; see Bonnet 34.

Church of Sainte-Geneviève into the Panthéon, envisioned a new religion of arts and artists (Kennedy 333). Meanwhile, as E. P. Thompson has documented, English radical tradition had included such as John Reeve, who said that there was no other God but the man Jesus (157), and other partisans of a "humanist and antinomian Jesus Christ" (228). Blake of course was fond of citing the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of one's own humanity: "Thou art a Man God is no more / Thy own humanity learn to adore" (*The Everlasting Gospel*, E 520).

Blake's concept of greatness differed in basic ways from the greatness that figured in the Panthéon. His great man was not a patriot and, unlike the great men of the Panthéon, who had to be French, was not associated with the glory of a nation, nor was he incorporated into an institutionalized, ceremonial form of worship. Blake was not engaged with either revolt against or transformation of specifically Catholic traditions, and he was interested not in any reverence of the dead but in the potentiality within the living. Blake's concept of greatness did include Jesus the sansculotte, as the passage in *The Marriage* goes on to make clear: "If Jesus Christ is the greatest man, you ought to love him in the greatest degree"; his Jesus broke several of the Ten Commandments and "was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules" (pls. 23-24). And *The Marriage* develops a concept of the prophetic artist as central man, who reveals "the infinite which was hid" (pl. 14) and brings about apocalyptic human change. Later, in the *Laocoön* engraving, "Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists" (E 274).

Mirabeau and Marat were soon "depantheonized." The Panthéon became a church again, was later resecularized and then once again resanctified. It then served as an arsenal for the Communards in the insurrection of 1871 before being established once and for all with the interment of Victor Hugo in 1885 as a secular temple of the great. Meanwhile, in England the debate on greatness took many famous literary forms, including Byron's satire of heroes, Carlyle's hero worship, and Wordsworth's democratization of greatness.² Blake went on to give his concept of greatness epic elaboration in the figures of Los and Jesus.

This is the context in which the passage on the greatest men in *The Marriage* belongs, the context of a humanistic, and volatile, redefinition of greatness, a contemporary example of which was the reconceptualization of the Church of Sainte-Geneviève, with its implication of the replacement of God by humanity.

2. See Gaull for a discussion of some of the attitudes towards the hero in the romantic period (145-72). Abrams (91) formulates succinctly the romantic tendency to diminish and at the extreme to eliminate the role of God, leaving as "the prime agents man and the world."

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N E W S L E T T E R

The village of Felpham is celebrating the 250th anniversary of Blake's birth by planning a festival of arts week in November 2007 and commissioning a Blake memorial stained glass window in the church. If you wish to donate money for the window or make suggestions for festival week, please contact Reverend Timothy Peskett (frtim@zoom.co.uk).

The Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of York, with the support of Nottingham Trent University and the Blake Society, is hosting a three-day Blake at 250 conference from 30 July to 1 August 2007. Further details are available at the conference web site <<http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/cccs/conf/Blakehome.htm>>.

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