

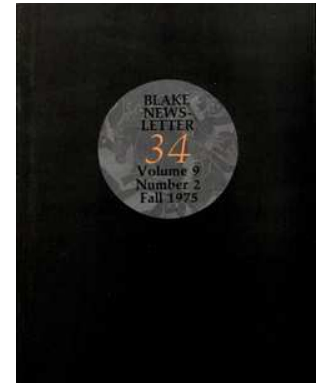
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M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

Blake in the Provinces

Geoffrey Keynes

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On another part of the same sheet was a paragraph of criticism:

FINE ARTS--We have never experienced greater satisfaction than is announced to our readers, that there are now in this town, for the inspection of the lovers of the fine arts, some most beautiful designs intended to illustrate a new and elegant edition of Blair's Grave. At a period when the labours of the pencil are almost wholly directed to the production of portraits, they who dare soar in the sublime regions of fancy surely claim the patronage of men of taste and discernment; and the specimens here alluded to may, with the strictest adherence to truth, be ranked among the most vigorous and classical productions of the present age.

I do not know of any other exhibition of Blake's work having taken place anywhere outside London at this early date. The list of subscribers printed in the book gives the names of sixty-six subscribers in Birmingham and the vicinity. The list suggests that the exhibition may have been circulated to other large centres such as Liverpool, Leeds, Wakefield, Manchester, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bristol and Edinburgh.

"Poor Robin" & Blake's "The Blossom"

By Warren U. Ober

In one of his notes on "The Cool World of Samuel Taylor Coleridge" (*The Wordsworth Circle*, 5 [Winter 1974], 61) P. M. Zall quotes part of a bawdy ballad recollected by Francis Place, "the radical tailor of Charing Cross":

One night as I came from the play
I met a fair maid by the way
She had rosy cheeks and a dimpled chin
And a hole to put poor Robin in.

A bed and blanket have I got ["I have got" in Zall's source]
A dish a Kettle and a pot
Besides a charming pretty thing
A hole to put poor Robin in.

Though the context in which the ballad is quoted in part in Professor Zall's source (Place, *Autobiography*, ed. Mary Thale [Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1972], p. 58n.) does not make clear the precise date of the ballad, the evidence provided by the editor tends to confirm Zall's suggestion: "about 1780." Place, who was born in 1771, is quoted as saying that he listened to such songs at a social gathering "when a boy of 10 years of age." Certainly it is clear that the song was very popular,

since Place says of it and others (p. 58n.), "There is not one of them that I have not myself heard sung in the streets."

This popular song of the London streets is of especial interest in that it may shed some light on a long-standing problem of interpretation involving Blake's "The Blossom," one of his *Songs of Innocence* (1789):

Merry Merry Sparrow
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom
Sees you swift as arrow
Seek your cradle narrow
Near my Bosom.

Pretty Pretty Robin
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom
Hears you sobbing sobbing
Pretty Pretty Robin
Near my Bosom.

A popular reading of the poem is that of Joseph H. Wicksteed (*Blake's Innocence and Experience* [London: Dent, 1928], p. 126): "The birds are the male element as seen by the maiden. They represent the whole range of the lover's love, from the winged thought to the accomplished act." Geoffrey Keynes (*Songs of Innocence and of Experience* [London: Hart-Davis, 1967], pl. 11 commentary) supports Wicksteed's interpretation: "The sparrow 'swift as arrow' is a phallic symbol seeking satisfaction in the blossom of the maiden's bosom. The robin sobs perhaps with the happiness of experience." Similarly, D. G. Gillham (*Blake's Contrary States* [Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1966], pp. 164-65) sees the subject of the poem as being sexual intercourse. "The blossom, herself, despite her tenderness," Gillham says, "is rather disengaged, and tends to be aware of the male sexual organ almost as a sort of pet." E. D. Hirsch, Jr., however, comments on "The Blossom" (*Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964], p. 181) as follows: "This is the most difficult poem in the *Songs of Innocence*. The only full-dress explication I know of is by Wicksteed, whose theory that the poem symbolizes love and sexual intercourse I cannot accept." And W. H. Stevenson rather stiffly says (*The Poems of William Blake*, ed. Stevenson [London: Longman, 1971], p. 64): "The extreme simplicity of this poem has puzzled interpreters, who have had to delve deep for its symbolism. It is more than doubtful that B. would embody such symbolism so deeply in a book planned for children. . . ."

The suggestion that the ballad recalled by Francis Place is a part of the context within which "The Blossom" was created, if not an actual source for it, should shock no one familiar with the scatology and robust satire of *An Island in the Moon*, in the manuscript of which appear the "Nurse's Song," "The Little Boy Lost," and "Holy Thursday" of the later *Songs of Innocence*. The facts that in the London street song recollected by Place the penis is called Robin and that Blake could reasonably have been expected to know the song and