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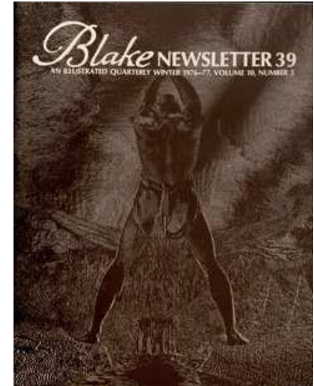

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In *Milton* the poet's consciousness and the inward struggles it involves command our attention. Book II of the poem focuses on the poet's and Ololon's decision to undergo the purgation of their selfhoods, demonstrates that their actions result in the recovery of Innocence, and ends with presages of the Apocalypse. Ololon's descent to Beulah incorporates Blake's fullest description of Beulah, a description which exhibits the opulent natural growth of Organized Innocence. In the catalogue of the individual flowers in Beulah, the Wild Thyme is prominent, and it remains prominent throughout the remainder of the poem.

The Wild Thyme is mentioned three times in Book II of *Milton*, and twice Blake designates it as "first." Its initial appearance is in the flower passage; the second time Blake writes about it is in conjunction with the renovating moments of each day where it becomes "Los's Messenger to Eden," and it reappears at the end of the poem after Blake falls in his own garden only to witness the imminent signs of the Apocalypse. The occurrence of the flower three times in Book II compels us to recognize the importance Blake attaches to it in *Milton*; in fact, discovery of its symbolic meaning reveals why Blake stresses its role in the poem. The significations of the Wild Thyme accrue with each new presence of it, first as the foremost flower in Beulah, then as the messenger of Los, and finally as Blake's vision of it helps us to see that it signals the approaching Apocalypse--not attained but at least forecast in *Milton*. It becomes associated with Ololon when she descends to Beulah, with Los when it becomes his Messenger to Eden, and with Blake when he sees it mounting with the Lark before the "Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations." Knowledge of the sources Blake might have drawn upon demonstrates why the Wild Thyme is an apt emblem in a poem so concerned with the necessary negation of selfhood, and in Ololon's case, with the institutional virginity that stands in the way of her union with Milton.

We should not be surprised that Blake attaches such a heavy freight of meaning to a flower in *Milton*, for it is now widely acknowledged that he assigned great importance to his flowers. Critics have explored the symbolism of his roses and his lilies;[1] and most recently, in an edition of Blake's illuminated works, David V. Erdman calls attention to the purposeful occurrence of flowers, vines, tendrils, and all manner of flora which appear everywhere in the texts and the designs.[2] However, while commentators have recognized and discussed the presence of Blake's Wild Thyme, no one has yet attempted to discover its possible sources.[3] Blake's use of his background to enrich the symbolism of the Wild Thyme not only provides a means to understand the poet's method elsewhere, it illuminates Book II of *Milton*. The various traits attributed to this flowering herb emphasize that its strategic appearance three times in *Milton* is symbolic in itself, and suggest that Blake may have explored several sources in order to endow this plant with various significances in the poem.

Blake could have found information about the Wild Thyme in two places, so his awareness of it seems undeniable. In his famous rejection of Swedenborg in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake cites Paracelsus or Jacob Behmen as superior. And his familiarity with the writings of Erasmus Darwin would have lead him to Robert John Thornton's full plate illustrations of the plant species and to his Herbal where he describes the properties and the lore of herbs. Paracelsus calls the Wild Thyme the "Mother of Thyme" and lists it under "Those things which come forth from the earth and have a warm nature."[4] Thornton places it under the name *Hypericum Perforatum*, or Perforated St. John's Wort, in his collection of plates, and it is included as Mother of Thyme in his Herbal. The variety of names ascribed to this plant indicates that it was well-known and that it was thought to possess more than one characteristic.

Paracelsus calls the herb "Mother of Thyme" because he claimed it as a uterine herb--"Mother" in the sense of the womb. But its other name, St. John's Wort or *Hypericum Perforatum*, makes it one of John the Baptist's herbs. Associated with St. John, the plant assumes magical qualities, for the herb was burned on St. John's Eve as a strengthening and purifying plant. Blake's designation of this herb as "a mighty Demon" suggests that he may have known of the English legends and ballads that mention it. In these the herb possesses the ability to rid a woman of her demon lover and to keep her house free of evil spirits. Some have called it "Christ's Ladder," a name which reflects its manner of growing along the ground and climbing towards heaven on mountains.

Blake first mentions the Wild Thyme after Ololon's descent to Beulah:

> Thou percievest the Flowers put forth their precious Odours!
> And none can tell how from so small a center comes such sweets
> Forgetting that within that Center Eternity expands
> Its ever during doors, that Og & Anak fiercely guard[.]
> First eer the morning breaks joy opens in the flowery bosoms
> Joy even to tears, which the Sun rising dries; first the Wild Thyme
> And Meadow-sweet downy & soft waving among the reeds.
> Light springing on the air lead the sweet Dance
>
> (E 130, 11. 46-53)

The passage extols the beauty and the sensuousness of Beulah, and it names the Wild Thyme as the leader of "the sweet Dance." The passage also suggests the relationship between time and eternity as Blake makes the connection between the opening flowers and eternity: the opening flowers' response to the sun or the light of heaven implies their link to eternity. The passage also places the Wild Thyme within an erotic context, for "joy opens in the flowery bosoms." The lines emphasize the fusion of flowers, sexuality, and joy. Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom's observation that the passage is a Song of Spring that resembles the Song of Solomon intensifies the already explicit connection Blake makes between flowers and sensuality.[5]

The passage is a striking description of the fecundity of Beulah--a place surrounding Eden and offering repose from it. The soft and moony Beulah is maternal in nature.[6] That the Wild Thyme leads the other flowers lends vigor and concrete power to its role in Beulah as well as in the poem. But the Wild Thyme's other name, Mother of Thyme, and the belief that it was a uterine herb serve to vitalize and reinforce its importance in Beulah, a maternal and married land. More significantly, Blake's later naming of it as Los's Messenger marks its appearance here as well as there with a sign that the efforts of creativity will be called into being.

Therefore, the connection made between Ololon and the Wild Thyme in Beulah is a crucial one, for Ololon descends to Beulah, and it is there that she sees the Wild Thyme, and it is from there that she opens up a "wide road" to eternity (E 134, 1.35). The virgin Ololon must cast off the Not Human--her holy chastity--in order to complete the purgation of her selfhood that will enable her to unite with Milton. To accomplish this, she must reject Natural Religion and the Female Will, thereby ridding herself of "dark secret love" and embracing instead open human love. Later in the poem, she confesses to Milton in horror that her selfish chastity and holiness have separated her from him. When she does this, Rahab Babylon is exposed and Ololon descends to Felpham as "a Moony Ark" who heralds the appearance of the redemptive Christ. It is in the context of Ololon's selfish chastity that the Wild Thyme must be considered, for Blake proclaims that the fourfold city of Golgonooza cannot be seen without passing the Polypus, "Or till you become Mortal & Vegetable in Sexuality" (E 134, 1.24). Like Oothoon, Ololon must rejoice in "lovely Copulation." Because the Wild Thyme is called Mother of Thyme, is known as a procreative uterine herb with "a warm nature," and is believed to be a purifying and strengthening herb, it is a singularly appropriate flower for Ololon to encounter in Beulah. Its presence in Beulah, where Ololon first descends, proclaims its status as an emblem of the human sexuality Ololon must learn to accept. Its association with strengthening and purifying rites symbolizes what Ololon undertakes as she descends to the world of generation to cast off the Not Human. The union of flowers, sexuality, and eternity is symbolized here by the Wild Thyme and is suggested as the means of attaining paradise.

This suggestion becomes an actuality when the Wild Thyme next appears in the passage associating it with the renovating moments of each day and hailing it as Los's Messenger. In these lines, Blake records his central beliefs about the renewing moments of each day, those moments which neither Satan nor his Watch Fiends can find; only the Industrious can discover these moments and can renovate every other moment of the day. During this moment, Ololon descends to Los and Enitharmon. Immediately after the description of Ololon's descent, Blake invokes the Wild Thyme: "Just in this Moment when the morning odours ride abroad/ And first from the Wild Thyme" (E 135, 11.48-49). The lines locate the Wild Thyme as first in the moment of renovation just as it is first on the list of flowers in Beulah, and its associations with purification, strength, and procreation befit its function as an emblem of renewal. But it becomes specifically associated here with the creative energies of the poet Los, in addition to the procreative energies of the virgin Ololon. Blake now makes the Wild Thyme "Los's Messenger to Eden" (E 135, 1.54). In that role it is

> . . . a mighty Demon
> Terrible deadly & poisonous his presence in Ulro dark
> Therefore he appears only a small Root creeping in grass
> Covering over the Rock of Odours his bright purple mantle
> Beside the Fount above the Larks nest in Golgonooza
> Luvah slept here in death & here is Luvahs empty tomb
> Ololon sat beside this Fountain on the Rock of Odours.
>
> (E 135,11.54-60)

Because the Wild Thyme is Los's Messenger to Eden and because it is also the first of the morning odors which arise in the renovating moments of each day, it joins the renovating moments to the poet's creation. In Ulro, however, the thyme, "only a small Root creeping in grass," appears deadly and poisonous. Blake implies that only those who dwell in Ulro, the land of limited

vision, see the thyme as a poisonous, destructive demon; for Luvah's empty tomb, filled with the fragrance of the thyme, presages eternity in Christ's ascension.

The connection the Wild Thyme has with the empty tomb and Christ affirms it as an emblem of eternity. That association along with those from the purifying and strengthening rites of St. John's Eve enhance its value as a symbol of poetic inspiration. By grouping the thyme, Beulah, and Ololon together and then by using the plant in conjunction with Los, poetic inspiration, and eternity, Blake emphasizes the inescapable fusion of healthy sexual desire, poetic inspiration, and the fourfold vision offered by Eden.

The final occurrence of the Wild Thyme gathers these meanings together. After Ololon's descent as a Moony Ark to Felpham's Vale and the sound of the four trumpets, Blake shifts the subject of the poem to himself. He falls "outstretched upon the path" in his garden where his soul returns to its mortal state, "To Resurrection & Judgment in the Vegetable Body," and where "Immediately the Lark mounted with a loud trill from Felpham's Vale / And the Wild Thyme from Wimbletons green & impurpled Hills" appears (E 142, 11.27, 29-30). After that appear the human harvest, the open winepresses and barns; and then the Apocalypse is imminent.

As Los's Messenger to Eden, the Wild Thyme heralds the Apocalypse. The reference to Wimbleton's "impurpled Hills" undoubtedly is another sign of its approach, for the Wild Thyme, a plant with purple blossoms that grows close to the ground and on mountains, is called "Christ's Ladder." The name adds naturalistic force to the plant's symbolic meanings. The reference to it as impurpling Wimbleton's hills, together with the specific alliance with Christ's ascension, and the designation as Los's Messenger to Eden make it a symbolic Christ's ladder, which joins heaven and earth, or Beulah and Eden.

Blake's choice of Wild Thyme as a symbol in *Milton* is surely not accidental, for in the poem Milton struggles to purge everything within himself that is not fully human. Book II declares that love which exists apart from the imagination--what Blake maintains is human existence itself--is a state, and states change and cease, unlike individual identities. Blake must have selected the Wild Thyme for its natural trait of growing along the ground in addition to its potential for symbolism; for as a creeping vine, it is firmly rooted in the earth--the human--which it must also cover. Unlike Blake's sunflower, it does not merely aspire to heaven. Instead, it impurples the hills of Wimbleton, exhibiting its closeness to earth as well as its ability to climb towards heaven. Blake's use of it as Los's Messenger to Eden symbolizes Milton's decision to cast away whatever is not human and to become entirely a man. At the end of *Milton*, Blake consolidates all of the Wild Thyme's associations when he identifies the plant with sexuality and poetic inspiration, adding yet another dimension to them--eternity. This yields an emblem which by relating human being, imagination, and eternity embodies the entire struggle in Book II of *Milton*. The Wild Thyme, an emblem of sex, creation, and eternity, underscores Blake's insistence that human sexuality must triumph over the hypocrisy of holy chastity for man to reside in paradise.

[1] See, for example, John E. Grant, "Two Flowers in the Garden of Experience," in *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence, R.I.: Brown Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 353-68.

[2] *The Illuminated Blake*, annotated by David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1974).

[3] See, for example, Harold Bloom *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (1963; rpt. N.Y.: Anchor, 1965), pp. 380-82, and Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), II, 159-61. Both Bloom and Raine agree, in the main, with these observations; but neither attempts to discover the source of this flowering herb. Raine suggests that Blake chooses the herb because of a pun involved in the name.

[4] *Paracelsus*, ed. A. E. Waite (London: James Elliott and Co., 1894), II, 181.

[5] Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1948), p. 355, and Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, p. 377.

[6] For this interpretation of Beulah, I am indebted to Bloom and Frye.