

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

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

John Dennis and Blake's Guinea Sun

Edward Strickland

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 14, Issue 1, Summer 1980, p. 36



JOHN DENNIS AND BLAKE'S GUINEA SUN

By Edward Strickland

In the long fourth chapter of his 1704 essay "The Grounds of Criticism," John Dennis draws a distinction between "Vulgar Passion" and "Enthusiastick Passion, or Enthusiasm." In delineating the latter he uses as an example our various perceptions of the sun: ". . . [T]he Sun mention'd in ordinary Conversation, gives the Idea of a round flat shining Body, of about two foot diameter. But the Sun occurring to us in Meditation, gives the Idea of a vast and glorious Body, and the top of all the visible Creation, and the brightest material Image of the Divinity."¹ In his famous conclusion to "A Vision of The Last Judgment," Blake echoes Dennis' exemplary contrast both in his imagery and diction. Blake, however, is contrasting the world of Imagination, rather than Enthusiasm, and Generation: "What it will be Questiond When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty . . ."² In the original, ironically, Dennis, while acknowledging the aesthetic superiority of "Enthusiastick Passion," proceeds in most un-Blakean fashion to recommend to poets the mastery of eliciting "Vulgar Passion," since more readers are capable of experiencing it.

¹ *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1939-43), I, 338-39.

² *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 555.

BLAKE'S ARGUMENT WITH NEWBERRY IN "LAUGHING SONG"

By Thomas Dilworth

Although David Erdman claims that "Laughing Song" in *Songs of Innocence* owes much to Anna Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), and David Bindman has discovered a visual influence on Blake's illumination for "Laughing Song," no specific literary source or influence has been proposed for Blake's lyric.¹ Certain affinities in form and content suggest, however, that in literature for children Blake's song does have a prototype--a short lyric entitled "How to Laugh," which appears in Newbery's *A Pretty Book for Children* (1761) and *A Collection of Pretty Poems* (1770).

John Newbery (1713-1767) wrote, printed, and published some of the best and most beautifully bound books produced for children during the

eighteenth century. His collections of rhymes are relatively free of the repressive moral and religious indoctrination characteristic of the vast majority of books for children then in print. For this reason, he has been seen as a possible influence on Blake.² At the very least, Newbery's work can be said to stand largely outside the implied criticism, in *Songs of Innocence*, of traditional and contemporary literature for children. His rhyme "How to Laugh" seems a special case, however, in that it is Newbery's only lyric to which Blake specifically alludes, and with which he apparently takes issue.

The verbal and conceptual similarities between Blake's "Laughing Song" and Newbery's "How to Laugh" are striking. Newbery's four-line rhyme concerns human laughter as an expression of Nature in relation to other of Nature's modes of expression:

Nature a thousand Ways complains,
A thousand Words express her Pains:
But for her Laughter has but three.
And very small ones, Ha, Ha, He.

Blake's subject is the same, and he uses the same laughing sounds to conclude the last two of his three stanzas.

But Blake contradicts the assertion in Newbery's rhyme that Nature has only "three words"--"and very small ones"--to express happiness, whereas her numerous other sounds complain and express pain. In Blake's lyric, expressions of pain are altogether absent. And instead of personifying nature as a whole, Blake humanizes her various aspects. Parts of the landscape, together with birds, grasshoppers, and even the air, laugh independently though in harmony with man's own preverbal "Ha, Ha, He":

When the green woods laugh, with the voice of joy
And the dimpling stream runs laughing by,
When the air does laugh with our merry wit,
And the green hill laughs with the noise of it.

When the meadows laugh with lively green
And the grasshopper laughs in the merry scene,
When Mary and Susan and Emily,
With their sweet round mouths sing Ha, Ha, He.

When the painted birds laugh in the shade
Where our table with cherries and nuts is spread
Come live & be merry and join with me,
To sing the sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He.³

Joyful innocence is here shared equally by man and by nature in its broad diversity and particularity. This is not mere personification or pathetic fallacy, but a clarity of vision in which, as Blake later put it, "All Human Forms" are "identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone" (*Jerusalem* Ch. 4, pl. 99:57).

The whole of *Songs of Innocence* implies the metaphysical equality and communion of man, nature, and the divine. But there is more human expression on the part of nature in "Laughing Song" than in all the rest of *Songs of Innocence*.⁴ That makes "Laughing Song" a focal point in the *Songs* for the