

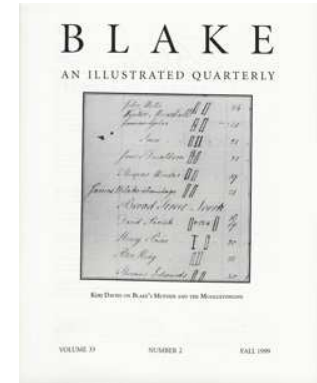
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A R T I C L E

William Blake's Mother: A New Identification

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William Blake's Mother:

A New Identification

BY KERI DAVIES

When Blake expostulated, "Public Records as If Public Records were true"¹ in the margin of Richard Watson's *Apology for the Bible* (1796), he gave a warning that his biographers would have done well to heed. Certain themes can seduce us, often because they confirm our private naïve conviction, legitimized by means of some apparently convincing documentary evidence. Thompson's *Witness against the Beast* has been widely acclaimed as an important contribution to Blake studies, and it seems to be accepted that he "offers plausible evidence to suggest that Blake's mother may well have come from a family with Muggletonian connections."² I am concerned in this paper with the biographical statements that Thompson makes and my reasons for coming, in some instances, to opposite conclusions to Thompson. What is the evidence that points to a Muggletonian connection for Blake's mother? Why does Thompson insist that her first husband was Thomas Hermitage? He makes a number of assertions:

The chapel at St George's, Mayfair, was a notorious bucket-shop for marriages, and convenient for couples who did not want to tangle with the Church of England. . . . The chapel was a place where radical dissenters, outside the Church, might obtain a quick marriage. . . . [Catherine] was the widow of Thomas Hermitage. . . . Several Hermitages can be found in the parish registers of St James's, Westminster, between 1720 and 1750. It will be recalled that a George Hermitage has two songs in the *Divine Songs of the Muggletonians*, probably from the 1730s or 1740s. Could George have been Thomas's kin? . . . If Muggletonians favoured endogamy, Catherine's first husband, and herself, might have been of the faith?³

I shall demonstrate that all of these assertions of Thompson's are to a greater or lesser extent tendentious, and some of them just plain wrong.

What is known

The Parish Registers of the Church of St. James, Piccadilly,

¹ Annotations to Watson, E 617

² Roy Porter, review of Thompson, *Witness against the Beast*, *English Historical Review* 111 (1996): 743-44.

³ E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 120-21.

record the baptisms of the children of James and Catherine Blake. Their eldest child James was born 10 July 1753 and christened 15 July. John was born 12 May 1755 and christened 1 June. William, born 28 Nov 1757, was christened 11 December. Another son John (the first of that name must have died in infancy), was born 20 March 1760 and baptized Monday, 31 March. Richard, so named in the Parish Register, was born 19 June 1762, and christened 11 July 1762. Catherine Elizabeth, the only daughter, was born 7 January and christened 28 January 1764.⁴

Aileen Ward, following the suggestion made many years ago by Arthur Symons, has asserted that "Richard" is a clerical error for "Robert," Blake's favorite and youngest brother.⁵ I would agree that the christening of "Richard" Blake is, most certainly, of the child later known as Robert, though there may be reasons other than the carelessness of the parish clerk for the apparent error.⁶

The Registers of St. George's Chapel in Curzon Street ("the Mayfair Chapel") record the marriage in October 1752 of

✚ 15. James Blake and Catherine Harmitage of S^t James^s Westminster.⁷

There can be no reasonable doubt that this records the marriage of Blake's parents. Both Christian names are right. The date is almost exactly nine months before the birth of the first child, James, on 10 July 1753. The ✚ in front of the entry is still unexplained.

The Registers of Bunhill Fields Burial Ground record the burial on 9 September 1792 of

Catherine Blake [aged] 70 [of] S^t James's Westminster.⁸

The implication of these records then is that Blake's mother was born in 1722 and was aged 30 at the time of her marriage to James Blake in 1752. Bentley comments that "The identification of this Catherine Blake with the poet's mother is a sound hypothesis based on the coincidence of names and the burial of her husband (1784) and three sons (1787, 1827, 1827) in the same graveyard."⁹

H. M. Margoliouth was the first writer to recognize the

⁴ The Parish Records of St. James's Church are now housed in the city of Westminster Archives Centre.

⁵ Aileen Ward, "Who was Robert Blake?" *Blake* (1994/95): 84-89. Arthur Symons, "The Family of William Blake," *Athenaeum* 4096 (1906): 515-16.

⁶ One of many examples would be the playwright R. B. Sheridan who was baptized Thomas. His parents changed their minds for some reason, and started to call him Richard. See Fintan O'Toole, *A Traitor's Kiss: the Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (London: Granta, 1997) 17.

⁷ City of Westminster Archives Centre. St. George's Chapel, Mayfair. [Register. Vol.]: 3

⁸ Public Record Office. Bunhill Fields Register RG 4/4695

⁹ G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 47. My summary of biographical data is, of course, entirely indebted to Bentley's work.



1 St. Martin in the Fields, Westminster. Parish Register: baptisms for 2 October 1723 showing baptism of Catherine Wright, daughter of John and Elizabeth. Photo courtesy of City of Westminster Archives Centre and published by permission of the Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields.

entry in the *Register* of the Mayfair Chapel as referring to Blake's parents.¹⁰ Margoliouth admits that he worked solely from the Harleian Society transcript which he took to be accurate and complete. Adequate for most purposes, the transcript regularizes the form of entries and omits the mysterious marginal crosses.¹¹ Margoliouth is appropriately tentative as to the conclusions to be drawn from his discovery. The name "Harmitage" he recognizes as an obvious error, perhaps for "Hermitage" or maybe "Armitage." Again, the choice of the Mayfair Chapel for the wedding is problematic since marriages there were "irregular" though entirely legal. Margoliouth comments that "Convenience, cheapness, privacy, or even fashion . . . may have brought James and Catherine there. It is also possible that, if, as is vaguely asserted by biographers (chiefly, perhaps, on the evidence of

subsequent burial at Bunhill Fields), they were dissenters, they may have preferred to avoid an episcopal licence or parochial banns."

The passing of Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act put a stop to the marriages at Mayfair; but on 25 March 1754, the day before the Hardwicke Act came into operation, 61 couples were married there. Thompson's reference to the Mayfair Chapel as a "bucket-shop" distracts us from the fact that Mayfair marriages, though legally "clandestine," were always performed in accordance with the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England by ordained, though "unbeneficed," Anglican clergy and were in some measure "fashionable."¹²

What kind of name is Harmitage?

I have endeavored to apply to our known data the resources of *FamilySearch*, a set of genealogical programs and data files on CD-ROM published by the Genealogical Society of Utah.

¹⁰ H. M. Margoliouth, "The Marriage of Blake's Parents," *Notes and Queries* (1947): 380-81

¹¹ George J. Armytage, ed., *The Register of Baptisms and Marriages at St. George's Chapel, May Fair; transcribed from the Originals now at the Church of St. George, Hanover Square, and at the Registry General at Somerset House*. Publications of the Harleian Society. Registers; xv (London: Harleian Society, 1889).

¹² On the Mayfair Chapel and its notorious minister, Alexander Keith, see John Southerden Burn, *History of the Fleet Marriages*, 2nd ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1834) 141-45, and George Clinch, *Mayfair and Belgravia: Being an Historical Account of the Parish of St George, Hanover Square* (London: Truslove & Shirley, 1892) 56-60.

11 Mr George Gardener of Richmond & Mrs Ann
+ Harding of Stoke-Davern Surry —

14 Mr Thomas Armitage & Mrs Catherine —
+ Wright of St George's Hanover Square

14 Mr John Newton & Mrs Rachel Norfolk —
of St Marys Isstrand — — —

2 St. George's Chapel, Mayfair. Register entries for 14 December 1746, showing marriage of Thomas Armitage and Catherine Wright. Photo courtesy of City of Westminster Archives Centre and published by permission of the Vicar of St. George's, Hanover Square.

Of most use in researching William Blake's family history has been the *International Genealogical Index* (IGI) which is now available as data files within *FamilySearch*.¹³ IGI is a file of names extracted principally from parish and other vital records. The data incorporated in IGI and now available on CD-ROM have transformed genealogical research in a way inconceivable to Margoliouth or Thompson. The main (1993) file contains 58,969,065 entries for England, of which 6,498,290 represent Greater London; the 1994 Addendum adds another 8,528,059 for England, including 290,270 for Greater London.

IGI records just 29 births or christenings with the surname "Harmitage" in British parish registers from 1582 to 1873. There is just one Harmitage birth recorded in Greater London in the eighteenth century, when Mary Harmitage, daughter of John and Mary, was christened 11 October 1756 at Saint Luke, Chelsea.¹⁴ Twenty-nine instances out of the more than 86 million British entries in IGI is so low a figure as strongly to suggest that we are dealing with a clerical error of some

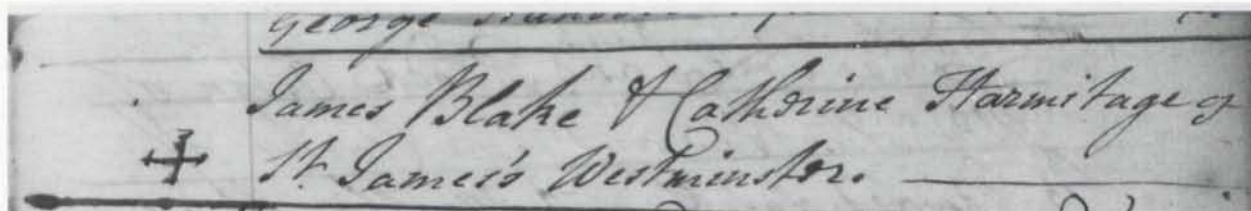
sort. "Harmitage" is an impossible surname—of such rarity that Catherine, if "Harmitage" were really her maiden name, would have had no plausible parents or siblings.

According to the St. James's Parish Rate Books, number 28 Broad Street, on the corner of Marshall Street and Broad Street (North) was occupied by a Thomas Lane from 1745 to 1747, after which someone named "Armitage" paid the rates from 1748 until 1753 when the name "Armitage" is erased in the Rate Book and the name "James Blake" written alongside. So James Blake's precursor at the Broad Street premises he was to make his family home and his shop after marrying Catherine was called Armitage. The coincidence of names is such that the simplest hypothesis is that "Harmitage" should be read as "Armitage." I think it is possible to explain the spelling "Harmitage" as the result of Catherine's nervousness at her second wedding—the intrusive aspirate is a typical Cockney response to a situation where she felt out of place and under stress. Other instances of this phenomenon will be quoted later.

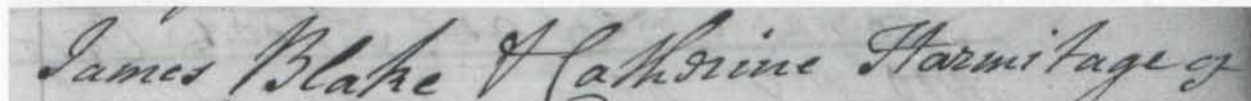
28 Broad Street was a corner house with a shop frontage on Broad Street but an entrance to the family dwelling around the corner in Marshall Street. For most years the house is actually listed in Marshall Street, because it was on the corner of Broad and Marshall Streets, and the main domestic entrance was in Marshall Street. This sample of en-

¹³ *International Genealogical Index*, 1983 edition and 1984 addendum, as incorporated in the *FamilySearch* CD-ROMs published by the Genealogical Society of Utah. Subsequent to the writing of this paper, a 1998 Addendum was issued. It occasions no significant changes to the evidence adduced here. A beta version of *FamilySearch* is now available online at <http://www.familysearch.org>.

¹⁴ IGI's coverage of Greater London parishes is better than 75% complete; better than 85% for Inner London.



3 15 October 1752: marriage of James Blake and Catherine Harmitage in the notebook of the officiating minister at the St. George's Chapel, Mayfair (PRO RG 7/248 f.207). The name is unequivocally "Harmitage." Published by permission of the Public Record Office, Kew.



Detail.

tries from the rate books traces the route of the rate collector around Golden Square ward over a period of years:¹⁵

Marshall Street [last house]	[Corner House (28 Broad Street)]	Broad Street (North) [second house]
1747 Thomas Woster	Thomas Lane	David Parish
1748 Thomas Woster	Armitage	David Parish
1752 Tho ^a Worster	Armitage	David Parish
1753 Thomas Worster	Armitage [erased] James Blake [written alongside]	David Parish
1754 Widow Worster	Ja ^a Blake	David Parish

Armitage itself (let alone "Harmitage") is an unusual surname in eighteenth-century London. I can trace no Catherine Armitage born in London around 1722 who would fit the bill as bride of James Blake. Historically the Armitages were a Yorkshire family that took their name from a hermitage in the township of Crosland in the parish of Almondbury.¹⁶ The surname is still much more common in West Yorkshire than anywhere else in England.

"Armitage" only paid rates for four years, which is not long enough period to convince one that Catherine was marrying from her parental home. The most plausible hypothesis, and the one chosen by Thompson, is that Catherine was married first to Armitage (whom he calls "Hermitage"),

then to James Blake. And, of course, the will located by Thompson, of "Thomas Armitage of the Parish of Saint James Westminster . . . haberdasher and hosier" justifies this hypothesis.¹⁷ What evidential support is there for Thompson's theory that Catherine's husband was really surnamed "Hermitage"?

The register for the Mayfair Chapel now in the Westminster Archives Centre carries the already-cited entry for 15 October 1752:

✚ 15. James Blake and Catherine Harmitage of S^t James^s Westminster

where there is an apparent hesitation in writing the name "Harmitage."¹⁸ Thompson treats this as evidence for "Hermitage" as Catherine's surname on marriage.

However, what Thompson ignores is that the register was not compiled contemporaneously with the marriages it lists but is a clerical compilation made by the clerk to the Chapel from the officiating ministers' notebooks. These notebooks survive in part at the Public Record Office.¹⁹ In fact, the apparent hesitation in writing Catherine's surname—the clerk has, in my opinion, begun to write "Hermitage" and then corrected himself to "Harmitage"—is not apparent in the minister's notebook which is unequivocally "Harmitage." It therefore makes most sense to search for Catherine's marriage not to a "Thomas Hermitage" but to a "Thomas Armitage."

¹⁵ City of Westminster Archives Centre, St James's Parish Rate Books: D489 (1747), D501 (1748), D58 (1752), D61 (1753), D63 (1754).

¹⁶ There is an account of the origin of the surname and its early history in George Redmonds, *Yorkshire: West Riding*. English Surnames Series, 1 (Chichester: Phillimore, 1973) 192-93.

¹⁷ E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast* 120n4.

¹⁸ For the symbol ✚, see note 21.

¹⁹ Public Record Office RG 7/248 (Mayfair marriages 6).

Obviously *IGI* is an excellent indicator of how common a particular surname is, or a particular spelling of that surname, or even where that surname is most commonly found. It clearly establishes how unusual a surname "Armitage" was in eighteenth-century London, confirming that no Catherine Armitage was born there in 1722 and recording just four London christenings of a "Thomas Armitage" that century. Was there any baptism of a "Catherine Armitage" in the eighteenth century? *IGI* records just two: in 1721 and 1765, both in Yorkshire. Additionally one should note that there are no entries for the baptism of a "Thomas Hermitage" in *IGI* or its *Addendum*.

Was there a marriage of Thomas Armitage to a Catherine?

One can also use the resources of *Family Search* to search for combinations of names. I set out to search for a "Thomas Armitage" who had married a "Catherine." I found two entries: Thomas Armitage who married Katherine Murley at Pampisford, Cambridgeshire in 1699 (which is clearly not the marriage we're looking for), and Thomas Armitage who married Catherine Wright at the Mayfair Chapel, 14 December 1746. The coincidence, if that's what it is, is striking to say the least. This is the only marriage of a "Thomas Armitage" to a "Catherine" between 1740 and 1750 that *IGI* records in Greater London. If we widen the search to cover the whole British Isles, there are eight other marriages of a "Thomas Armitage," but none to a "Catherine." (A check of the 1994 *IGI Addendum* yields just one marriage of a Thomas Armitage, but he didn't marry a Catherine.) The entry transcribed from the Register of the Mayfair Chapel for December 1746 reads as follows:

✦ 14. M^r Thomas Armitage & M^{rs} Catherine Wright
of St George's Hanover Square²⁰

This, without a shadow of a doubt, is William Blake's mother. (Note that again there is a cross in the margin alongside the entry. In the Register of the Mayfair Chapel, some 7% of all entries are accompanied by a marginal cross ✦ including both the marriage of Catherine Wright to Thomas Armitage and that of Catherine Harmitage to James Blake. These crosses occur both in the clerk's Register and in the officiating ministers' notebooks.)²¹ As I shall demon-

²⁰ Or in the printed transcript: George J. Armytage, editor, *The Register of Baptisms and Marriages at St. George's Chapel, May Fair*. Publications of the Harleian Society. Registers; xv (London: Harleian Society, 1889) 73. At this date, the honorific "Mrs." carries no indication of marital status and could be used, as here, by any unmarried woman who was not a minor and did not need parental consent to marry.

²¹ What significance can these marginal crosses have? The options, it seems to me, can be that the marginal cross refers to the persons being married, or it refers to some rite of the Church of England, or it refers to some extra document or payment (in other words an administrative note to the Mayfair chapel clerk).

strate, the discovery of Catherine Wright (for, as far as I can determine, this is the first publication of the true maiden name of Blake's mother) challenges the very basis of the Muggletonian hypothesis.

The evidence of the poll book

The poll book of the Westminster election of 1749, where the Whig Viscount Trentham was challenged by the candidate of the "Westminster Independents," Sir George Vandeput, is of considerable interest, in that both James Blake and Thomas Armitage appear in its pages, voting for the same candidate.²²

The method of procedure at the election required the poll clerks, who were provided by the candidates, to enter the following information about each voter in the appropriate poll book: his Christian names(s) and surname; the street, square, court, alley, etc. of his residence; his status, profession or trade; the candidate supported. As the recording procedures appear to have been based on what the voter said and thus on what the poll clerk thought the voter had

Could the ✦ perhaps refer to some question about the status of either party to the marriage? For example, the marginal cross might imply that the bride is a widow or the groom a widower. Since there are crosses against the entries for both of Catherine's marriages I am forced to reject that hypothesis. Or could it indicate that either party was a minor? Marriage at the Mayfair Chapel did not require parental permission, which hardly applies in this case anyway — Catherine "Harmitage" for one is no longer a minor, and if my identification is correct, neither is Catherine Wright.

Could the ✦ refer to some rite of the church such as baptism? It is a Canon Law requirement that parties to a Church of England wedding be baptized Christians. If James Blake was baptized at his wedding then this would explain why we can't find any trace of his infant baptism. But it looks as though Thomas Armitage was baptized (if I have identified him correctly) and so too was Catherine.

Or could the ✦ be an administrative note to the Mayfair Chapel clerk? Crosses are always transferred from the minister's notes to the clerk's register. The significance of the crosses is probably something relevant to that particular event, not to any former status of bride or groom. Most likely, since the clerk felt obliged to transfer the marginal crosses to his register, they record some aspect of the functioning of the Chapel — fees not paid in full or extra payments for copy certificates.

²² Surviving poll books (both printed and manuscript) for Westminster elections are listed in Jeremy Gibson and Colin Rogers, *Poll Books c1696-1872: a Directory of Holdings in Great Britain*. 3rd ed. (Birmingham: Federation of Family History Societies, 1994).

I have used the following printed poll book for the 1749 Westminster election: *A Copy of the Poll for a Citizen for the City and Liberty of Westminster; Begun to be Taken at COVENT-GARDEN, upon Wednesday the Twenty-Second Day of November; and Ending on Friday the Eighth Day of December 1749. Peter Leigh, Esq; High-Bailiff. Candidates, the Right Hon. GRANVILLE LEVISON GOWER, Esq.; commonly called Lord TRENTHAM and Sir GEORGE VANDEPUT, Bart.* (London: Printed for J. OSBORN, at the Golden-Ball, in Pater-Noster Row; and Sold by the Booksellers of London and Westminster. M.DCC.XLIX.). I consulted the copy

15. Daniel Felix Fleischman and Mary Cotton of St. Martin's in the Fields —
 15. Nicholas Crow and Ann Clarke of Richmond Surry —
 15. James Ash and Mary Matthews of St. Lawrence London —
 15. William Andrews and Sarah Buckmaster of St. Martin's in the Fields —
 +15. James Blake and Catherine Harmitage of St. James's Westminster —
 15. Samuel Allen and Ann Deane of St. George Hanover Square M^{ch} —
 15. Joseph Hill and Elizabeth Phillips of the Tower Hamlet London —
 16. William Gull and Mary Bates of Stratton Hartless Oxon. —
 of St. George's Hanover Square —

4 St. George's Chapel, Mayfair. Register entries for 15 October 1752, showing marriage of James Blake and Catherine Harmitage. Note the clerk's hesitation in writing "Harmitage," as though he's begun to write "Hermitage" and then corrected himself in transcribing the minister's notebook. Photo courtesy of City of Westminster Archives Centre and published by permission of the Vicar of St. George's, Hanover Square.

Catherine Harmitage of St. James's Westminster

Detail.

Harmitage

Detail.

said, there were numerous opportunities for mistakes. Voters in St. James's Parish in 1749 include both a "Harmstrong" and a "Handerson" (that intrusive aspirate again)! There are indeed numerous instances where the parish rate books and the poll books are in disagreement, sometimes quite markedly. Peter Lens, of Berwick Street, wrote a letter of complaint to the press when he discovered, from the printed version of the poll book that he had been recorded by the clerk as Peter Borlence. James Ellison of Hedge Lane is the voter, while James Allison is the ratepayer. Another voter, Joseph Austen of Haymarket, is almost certainly Joseph Forster of the rate books.²³

According to the poll books:

James Blake *Glasshouse-str.* Hosier

voted for Vandeput in St. James's Parish, Saturday 25 November 1749²⁴ and

Thomas Hermitage *Broad-street* Hosier
also voted for Vandeput in St. James's Parish, 1 December 1749.²⁵

Thomas is the only "Hermitage" in the poll book and does not appear anywhere in the rate books. Similarly, the "Armitage" of the rate books cannot be found in the poll book. Although the rate books sometimes offer a variety of forms of the same name over a period of years, on balance they are likely to be consistent and thus more reliable than the forms of the poll books, based on aural interpretation and of one occasion only.

In voting for the Tory (Thompson prefers the expression "anti-Court") Sir George Vandeput, Thomas Armitage and James Blake voted for the losing candidate. In both 1741

and 1749 the Court won a solid majority in four of the nine Westminster parishes. In the fashionable suburbs of St. George Hanover Square and St. James Piccadilly the Court candidate gained a comfortable victory.²⁶

James Blake's politics

Nicholas Rogers, in his detailed study of the 1749 Westminster election, comments that there is little evidence of Westminster tradesmen deliberately pitting their energies against wealth, name and influence in the way Francis Place and his compatriots did in the early decades of the next century. He adds that "in a constituency such as Westminster, dominated by the gentry and conditioned by the existence of a luxury consumption economy, the web of political influence cut across trade and occupation."²⁷ The pressures of Court and aristocratic authority, and the peculiarities of Westminster's luxury economy, helped to perpetuate a system of social stratification where deference and dependency held sway, and emasculated the emergence of class interests in an articulate form. After Trentham's final victory, the Tories under the guise of "Westminster Independents" drifted into oblivion; the Whigs, the Court party, enjoyed two decades of undisputed superiority in Westminster politics.²⁸

The incoherence of voting patterns in the 1749 election, the lack of any clear class solidarity amongst voters, is such that, *pace* Thompson, no claims as to James Blake's or Thomas Armitage's political radicalism or radical sympathies are justified. Thompson, by disguising the Tory George Vandeput as merely the "anti-Court" candidate, fudges the issue of James Blake's politics and attributes to James Blake and Thomas Armitage a spurious radicalism that cannot be justified from the documentary evidence. One might say that even though the two men voted for the same candidate, there is no reason to suppose they did so for the same reasons.

The evidence of the will

I am myself puzzled that Thompson did not recognize the primacy of the will of Thomas Armitage.²⁹ It's the only document listing Thomas and Catherine which is derived from written documents to which they placed their signatures.

in Cambridge University Library (Ddd.25.58⁹). Printed copies of the 1749 book are also held at the Guildhall Library and the City of Westminster Archive Centre.

Separate manuscript poll books exist for the parishes of St. Anne, St. George, St. James, St. Margaret & St. John the Evangelist and St. Martin in the Fields. A single poll book sufficed for the parishes of St. Clement Danes and St. Mary le Strand and another for the parish of St. Paul, Covent Garden and the Liberty of St. Martin le Grand. There are, therefore, seven poll books in all. The manuscript poll books for Westminster elections are held in the London Metropolitan Archives but are generally too fragile for use. A typescript index to the manuscript poll books made by Osborn (1979) is held by the City of Westminster Archive Centre.

²³ G. F. Osborn, compiler, *Alphabetical Index of Those who went to the Poll in the Westminster By-Election 1749, followed by a Alphabetical Arrangement of Them by Their Trade & Profession* (London, 1979) ii.

²⁴ *A Copy of the Poll for a Citizen for the City and Liberty of Westminster* (London, 1749) 167. Also on page 19 of the manuscript poll book.

²⁵ *A Copy of the Poll for a Citizen for the City and Liberty of Westminster* (London, 1749) 196. Also on page 52 of the manuscript poll book, though the address is given there as "Brad Street."

²⁶ For an analysis of voting patterns in Westminster, see Nicholas Rogers, "Aristocratic Clientage, Trade and Independency: Popular Politics in Pre-Radical Westminster," *Past and Present* 61 (November 1973): 79.

²⁷ Nicholas Rogers, "Aristocratic Clientage" 93.

²⁸ See also Nicholas Rogers, "The Urban Opposition to Whig Oligarchy, 1720-60" in Margaret C. Jacob and James R. Jacob, editors, *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*. Revised paperback ed. (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1991) 152-68.

²⁹ E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast* 120.

Annabell Wilson	II	30	1	5	1	5	
John Wells	II	24	1		1		
Winter Marshall	II	21		17	6		Winter Marshall at a
James Giles	II	21		17	6		17 6
Ann	II	21		17	6		17 6
James Donaldson	II	21		17	6		17 6
Thomas Wender	II	19		15	10		15 10
James Blake Armitage	II	21		17	6		17 6
Bread Street North							
David Parish	II or 13 4	16		14	2		13 4
Henry Paine	I	20		16	8		16 8
Peter King	III	21		17	6		17 6
Thomas Edwards	II	30	1	5	1	5	

5 St. James's, Picadilly. Parish Rate Books, Golden Square ward. Poor rate (collector's book) for 19 October 1753 (D 61). The book open to show the entry for the corner of Marshall Street and Broad Street North. The name "Armitage" has been crossed out and "James Blake" written instead. The facing page bears the annotation "James Blake Xmass." Photo courtesy of the City of Westminster Archives Centre and published by permission.

James Blake Armitage II 21

Detail.

The rate book and the poll book were both based on oral testimony as to names. But the will is the Prerogative Court of Canterbury transcript made by experienced legal clerks of an original signed by Thomas Armitage. The evidence for Armitage not Harmitage/Hermitage is overwhelming.

Omitting conventional pieties, the substance of the will is as follows:

I give devise and bequeath unto my dearly beloved Wife Catherine Armitage all rest residue and remainder of my Estate Real or Personal of what nature kind or quality soever or wheresoever to be by her peaceably and quietly used and enjoyed to her own use and benefit But it is my Will and mind That if my said wife Catherine Armitage shall happen to Marry Then she shall be obliged to give and pay the following sums of

Money unto the several Persons hereafter mentioned (that is to say) unto my Brother William Armitage the sum Twenty Pounds for himself and the sum of Twenty Pounds for his son Thomas Armitage to be by my said Brother Placed out at Interest upon good Security for the Benefit of my said Nephew Thomas Armitage untill he shall attain the age of Twenty one Years if not at that age at the time of such Marriage at which age it is my Will the said Thomas Armitage shall receive both Principal and Interest that shall be then due To my Brothers and sisters Richard Armitage Joseph Armitage Elizabeth Fox and Grace Hattersley or to the Heirs of them that shall be then living the sum of ten Pounds to each and every of them and I do hereby ordain nominate and appoint my said wife Catherine Armitage to be sole Executrix of this my last will and testament.³⁰

³⁰ Public Record Office PROB 11/790 (1751 November quire 298 [folio 390v]).

What can we find out about Thomas Armitage?

Thomas Armitage, "Haberdasher and Hosier," wrote his will in July 1751, and his widow was granted probate in November the same year. The will tells us that Thomas Armitage had brothers Joseph, Richard, and William, and sisters Elizabeth and Grace. At the time the will was written, William had a son Thomas (a minor), Elizabeth had married a Mr. Fox, and Grace a Mr. Hattersley. Where then was Thomas Armitage born and where buried?

Could the Armitages have been a London family? *IGI* records just 25 London baptisms of an Armitage child in the years 1700–50: Benjamin 1736, David 1736, Elizabeth 1713, Elizabeth 1731, Henry 1711, Hugh 1746, Joseph 1721, Joseph 1728, Joseph 1750, Mary 1733, Michael 1736, Robert 1739, Samuel 1706, Sam^l 1717, Sam^l 1742, Samuel 1745, Sam^l 1749, Stephen 1701, Stephen 1733, Thomas 1701, William 1708, William 1709, William 1719, William 1738, William 1748. No Richard or Grace, and the only Thomas's birth in 1701 would make him implausibly old to be Catherine's first husband. However, using *IGI* to locate all Thomas Armitages baptized in England between those dates, we get the expected result that nearly 90% (53 out of 60) took place in Yorkshire. The probability then is that Catherine's husband was a Yorkshireman.

My conclusion is strengthened by the discovery that a Grace Armitage and a Joshua Hattersley were married on 11 August 1743 at Royston in Yorkshire. Could this be Thomas's sister (the Grace Hattersley of the will)? And are Grace and Thomas the children of Richard Armitage, whose son Thomas was christened 21 June 1722, also at Royston?³¹ So Thomas would be the same age as Catherine and of Yorkshire origin which suggests a wool trade connection appropriate to a haberdasher and hosier.

Where was Thomas Armitage buried? I can confirm that there are no Armitage (nor Harmitage nor Hermitage for that matter) burials at St. James's, Picadilly nor in the St.

James's Burying Ground, Hampstead Road. If he were a dissenter of some sort, could he have been buried in Bunhill Fields like Catherine and her second husband? Again the answer is negative.

One has the ignoble thought that with her Armitage in-laws away in Yorkshire, Catherine may have opted for a quiet Mayfair marriage to James Blake to avoid fulfilling the terms of her first husband's will! The will would have required her to pay £80 to the Armitages on her remarriage.

Catherine (Harmitage) Blake: a tentative identification

We know that Catherine Harmitage Blake must have been born *circa* 1722 since, when she was buried in Bunhill Fields on 7 September 1792, her age was given as 70. Can we find a likely Catherine Wright? *IGI* records 25 christenings of a Catherine Wright in Britain between 1720 and 1724. I think we can ignore the seven christenings in Scotland, and any births in Ireland, for if Catherine was Scots or Irish, then surely this would be clearly reflected in documents and anecdotal evidence connected with Blake's work and biography.

We are left with five christenings in Greater London and 13 provincial christenings. To deal first with a possible provincial origin for Catherine, could she have been born in the same parish as Thomas Armitage and have come to London to marry her childhood sweetheart, or could she have been a girl from the country in domestic service in London? These seem the likeliest options that could have brought Catherine to London. Of the 13 Catherines from the provinces, only two come from Yorkshire (from Sheffield, and from Bridlington) and nowhere near what I have identified as Thomas Armitage's birthplace of Royston. I therefore think it unlikely that Catherine came from the same parish as Thomas Armitage and moved to London to get married.

Similarly, I think it unlikely she was a maidservant. If she were a girl from the provinces who was in domestic service in London, it is implausible that she should become the wife of a shopkeeper. Do maidservants marry into trade, and do they marry at the Mayfair Chapel? Very few I think—marriage there was discreet, but expensive at one guinea. The servant classes married in the Fleet for half-a-crown. Also, if Catherine was a maidservant then William Blake's biographers would have noted it—just as they noted the rumor that his wife Catherine Boucher had been in service.³²

Catherine was most likely a Londoner and the Mayfair register gives her as a resident of St. James's parish at the time of her marriage. We should look for the christening of

³¹ From the Bishop's transcripts of registers for Royston or Roystone parish, Yorkshire, in Sheffield Archives, I transcribe the following entries:

[1712]

William the son of Richard Armitage of Cudworth was bapt. September y^e 25th

[1719]

Grace daughter of Richard Armitage of Cudworth bapt. Decem. 5th

[1722]

Thomas the Son of Richard Armitage of Cudworth Farmer bapt. June y^e 21st

[1743]

Joshua Hattersley of the Parish of Silkstone and Grace Armitage of Cudworth were married August y^e 11th

The parish of Royston is now a locality in South Yorkshire and administratively part of Barnsley district. The records were consulted on microfilm, the originals being in the Diocesan Record Office at Wakefield.

³² I'm aware that I'm on shaky ground here. There are plenty of instances of widowers, in particular, marrying their servants. Nevertheless, I think the balance of probabilities favors my argument, and it does lead to a conclusion which makes a good fit with the known facts.

June 1755.

1. William Groom, Son of Richard & Jane May 15.
- Hollin M. Lauchlan, Son of Hollin & Anna Maria, ^{May} 19.
- Thomas Partridge, Son of Richard & Elizabeth, May 31.
- John Blake Son of John & Catherine May 12.
- Thomas Marshall, Son of John & Martha . . May 16. 17.
- Thomas Jefferies, Son of William & Ann . . . May 16. 18.
- Edward Davies, Son of Moses & Elizabeth . . May 20. 19.

6 "Public Records as If Public Records were true"—perhaps Blake had this sort of thing in mind! St. James's Church, Picadilly. Parish Register: baptisms for 1 June 1755 showing the baptism of John Blake son of John [sic] and Catherine. Photo courtesy of City of Westminster Archives Centre and published by permission of the Rector of St. James's Church, Picadilly.

John Blake Son of John & Catherine.

Detail.

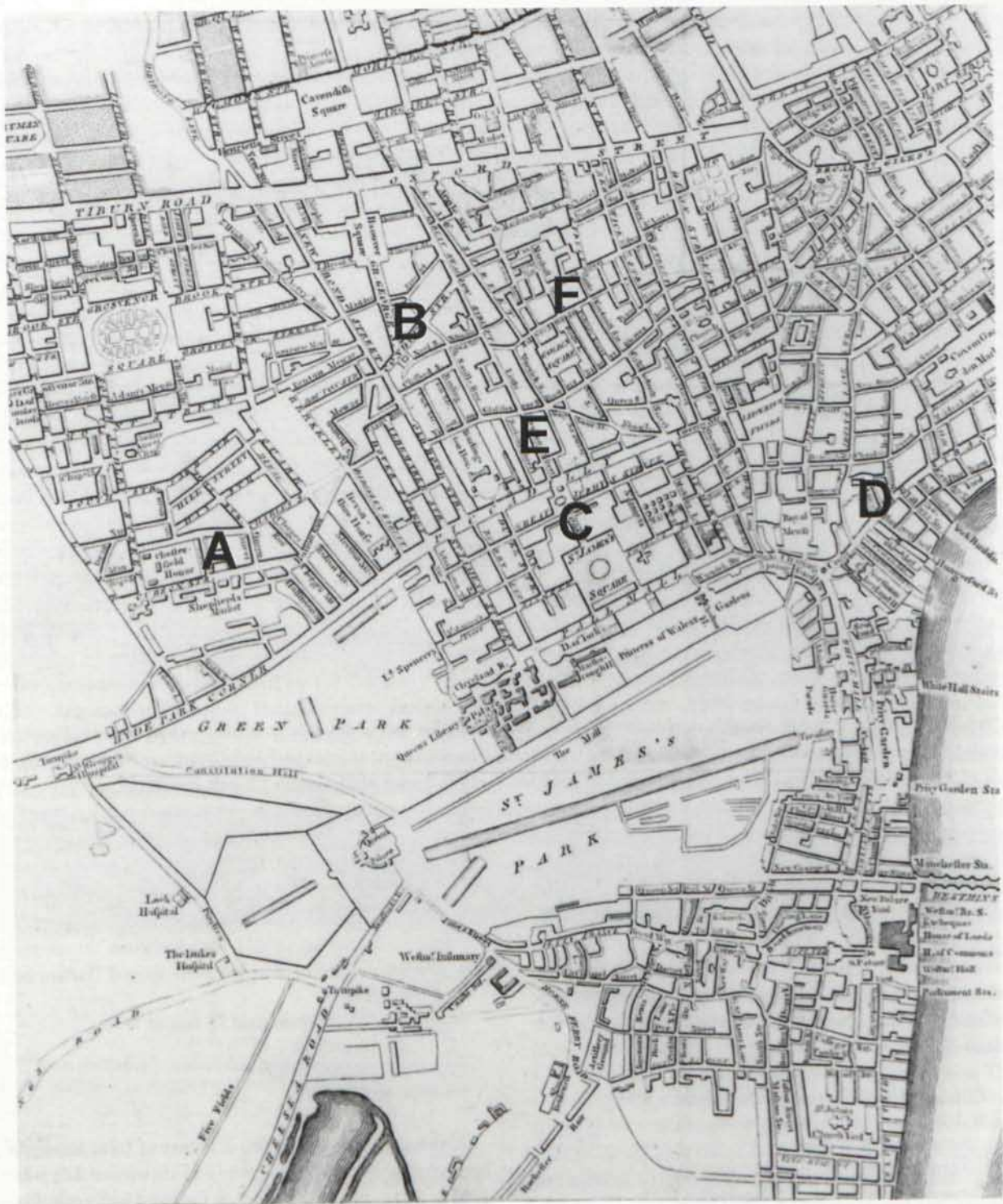
a child born not too far away. I have been able to trace the following London christenings for the two years on either side of 1722:

Katherine Wright christened 10 February 1720;
St. Lawrence Pountney, London
Father: Joseph Wright
Mother: Anne
Catherine Wright christened 5 November 1721;
St. Bartholomew the Great, London
Father: John Righte
Mother: Marey
Catherine Wright christened 2 October 1723;
St. Martin in the Fields, Westminster
Father: John Wright
Mother: Elizabeth
Katherine Wright christened 5 August 1724;
St. Dunstan, Stepney
Father: Hen^y. Bexley Wright

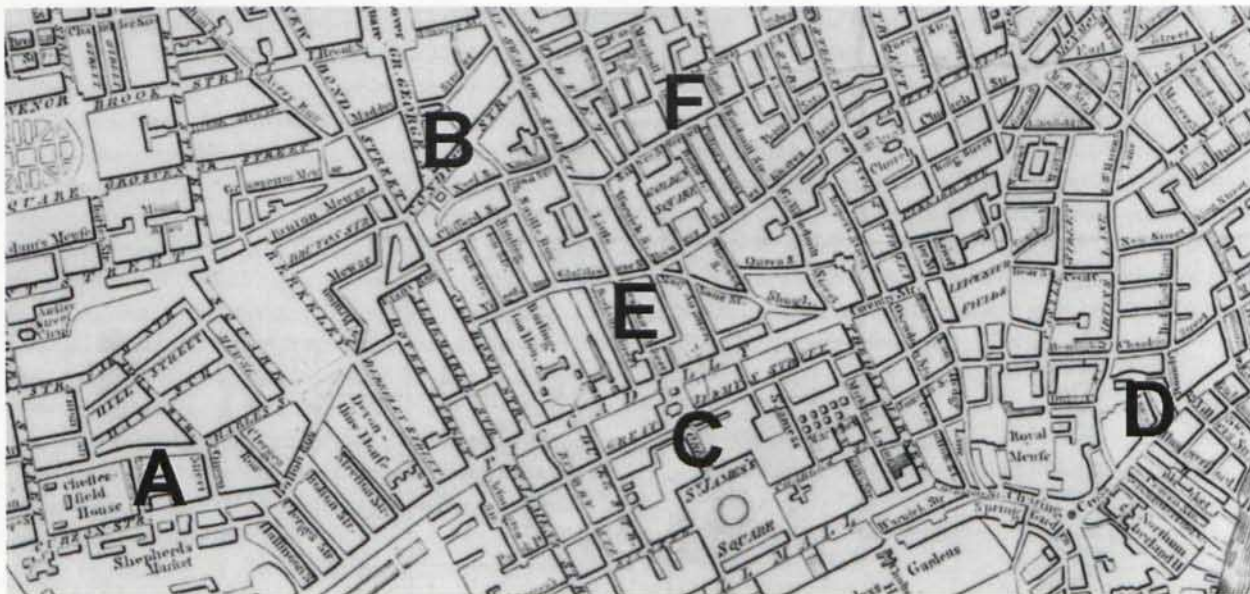
Mother: Mary
Catherine Wright christened 23 August 1724;
St. Olave, Southwark
Father: Thomas Wright
Mother: Catherine

Of these, Catherine Wright, daughter of John and Elizabeth Wright, born 28 September and christened 2 October 1723 at St. Martin in the Fields, is the most likely candidate for the woman who married Thomas Armitage and James Blake and became mother of the poet. By reason of her date of birth, her residency in a nearby parish, and her parents' Christian names, she provides the "best fit."³³

³³ The register of St. Martin in the Fields, Westminster, records the wedding of John Wright to Elizabeth Smith on 23 October 1722. But the baptismal records of the same parish also note that John the son of John and Elizabeth Wright was born October 13 and christened 3 No-



7 Detail from a fragmentary engraved map of circa 1765. This is most probably Cluer Dicey's *New & Accurate Plan of the Cities of London & Westminster* (Darlington & Howgego, Printed Maps of London, no.133). Note the Mayfair Chapel (A), the Parish Church of St. George, Hanover Square (B), the Parish Church of St. James, Picadilly (C), the Parish Church of St. Martin in the Fields (D), James Blake's bachelor residence in Glasshouse Street (E), and the Blake family home on the corner of Broad Street and Marshall Street (F). Photo courtesy of the City of Westminster Archives Centre and published by permission.



Detail.

In the eighteenth century, children were not named arbitrarily but usually took their names from their grandparents, their parents' siblings, and less frequently, a more distant relative or close friend of the family. I would claim that we can see this process at work in the naming of James and Catherine's six children. The eldest son James (born 1753) was named after his father and his paternal grandfather. The next child John (born 1755) was named for his maternal grandfather. From what relative did William (born 1757) take his name? The next child (born 1760) is again called John—the first of that name had died in infancy. The insistence on reusing the name is itself significant. Then comes Robert (born 1762), perhaps named after some unknown relative. And finally the only daughter, Catherine Elizabeth (born 1764) whose names commemorate both her mother and her maternal grandmother.

Conclusion

To summarize. My trawl of currently available genealogical evidence strongly suggests that Blake's mother Catherine's first husband was Thomas Armitage of Royston, Yorkshire. I can confidently say that it was one Catherine Wright who married first Thomas Armitage and subsequently James

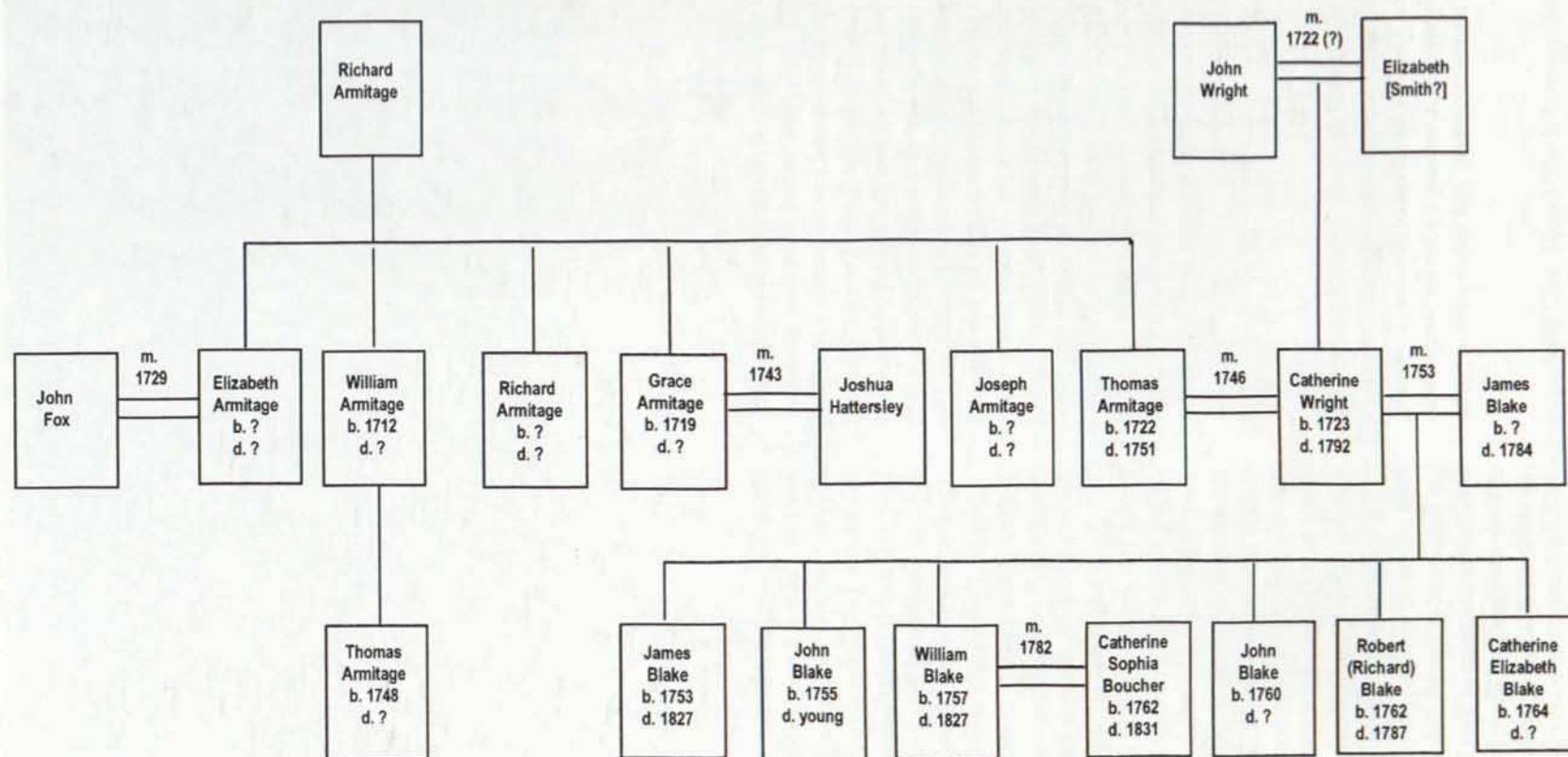
Blake. The simplest explanation is the best. Catherine Wright married Thomas Armitage at the Mayfair Chapel on 14 December 1746, was widowed in 1751, and married James Blake in October 1752—the answer was under our noses all the time. It is highly likely Catherine Wright was born in London, the daughter of John and Elizabeth Wright of the parish of St. Martin in the Fields.

Despite Thompson's assertions, there is no evidence to connect Blake directly to known followers of Lodowicke Muggleton.³⁴ As Thompson makes clear, without realizing the import of his discovery, Blake's mother was not born into the "Harmitage" or "Hermitage" or even "Armitage" family. Her family name, in fact, was Wright and her only connection to the Armitage family was through her first marriage. There is no evidence whatsoever of a link between the Thomas Armitage she married and the "George Hermitage" who wrote some Muggletonian hymns. In any case, there is a very great difference between being born into, and raised in, a Muggletonian family, and later marrying a man who has alleged Muggletonian connections.

The evidence of an Anglican (though "irregular") marriage ceremony and baptism of children in the parish church but later burial at Bunhill Fields suggests that either the Blake family were members of the Church of England at the time of their marriage and moved toward religious dissent during William's childhood, or else they were dissenters of very

vember 1723. Born, that is, just two weeks after Catherine. It looks as though there may have been two couples named John and Elizabeth Wright resident in St. Martin's parish and we can take our research into Catherine Wright's ancestry no further.

³⁴ A list of Muggletonians contemporary with William Blake, with further comment on Thompson's hypothesis, is given in the Appendix.



Genealogy of the Armitage, Blake and Wright Families

mild persuasion (maybe Moravian, maybe Methodist) who perhaps objected to the Anglican clergy (a political stance) but had no overriding theological objection to Anglican rites and ceremonies. When Blake died in 1827, he was buried, like his father, mother, brothers and aunt, at Bunhill Fields, the dissenters' burial ground. But, at his own request, the burial service followed the Anglican Prayer Book.³⁵ Certainly Blake's expressed wish to be buried at Bunhill Fields, but by the Anglican rite, is not suggestive of any extreme dissenting background. Thompson fails to give due weight to the will and the rate books in his anxiety to link Catherine with the Muggletonian George Hermitage. Despite Thompson's considerable eminence and reputation as a historian, the fundamentals of his historicism, in this instance, are seriously limited by his failure to see the relative significance of his archival sources. He fails, in fact, to adhere to the normal canons of probability.

The implication of the surviving documents is that the elder Blakes were more conventional in their religion and political beliefs than some scholars have romantically envisaged. Or at least, as shopkeepers with a clientele that included the St. James's Parish, they found it expedient to conceal their views.³⁶ The social and political implications of what we know about Blake's parentage must now be amended in the light of these discoveries.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to David Worrall, Ted Ryan, and my brother Geoff, who read and commented on successive drafts of this paper. Particular thanks must go to John Sargent of the City of Westminster Archives Centre for his invaluable assistance in obtaining photographs of documents deposited with the Archives Centre. An earlier version of this paper was read to the Blake Society in December 1998.

Appendix: Blake's Muggletonian contemporaries, or, whatever became of Uncle George?

The register of St. James's Church, Piccadilly contains just two entries for the name Hermitage: on 7 July 1727, "L^y Hermitage" married Francis Nequier, and on 14 November 1742, Elizabeth Hermitage, the infant daughter of George and Susanna, was baptized. I can find no further trace of the mysterious aristocrat ("Lady Hermitage"?) who married

there in 1727. The George Hermitage whose daughter was baptized in 1742 may well be the contributor to the *Divine Songs of the Muggletonians* mentioned by Thompson.³⁷ But, as is shown below, no Hermitages survived to become Muggletonian contemporaries of William Blake.

Thanks to the efforts of E. P. Thompson, the British Library's Department of Manuscripts now contains the *Muggletonian Archives*. Vol. 2 of the *Archives* (BLAdd. 60169) contains on fols. 102-03, "A Collection of the Names of Male Friends Residing in England" dated Aug^t 14th 1803. A transcript of these pages follows:

[fol. 102r]

Names of Male Friends Residing in England.

In London

M^r Pickersgill Sen^r
 M^r Pickersgill Jun^r
 M^r Geo. Smith
 M^r Silcox
 M^r Vincent Sen^r
 M^r Vincent Jun^r
 M^r J. Tregunno
 M^r T. Tregunno
 M^r W^m Robinson
 M^r Rob^t Robinson
 M^r Geo. Robinson
 M^r Sedgwick
 M^r Cates
 M^r Frost
 M^r Wade
 M^r Hack
 M^r Hurcum
 M^r Williams
 M^r White
 M^r J. Dawson
 M^r Hovenden
 M^r Pearson
 M^r W^m Wade
 M^r Deal
 M^r Read
 M^r Labdon
 M^r Lynch Sen^r
 M^r Lynch Jun^r
 M^r Boatwright

³⁵ J. T. Smith's brief life of Blake, quoted in Bentley, *Blake Records* 476. Smith states that Blake requested a "service . . . of the Church of England." Alexander Gilchrist presumably drew on Smith for the account in his *Life of William Blake, "Pictor Ignotus"* (London: MacMillan, 1863) 1: 361.

³⁶ Stanley Gardner, *Blake's Innocence and Experience Retraced* (London: Athlone Press, 1986) documents the Blake family's commercial dealings with St. James's Parish.

³⁷ Joseph Frost and Isaac Frost, editors, *Divine Songs of the Muggletonians in Grateful Praise to the Only True God, the Lord Jesus Christ* (London: R. Brown, 1829) contains two songs by George Hermitage. However, there are no Hermitages (nor Blakes, nor Wrights for that matter) among the subscribers to this work.

The song "Praise's to my Maker's glory" (page 132), by George Hermitage, is set to the tune *Stella darling of the muses* from Giovanni Battista Pescetti's opera *Demetrio*, revived at the King's Theatre, London, in 1737. The date certainly fits in with the George Hermitage who lived in St. James's parish.

M^r Fleming
 M^r J. Sheilds
 M^r Tho^s Tyley
 M^r Johnson
 M^r Rob^t Mills
 M^r Abr^m Mills

35

In Kent

M^r Rob^t Dawson
 M^r Abr^m Tregunno
 M^r W^m Tregunno
 M^r Bowen
 M^r Abbott
 M^r Farley
 M^r Burr
 M^r Bowles
 & About 12 More, names unknown

20

In Hertfordshire

M^r John Twyne
 M^r W^m Twyne
 M^r John Chalkley
 M^r W^m Chalkley
 M^r J. Clemitson
 M^r Parker

6

In Norwich

M^r Tho^s Hill
 M^r John Minns
 M^r Rob^t Waller
 M^r David Murrill
 M^r W^m Murtin
 M^r John Johnson
 M^r Rob^t Lawes
 M^r W^m Hoe
 M^r James Sutton
 M^r Joseph Sutton
 M^r John Sutton

11

[fol. 102v blank]

[fol. 103r]

In Derbyshire

John Cotes
 Jonathan Cotes
 Edw^d Moore
 John Norman
 Sam^l Cutler
 Tho^s Briggs
 Geo. Taylor
 Benjⁿ Hall
 Geo. Hunt
 Jos^h Robinson
 Jos^h Alexander

W^m Maddox & 2 Sons
 W^m Wright
 Francis Scarrat
 John Carwithen
 John Hunter
 Ferdinand Turton
 2 More, names unknown

21

Divers Places

M ^r Holmes	Walworth
M ^r Rich ^d Tyley	Old Ford
M ^r Richd Smith	Ireland
M ^r Mathiss	
M ^r Osmond	Bath & Bristol
M ^r Woods	

6

In all about 100 Male Friends, Aug^t 14th 1803.

These 83 names from perhaps 63 families represent the extent of the Muggletonian community in Blake's time. Fewer than 30 families have London addresses. There are Muggletonians in Derbyshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Norfolk, Somerset, Surrey, and Ireland, but there is no reference to the Armitage (or Harmitage, or Hermitage) or Blake families. The only Wright lived in Derbyshire. There are no families listed with the Yorkshire connection that I would have expected were there to be Muggletonian Armitages. There is just no evidence whatsoever linking William Blake to the Muggletonian community.