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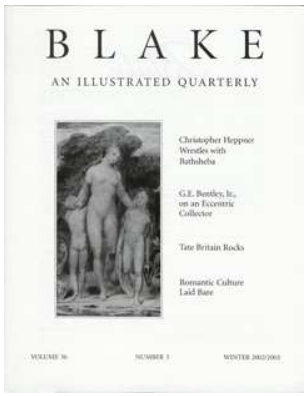

A R T I C L E

Bathsheba Revisited

Christopher Heppner

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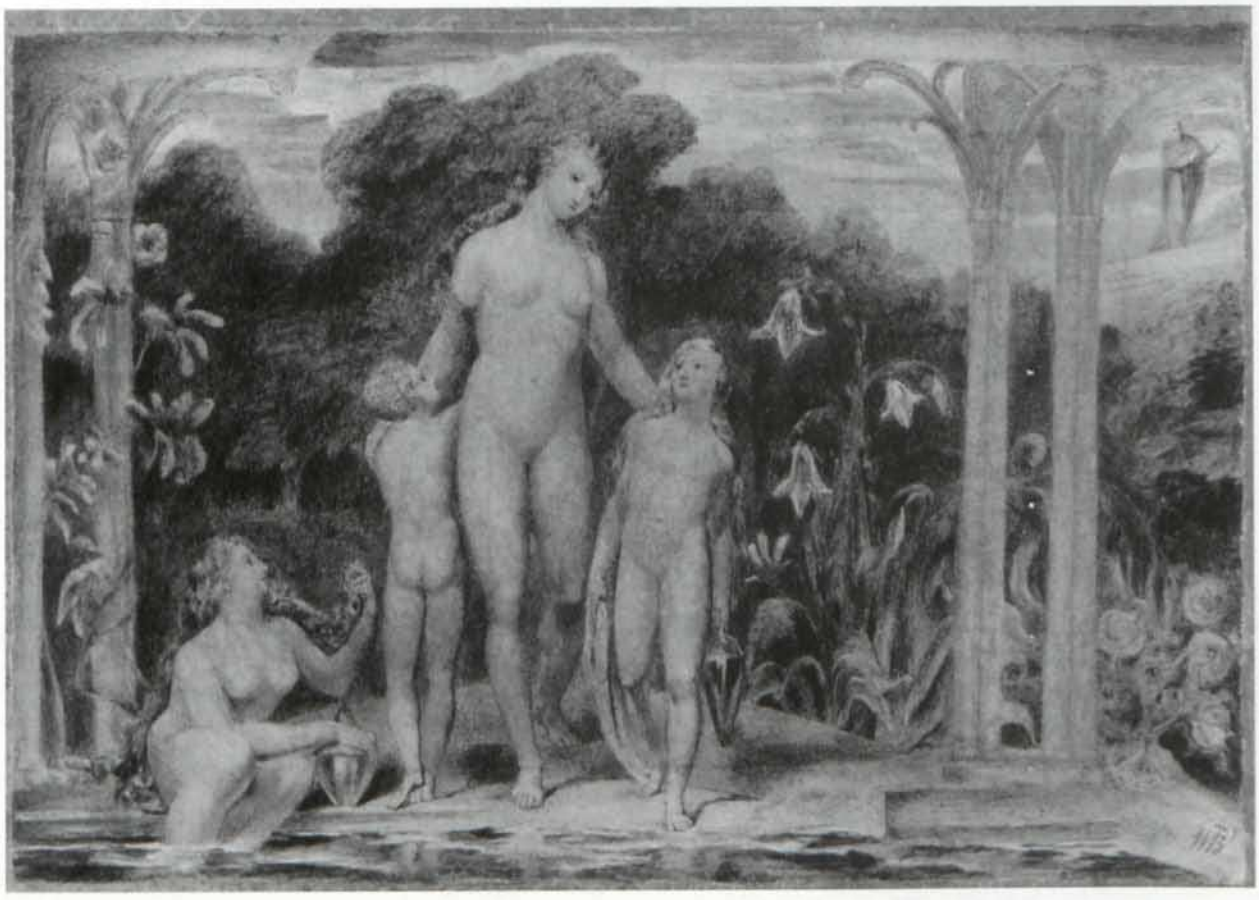

1. William Blake, *Bathsheba at the Bath*. © Tate, London 2001.

Bathsheba Revisited

By Christopher Heppner

The present essay is prompted by two desires, the first to delete and overwrite what I now consider a mistaken reading offered some years ago of Blake's *Bathsheba at the Bath* (Tate, B 390; illus. 1),[1] and the second to revisit the complex interactions between already existing narratives and Blake's own thoughts and mythology, in a further effort to understand the process of invention that created such images. Associated with this latter aim is the desire to explore again the reasons for the resistance of many of Blake's designs, including this, to definitive interpretation.

Bathsheba has to date drawn little commentary, most of that little focused on questions of style. Bindman calls it "strikingly Venetian" in spirit, pointing to the "sensuality of the naked figures" as suggestive of Correggio, and to the "luxuriance of the palm trees by the pond" (has he mistaken the ornamental wooden pillars for trees?) as prompted by "study of original paintings by Titian and perhaps Veronese."[2] Butlin's catalogue entry comments that "This particularly sensuous picture suggests the influence of Parmigianino or Correggio, whose work would have been known to Blake through engravings if not from actual paintings." Neither of these writers aims at a detailed reading of the design.

My first attempt to interpret the design focused on the anomalous presence of the two children; the Bible records no children born to Bathsheba before David's abduction, and no such children appear in previous illustrations of the episode. I proposed that this made it impossible to identify the central figure as Bathsheba, and that she must represent Maachah, a previous wife of David, with her two children Absalom and Tamar (1 Chronicles 3:2 and 2 Samuel 13). I identified the seated woman at our left as

1. Christopher Heppner, *Reading Blake's Designs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 175-78.

2. David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977) 127.

Bathsheba, despite her visually subordinate position. Though the presence of those children still presents a major problem, I now find unacceptable both the radical disjunction that reading created between the center of implied narrative interest and the center of visual attention, and the associated displacement of a slim and attractive young woman by a heavier, even Rubenesque figure of doubtful seductiveness in Blake's eyes. I retract that reading and try again, beginning with a brief sketch of some key moments in the interpretive history of the scene in order to foreground what is new and different in Blake's version of the episode.[3]

Medieval interpretation read the scene typologically as representing the marriage between David as Christ and Bathsheba as the Church, the latter washing herself in order to become worthy of her spouse.[4] In late medieval times there was a shift from typology towards moralizing, Bathsheba often being used as an illustration of the dangerous seductiveness of female beauty, particularly when nakedly exposed.

The subject was not common in the early Renaissance, but a little later Raphael created a version for the loggia of the Vatican, reproduced in several engravings, including one by Sisto Badalocchio. Raphael shows David in the background watching Bathsheba, who sits alone in the foreground on a raised terrace beside a large basin of water, combing out her hair, and naked apart from draped loins. Along the street separating Bathsheba from David run a multitude of armed soldiers, two or three of whom look at Bathsheba as they rush by, though the majority disregard such charming but for the moment irrelevant sights. The design implies that Bathsheba is being rather ostentatious in appearing in so public a space, but does not clear David from guilt, as his better disciplined soldiers show.

Giulio Romano designed (Rinaldo did the actual painting) a series of frescoes on the life of David for a loggia in the Palazzo del Te in Mantua. The *Toilet of Bathsheba* shows her tended by three young maidservants. The sequel, *David Spying upon Bathsheba*, shows a nude Bathsheba with her foot in a fountain; an attendant holds a drape up behind her, as if to protect her from the eyes of David, who looks across from a nearby window, accompanied by another man who points towards Bathsheba. There are flowers around the balustrade of the fountain, and trees in the background.[5] Verheyen suggests that the fresco reflects Romano's desire to please his patron Federigo Il Gonzago, who hired Romano to build and decorate a splendid palace outside Mantua. Like David, Gonzago had loved another man's wife, and had caused the death of her husband; Romano may have intended to use the parallels to clear both David and Gonzago of serious wrongdoing: "What was lawful for the gods could not be wrong for Federigo; if he considered himself a second David, why then should he be ashamed of his love of someone else's wife?"[6]

The subject also attracted a few Venetian painters. Paris Bordone produced a version, now in Cologne, interesting for its Serlio-based perspective architecture and for the lemon bushes behind Bathsheba and her assistants, which suggest the possibility of a botanical allegory, since lemon trees were often interpreted as connoting the bittersweet nature of erotic experience.[7] Veronese also painted a version, now at Lyons, notable for a fully dressed Bathsheba, who sits below a nude male sculpture and is addressed by a mature, bearded man who looks oddly out of character as he seems to plead David's case.[8]

The Flemish Hans Memling produced an interesting version in the second half of the fifteenth century, now in Stuttgart. This indoor scene shows a nude Bathsheba stepping out of an elaborate bath as she is helped into a white shift by a young servant. On the floor are waiting slippers, an empty plate, a pitcher, and a small dog. There is an open window through which can be seen the small figure of David watching intently from a distant balcony. He is very much a peeping-Tom intruder, while Bathsheba's modest behavior absolves her of any charge of provocative self-display. The decorously domestic atmosphere suggests that Memling may be responding to the text's implication that the washing observed by David may have been the ritual cleansing after menstruation: "for she was purified from her uncleanness" (2 Samuel 11:4).[9]

The northern Protestant tradition, developed in German and Netherlandish prints in the first half of the sixteenth century, placed Bathsheba among other unchaste or seductive women.[10] Dürer's 1521 sketch for the council room at Nuremburg showing, in separate episodes, Bathsheba in the bath, Samson and Delilah, and Aristotle and Phyllis, is in

3. See Elisabeth Kunoth-Leifels, *Uber die Darstellungen der "Bathseba im Bade": Studien zur Geschichte des Bildthemas 4. bis 17. Jahrhundert* (Essen, 1962), for an overview of the iconographic history up to the late seventeenth century.

4. Louis Réau, *Iconographie De L'Art Chrétien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957) II.i.273. See also Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York: Norton, 1968) 27, for St. Gregory's allegory, that makes David innocent, and Uriah culpable.

5. The frescoes are reproduced in Frederick Hartt, *Giulio Romano* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958) vol. 2, #334, 335. See also Ernst Gombrich et al., *Giulio Romano* (Milan: Electa, 1989) 364.

6. Egon Verheyen, *The Palazzo del Te in Mantua: Images of Love and Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 33.

7. See Peter Daly, ed., *Andreas Alciatus*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985) Emblem 207.

8. Both of these are illustrated and discussed by Kunoth-Leifels, *Darstellung* illus. 30 and 31, pp. 39-42.

9. The painting is reproduced, and very briefly discussed, in Bruce Bernard, *The Bible and its Painters* (New York: Macmillan, 1983) 99 and 284.

10. Eric Jan Sluitjer, "Rembrandt's Bathsheba and the Conventions of a Seductive Theme," in Ann Jensen Adams, ed., *Rembrandt's "Bathsheba Reading King David's Letter"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 49.

this tradition.[11] Heinrich Aldegrever, praised by Blake as one of the "old original Engravers, who were great Masters in Painting and Designing" (*First Chaucer Prospectus*, E 567), produced an interesting print in 1532 (illus. 2).[12] This shows a naked and seated Bathsheba in full view of David. Her left arm suggests the gesture of the Medici *Venus pudica*, though her hand covers her shoulder rather than her breast; perhaps she is showing modesty before David's gaze. Another equally naked woman stands to our left; her relationship with Bathsheba is not made clear, though I see no implication that she is a maidservant. Maarten van Heemskerck produced an influential composition ca. 1566 made known through an engraving by Herman J. Muller distributed in several editions, including one signed by Hieronymus Cock. In this design, Bathsheba, tended by several maidservants, reaches out to receive a letter from David's messenger; an ointment jar, a jewel box, and a mirror emphasize that Bathsheba is preening herself, and evoke associations with such allegorical figures as Superbia and Vanity. The design is in fact the sixth in a series drawn by van Heemskerck to illustrate the Ten Commandments, and has the words "non moechaberis.exod.xx" ("Thou shalt not commit adultery") along the lower edge.[13] In many of the northern versions an old woman appeared, regularly interpreted as a bawd, and often carrying a letter understood to be from David. In addition to the adulterous implications of this, the juxtaposition of old and young reflected both vanity and the transience of earthly beauty.[14] The moral climate had become distinctly chilly for Bathsheba.

2. Heinrich Aldegrever, *Bathsheba at the Bath*. Courtesy British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

Rembrandt produced two versions of the story; the first, dated 1643, "portrayed Bathsheba as a more or less 'active' seductress";[15] his later (1654) and more famous Louvre version of *Bathsheba Reading King David's Letter* offers a more complex response to the story. It was in London by the early nineteenth century, but was not reproduced in a print before 1876, and was almost certainly unknown to Blake.[16] This shows an older woman tending Bathsheba's foot, while the latter holds a letter, already it seems read and now being digested; whether the older woman was also the bearer of the letter is unclear. Bathsheba is conspicuously bejewelled. The feelings passing over her face are complex and subtle, but taken together with the jewels suggest some degree of complicity or acceptance.

The last painting I shall mention is that by Rubens, now at Dresden, painted before Rembrandt's second version. Here Bathsheba sits beside a fountain, her breasts and thigh fetchingly exposed to the viewer though her loins are draped and her nearer arm is lightly veiled. Her hair is being combed by a young female attendant, while she looks over her shoulder at a black page who proffers a letter, evidently an invitation or summons from the David visible on the balcony of the palace behind the bathing scene. A pearl string is draped around her left forearm, and hangs down between her fingers.

The iconographic history shows that Bathsheba was often seen as a woman of some wealth, proud of her appearance and grooming, and not averse to making a public display of her beauty. Many images imply that she shares in

11. Kunoth-Leifels, *Darstellung* illus. 25a and 25b, and p. 33.

12. Kunoth-Leifels, *Darstellung* 44-45.

13. Sluitjer, "Rembrandt's Bathsheba" 50, and Ilja M. Veldman (comp.), Ger Luijten (ed.), *The New Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450-1700: Maarten van Heemskerck, Part I* (Roosendaal, Netherlands: Koninklijke von Poll, 1993) 66-67.

14. Sluitjer, "Rembrandt's Bathsheba" 52-53.

15. Sluitjer, "Rembrandt's Bathsheba" 81.

16. Gary Schwartz states that the painting, bought by William Young Ottley some time before 1811, was not mentioned in any published record before that date: "'Though deficient in beauty': A Documentary History and Interpretation of Rembrandt's 1654 Painting of Bathsheba," in Adams, ed., *Rembrandt's "Bathsheba"* 176-80. Blake did not make Ottley's acquaintance until 1827—see G.E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 341.

David's guilt by her self-exposure, triggering his desire to possess her. She is frequently shown with attendants, who are often tainted with the suspicion of acting as bawds to David's desires, a function sometimes made explicit by the non-biblical motif of the bearing of a letter of assignation. Such implications of female complicity or worse in Bathsheba's fate have aroused such feminist commentary as that embodied in the collection of essays edited by Ann Jensen Adams and in Mieke Bal's *Lethal Love* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

Blake may have known a few of these versions through prints, but his version has very little in common with any of them, except in showing David as a small and distant figure, and in possibly following Aldegrever's addition of a second standing nude woman, though Blake has as I now think reversed the positions of the two, making Bathsheba, very unusually, the standing figure. Blake's tempera surprises also in the prominence of the flowers that surround the bath, and in the unexampled children accompanying Bathsheba, whose presence confirms the probability that Blake is pursuing themes rather different from those proposed by previous versions.

A search for Blake's intentions can begin with what the biblical account tells about David and Bathsheba and their meeting. Bathsheba is one of the female ancestors of Jesus in Matthew's genealogy: "And Jesse begat David the king; and David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias" (Matthew 1:6). Luke traces a different line: "Matthatha, which was the son of Nathan, which was the son of David, Which was the son of Jesse" (Luke 3: 31-32), cutting out both Bathsheba and Solomon. Nathan was the prophet who promised David an eternal dynasty, but then rebuked him for adultery with Bathsheba, threatening him with a divinely sanctioned death, which upon David's repentance was shifted to the first child born of the adulterous union.

In the story in 2 Samuel, Bathsheba is identified by one of David's servants or friends (doubtless the other man in Giulio Romano's version), who comes back with the news or rumor "Is this not Bathsheba the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" (2 Samuel 11:3). Eliam was the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite (2 Samuel 23:34), one of David's counselors, who joined Absalom's rebellion and advised Absalom to allow Ahithophel and twelve thousand men to put to flight David's men and then kill the king himself (2 Samuel 17:1-3); his counsel was undermined by Hushai "to the intent that the Lord might bring evil upon Absalom" (2 Samuel 17:14), and Ahithophel finally hung himself upon seeing "that his counsel was not followed" (2 Samuel 17:23). This raises the possibility that David's seizure of Bathsheba represented an act of revenge against the dead Ahithophel, Bathsheba's grandfather, but there are no signs that such an interpretation is at play in any representation of David and Bathsheba known to me.

David, like Bathsheba, figures in the genealogy of Jesus as father of Solomon. In Christian interpretation David is not only an ancestor (Matthew 22:42, Mark 12:35, etc.) but also a type of Jesus in his roles as poet, shepherd and prince (Ezekiel 34:23-24). Though a hero, he committed great errors and even crimes. Nathan sums up the contradiction in the parable of the rich man and the poor man; the rich man, visited by a traveller, and wishing to provide a feast, kills not one of his own numerous flock, but the ewe lamb of the poor man. Nathan, speaking on behalf of God, applies the parable to David:

> I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah. . . . Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife. (2 Samuel 12:8-10)

This is the double face of David: rich in gifts and power, but unable to resist the temptation to abuse both on occasion, to the detriment of both Israel and himself. Despite founding the kingship of Israel, he was destined never to fulfill the ambition to build a better house for the ark of God than the "curtains" within which it dwelled (2 Samuel 7:2); God confirmed to David via Nathan that it would be left to the "seed . . . which shall proceed out of thy bowels" (i.e. Solomon) to "build an house for my name" (2 Samuel 7:12-13).

Blake left some evidence for his views of David and Bathsheba. His one textual reference to Bathsheba[17] again reflects Matthew's genealogy rather than Luke's (though with a large difference):

> I see the Maternal Line, I behold the Seed of Woman!
> Cainah, & Ada & Zillah & Naamah Wife of Noah.
> Shuahs daughter & Tamar & Rahab the Canaanites:
> Ruth the Moabite & Bathsheba of the daughters of Heth
> Naamah the Ammonite, Zibeah the Philistine, & Mary
> These are the Daughters of Vala, Mother of the Body of death[.] (*Jerusalem* 62, E 213)

These female ancestors of Jesus were of considerable interest to Blake, and he pictured several of them: Ada and Zillah in the large color print of *Lamech and His Two Wives* (B 297), Ruth in the print of *Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah* (B

17. There is a "Visionary Head of Bathsheba with Uriah" (B 699); see Robert N. Essick, *The Works of William Blake in the Huntington Collections* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1985) 84. Essick records that Rossetti described this Bathsheba as "sweet, soft, yielding, witty"; this comment on a drawing done at least twenty years after the tempera offers no interpretive guidance here.

299—despite the name given to the print, all of Blake's references to the subject name Ruth rather than Naomi as the focus), Bathsheba in the present design, and Mary in many designs.

S. Foster Damon (s.v. "Maternal Line") comments on the passage cited above:

> the traceable female ancestry of Mary, and hence of Jesus. As the genealogies given by Matthew and Luke both trace his ancestry (surprisingly) through Joseph, Blake accepted the Roman theory that Mary was Joseph's cousin; and as he believed that all she gave her son was this mortal and sinful body, it seemed appropriate to him that her female ancestry included some of the worst characters in the Old Testament.

Morton D. Paley repeats the notion that Blake's "Maternal Line" represents the ancestry of Mary, crediting Sloss and Wallis as well as Damon.[18] However, Damon has misread Sloss and Wallis, who wrote that Blake "sets out to trace the ancestry of Jesus on the maternal side in such a manner as to stress the element of 'feminine delusion' noticed elsewhere in his use of the term 'maternal'"; they then annotate the names listed, showing that all are involved in the descent from Adam to Jesus.[19]

Blake is listing not the ancestry of Mary, which is nowhere given in the Bible beyond the statement that she was a cousin of Elizabeth "of the daughters of Aaron" (Luke 1:5), but rather some of the women who were wives or consorts of the male ancestors of Jesus; I do not know Damon's evidence for the theory that Blake used a Roman notion that Mary was Joseph's cousin. Cainah was presumably invented as the wife needed to make Cainan an ancestor of Jesus, as he is in Luke 3:36; Ada and Zillah were the wives of Lamech, the father of Noah, and thus one of them was Noah's mother; Naamah's role is clear; Shuah's daughter is the wife of Judah, also in Luke's list (3:30); Tamar is almost certainly the woman with whom Judah lies in Genesis 38 (cf. Ruth 4:12), begetting the Pharez who appears in both lists (Matthew 1:3, Luke 3:33). Rahab is problematical, but there is a Rachab upon whom Solomon begat Booz in Matthew 1:5, and the story of Rahab the harlot ends with her and all her family being integrated into Israel, so that "she dwelleth in Israel even unto this day" (Joshua 6:25)—Blake may have assumed that her blood entered into the ancestry of Jesus in some general way, while she added to the strain of outsiders and transgressors among the female ancestors: "If [Jesus] intended to take on Sin / The Mother should an Harlot been" (E 877). Ruth, a Moabite, and Bathsheba, "of the daughters of Heth" (i.e. a Hittite) add further outsider blood to the mix. Damon suggests that Zibeah the Philistine is the Zibiah of Beersheba listed as the mother of Jehoash (or Joash) in 2 Kings 12:1, though since he is not in the lineage given by either evangelist, it remains unclear why Blake has included Zibeah—perhaps as mother of a king of Israel she can be assumed to have participated in the ongoing process of incarnating Israel.

These women are described by Blake both as a "Line," implying successiveness, and as sisters, "Daughters of Vala," implying that they are sibling collaborators in the continuing process of the creation of the "Body of death." Blake uses this phrase in several other contexts, as in *The Four Zoas*, where Enitharmon taunts Los: "Howl thou over the body of death tis thine" (E 323), and in plate 13 of *Milton*: "For then the Body of Death was perfected in hypocrite holiness, / Around the Lamb, a Female Tabernacle woven in Cathedrons Looms" (E 107). On plate 9 of *Jerusalem* we find Los testifying that he saw "disease forming a Body of Death around the Lamb / Of God, to destroy Jerusalem, & to devour the body of Albion" (E 152). Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi suggest that the phrase may refer to the doctrine of the virgin birth or a false notion of the incarnation;[20] more generally, the phrase covers all those processes through which history incrusts an imagination embodied within time and space. In Night the Eighth of *The Four Zoas* those in Eternity use a related phrase in urging on the incarnation: "Assume the dark Satanic body in the Virgins womb / O Lamb divin[e]" (E 377). Like many of Blake's terms, "Body of death" can be interpreted from both positive and negative perspectives; the Eternals urge on the incarnation because they understand its creative necessity, but they also lament the inevitable darkening of the light by its enclosure in a dying body. The end-product of the process of incarnation can be called "the Body of death," but is also the path to life; as the Divine Voice comforts Jerusalem at the prospect of the incarnation, "behold Joseph & Mary / And be comforted O Jerusalem" (*Jerusalem*, E 211).

The "Daughters of Vala" are the mothers not of Mary but of Israel and finally of Jesus. Their function, however, is only to weave bodies, and Blake's deep ambivalence about bodies shapes his interpretation of Vala and probably of her daughter Bathsheba. Doubtless Blake was working with a model of reproduction that attributed the gift of life to the male seed, and saw the womb as merely the matrix from which the seed took sustenance as it grew (cf. "Vala produc'd the Bodies. Jerusalem gave the Souls" [*Jerusalem*, E 163]). Bathsheba, in Blake's only textual reference to her, as a "Daughter of Vala" and metaphorically an elder sister of Mary, has a role in the incarnation of the progressive stages of the human imagination.

18. Morton D. Paley, ed., *William Blake:* Jerusalem (Princeton: William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press, 1991) 231.

19. D.J. Sloss and J.P.R. Wallis, eds., *The Prophetic Writings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926) I:560.

20. Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, eds., *William Blake:* Milton a Poem (Princeton: William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press, 1993) 137.

Blake's view of David has a sharp cleavage line that reflects Nathan's critique; David was both king and "great poet" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, E 39), not a conjunction normally found in Blake, and capable of both heroic action and great wickedness. Blake's view of David is not made more transparent by the idiosyncratic punctuation of a key statement: *Jerusalem* 27 tells us that "when compulsory cruel Sacrifices had brought Humanity into a Feminine Tabernacle, in the loins of Abraham & David: the Lamb of God, the Saviour became apparent on Earth as the Prophets had foretold" (E 174). Are the "loins of Abraham & David" the space of the "Feminine Tabernacle," or are they part of the (pro)creative process that made "apparent on Earth" the Savior? The logic of Blake's argument implies that the "Return of Israel" (E 174) is the process begun by Abraham and continued by David: "Jesus as also Abraham & David considerd God as a Man in the Spiritual or Imaginative Vision" (annotations to Berkeley's *Siris*, E 663). The "Saviour became apparent on Earth" in (through) the loins of Abraham and David, though all incarnation (becoming apparent) takes place through the medium of a "Feminine Tabernacle." The punctuation invites us to take it both ways.

Both Abraham and David are focal points for Blake's version of the history of human progress as recorded in the Bible. Abraham was "called to succeed the Druidical age, which began to turn allegoric and mental sacrifice into corporeal command, whereby human sacrifice would have depopulated the earth" (*A Descriptive Catalogue*, E 542-43). David's role was that of heroic defender of his people, and carrier of a poetic power that supported the "allegoric and mental" against the "corporeal"; his playing of the harp, for instance, had power to drive evil spirits away from Saul (1 Samuel 16:23). In another episode, David thanked Abigail for urging him to spare his enemies: "blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand" (1 Samuel 25:33). In such moments David advanced the cause of the imagination, transforming revenge as Abraham had transformed sacrifice.

But Blake also offers David as one "Example of the possibility of Human Beastliness" to be found in the "Jewish Scriptures" (annotations to *An Apology for the Bible*, E 614); the good will "abhor wickedness in David or Abraham" (E 618). In both Abraham and David, wickedness was intimately mingled with great good; in the case of David, a form of resolution is achieved in his buying the threshing floor from Araunah and there building an altar to the Lord, who in response stays a plague from Israel (2 Samuel 24:18-25). Blake describes Araunah "emptying out the vanities of Riches & Worldly Honours" (*A Vision of The Last Judgment*, E 557) in an act that symbolically cleanses both David and kingship. Perhaps Blake envisioned David's taking Bathsheba for himself as another version of the fortunate fall, as a movement prompted by the energy of desire, initially destructive but ending in the happy conception of one who played a role in leading Israel—humanity—towards the freer future embodied in Jesus.

Blake portrayed both aspects of David in his art. The heroic young David is the subject of a drawing in the Visionary Heads notebook (B 698) and of *Goliath Cursing David* (B 457); a maturer David is shown in *David Pardoning Absalom* (B 459). *David Delivered out of Many Waters* (B 462), based as Butlin points out on Psalm 18, shows David entangled with ropes and looking up at flying angels while, at center top, Jesus descends to save him from drowning. This David has been dragged down by "the floods of ungodly men," "the sorrows of hell" and "the snares of death," disasters that are the result of his own errors as well as the ill-will of others; he needs redemption by his descendant.

As with Bathsheba, Blake shows an interest in David's role in the genealogy leading to Jesus, and in the late *Epitome of James Hervey's Meditations among the Tombs* (B 770) visualizes some of the key figures. Adam and Eve with the Serpent are followed by Cain and Abel and then Enoch and Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Aaron, and, a little lower, David and Solomon. At the bottom is Jesus at the moment of transfiguration, flanked by Moses and Elias. The painting also shows, between Noah and Abraham, figures labelled "Mother of Leah & Rachel" and "Mother of Rebecca"; it is a minor oddity of the Genesis narrative that these mothers are never named. Rebekah was the wife of Isaac and mother of Jacob and Esau; Leah and Rachel were won as wives by Jacob, and between them produced the tribes of Israel. Blake has given both visibility and a title ("Mother of . . .") to these unnamed women who occupy key positions in Matthew's lineage. It remains to be seen whether recognition of this incorporation by Blake of the genealogies and stories of the Bible into his mythologized vision of the history of culture offers any leverage in interpreting Blake's tempera.

Some aspects of Blake's *Bathsheba* follow the biblical text or iconographic tradition. The blue sky streaked with orange, for instance, reflects the biblical narrative's note that the sighting of Bathsheba took place "in an evening-tide" (2 Samuel 11:2). David is portrayed, as became usual in the iconography of the episode, as a small figure in the background. His gesture is easily read in both conventional and Blakean language; his raised arms as he catches sight of the unexpected beauty before him echo the reaching arms of "Mans desires" in plate V of *There is No Natural Religion (a)*. Blake has also followed a common iconographic tradition in showing Bathsheba with another figure or figures at the bath, though in this case the other figure appears not to be the usual maidservant. There are, however, major novelties in Blake's design that demand and challenge interpretation, in particular the prominence of the flowers and the children.

I have elsewhere made the argument that Blake, in approaching texts other than his own, often modified them in the direction of his mythology, or, better, his mode of poetic thinking, though he did not simply substitute that myth for the text being illustrated.[21] I offered as underlying model the notion that Blake was practising an art of invention akin to Le Bossu's theory of epic invention, the most widespread theory of the time. Here is the most succinct articulation of that theory:

> The first thing we are to begin with for Composing a Fable, is to chuse the Instruction, and the point of Morality, which is to serve as its Foundation . . . In the next place this Moral Truth must be reduc'd into Action, and a general Action must be feign'd in Imitation of the true and singular Actions [that illustrate the point chosen] . . . then [the Poet] should look for the Names of some Persons (to whom a parallel Action has either truly or probably happen'd) in History, or some well-known Fables: And lastly, he ought to place his Action under their Names. Thus it will be really feign'd and invented by the Author, and yet will seem to be taken out of some very ancient History and Fable.[22]

The theory allowed for "accommodation" between the originating "Moral Truth" and the "History" under the names of which it was placed.

A letter to Butts dated 6 July 1803 records Blake's own comments on such "accommodation" in the context of another illustration of the Bible, the *Riposo*, which

> represents the Holy Family in Egypt Guarded in their Repose from those Fiends the Egyptian Gods. and tho' not taken directly from a Poem of Miltons . . . yet it is very similar to his Hymn on the Nativity. . . . I have given in the background a building which may be supposed the ruin of a Part of Nimrods tower which I conjecture to have spread over many Countries for he ought to be reckoned of the Giant brood. (E 729)

Blake regards the Bible, like Milton's work, as a poem, to be treated with respect as "an original derivation from the Poetic Genius" (E 1), as was Milton's epic, but subject to reinterpretation by "Conscience or the Word of God Universal" which empowers "every man [to] converse with God & be a King & Priest in his own house" (E 615). In this case Blake expands upon the tradition surrounding Nimrod's tower, the tower of Babel (Genesis 10: 9-10), adding the "conjecture" that the cursed culture which he created spread over the whole earth. "[S]upposed" and "conjecture" imply the playfully imaginative insertion of new meaning into the original text, which however remains almost intact; "accommodation" rather than superimposition and replacement.

Unfortunately the picture here described is lost, but there is extant a closely related watercolor, *The Repose of the Holy Family in Egypt* (B 472). This shows small and inconspicuous ruins on the banks of the river that flows between the distant pyramids and the holy family in the foreground. Assuming that the lost painting described by Blake showed similar architecture, it seems that Blake could assign to inconspicuous images meanings more explicit than any we should feel safe in assigning ourselves, meanings that substantially expand those inherent in the subject as given. Simultaneously, we learn that it would be unwise to ignore objects clearly present in a design, though not taken directly from the original subject, even if we are initially unsure what they might mean.

Before attempting to reconstruct the motivation for Blake's unique transformation of the story of Bathsheba, using some process of "accommodation" as possible key, there is another question to settle. Blake's biblical paintings were commissioned and paid for by Butts, a practising Christian,[23] who may have had a hand in choosing the subjects: "I wish to ask you what subject you choose to be painted on the remaining Canvas" (E 720). However, Blake also wrote to Butts claiming his "Just Right as an Artist & as a Man. & if any attempt should be made to refuse me this I am inflexible & will relinquish Any engagement of Designing at all unless altogether left to my own Judgment. As you My dear Friend have always left me" (E 731). We do not know whether the subject of *Bathsheba* was chosen for Blake by Butts, proposed as one possibility among others, or freely chosen by Blake, but we can assume that Blake shaped the design in accord with his own interests and desires.

We can focus now on those "principal peculiarities and differences from other representations of the scene" that both "demand explanation" and offer a path into the intentionality of a specific design.[24] Despite Giulio Romano's unobtrusive flowers and Bordone's lemon bushes, nothing like Blake's pervasive garden imagery had been offered in previous handlings. Honeysuckle grows around one of the columns on the left of the picture, while drooping lilies fill the space between the young girl and the column to our right, and roses the space separating the further column

21. Heppner, *Reading* 82-86, 120-31.

22. Stuart Curran, ed., *Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic* (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970) 15.

23. The notion that Butts was a Swedenborgian has been generally dropped for lack of specific evidence, though it remains a possibility. The most responsible assessment is that of G.E. Bentley, Jr., who notes that Butts quotes the Archbishop of Canterbury, and summarizes thus: "It is likely that he was an Anglican or a respectable Methodist, but in the absence of evidence it is safest to say that his religious affiliation is unknown." "White Collar Maecenas," *PMLA* 71 (1956): 1053.

24. I am adopting language used by Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 121.

on the right from the frame. Like the distant buildings in *The Repose of the Holy Family in Egypt*, these apparently ornamental flowers may hold at least a partial key to the design's intent.

Here is the core of Rodney Baine's commentary on the honeysuckle:

> One of the most easily distinguishable of the vines of Innocence is the honeysuckle.... Its long tube was for Erasmus Darwin an emblem of fertility: 'With artless grace and native ease she charms / And bears the Horn of Plenty in her arms' (I. 215-16). In Blake's symphony of flowers in *Milton* the honeysuckle is early awakened by the odors of the herbs and flowers as it is 'sleeping on the Oak': 'the flaunting beauty / Revels along upon the wind' (31: 54-55).... In a number of designs Blake seems to have depicted the scarlet trumpet honeysuckle ... long cultivated in English gardens because of its beauty, its evergreen leaves, and the longevity of its flowers.[25]

There is ample evidence for Blake's knowledge and use of Erasmus Darwin, and his treatment of this flower suggests that he was aware of its joyous participation in the "vegetable Loves" of all plant life. After the lines quoted by Baine, Darwin writes "Five rival Swains their tender cares unfold, / And watch with eye askance the treasured gold"—the female stamen, as his note makes clear: "Honeysuckle. Five males, one female."[26] Blake's flowers are reddish in tone, and almost alarmingly fleshy looking; one could without difficulty see both penises and reaching fingers. Should we read Blake's portrayal of the "rival Swains" as a vegetable analog to David's lusting after another man's wife, as representing the sexual energy that reaches out to enter history at this moment?

On the right are white lilies and roses, often paired as Baine notes. The lily was "associated with the bride in The Song of Solomon and praised for its beauty by Christ himself" and had "for centuries symbolized beauty, purity, and divine grace." It was assigned to Mary as an attribute, and often appeared in depictions of the Annunciation. The rose traditionally "suggested love and beauty"; in "the emblem books and the poets, roses usually suggest mercy, grace, beauty, cheerfulness, pleasure, love and marriage, and lyric poetry." The two flowers often appear together in Blake's work; for instance, there is a lily entwined with roses behind Mary in *The Christ Child Asleep on a Cross* (B 410). Baine points out that in *Satan Watching the Endearments of Adam and Eve* (B 536:4) Adam holds a lily and Eve a rose: "Roses and lilies are marital flowers also in *Job*, *Jerusalem*, and apparently also in *Bathsheba at the Bath* ... where the honeysuckle of fertility climbing the column at our left may be intended to remind us of David's line."[27] I shall expand on these suggestions in what follows.

The flowers are consonant with Blake's one poetic reference to Bathsheba as, like Mary, of the "Seed of Woman"; they support the hypothesis that Bathsheba is presented as a type of Mary, as the still unconscious recipient of an Annunciation that will take the form of the regal favor that discovers in her naked beauty the fruitful womb in which to seed the next leader of his people, and another ancestor of Jesus; her beauty and innocence are expressed in the lilies and roses, and her impending fruitfulness in the luxuriant honeysuckle, which also reflects the intrusive but creative sexual energy of David. This offers a conceptualization of the moment of the painting, and integrates Blake's one poetic reference to Bathsheba with the one major design from his hand to show her. We can read Bathsheba as an avatar of Vala without seriously disrupting the biblical account that underlies the design, the insertion of Blake's poetic mythology just giving an extra dimension to a familiar story. Nevertheless, even such a simple connection as this raises questions; can one, for instance, assume enough chronological consistency within Blake's mythology to support interpretation of a tempera painted in 1799-1800 by means of a poetic statement made considerably later? And can we move between Blake's poetry and his painting as if the two were a seamless unity?

Blake's mythology grew and changed. We do not know exactly when Vala entered Blake's myth; the "nameless shadowy female" of *Europe* (E 60) is probably an early version.[28] She seems to have grown in focus and prominence while Blake was illustrating Young's *Night Thoughts*, and by around 1797 she had become the titular figure of *Vala*. Paley sees her presence in several groups of figures in the illustrations to Young, tracing her in such roles as Fate, Life, and Fortune in pursuit of the argument that "Young's personification becomes Blake's symbol" as Blake "assimilated [his subject] into the mythological system that he was creating in his own prophetic works."[29] Margoliouth suggests that we may see the "actual genesis of the name" in a manuscript fragment in which "Vala" has been substituted for an erased word that he declines to read, though he disagrees with Sloss and Wallis's suggested "Mystery";[30] Erdman proposes "[?*Enion*]" (E 845). It looks as if the central concepts which animate Vala entered Blake's imagination some time

25. Rodney M. Baine, with the assistance of Mary R. Baine, *The Scattered Portions* (Athens, Georgia: Baine, 1986) 157.

26. Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden* (London, 1791; facsimile reprint, Scolar Press, 1973) vol. 2, "The Botanic Garden," 21-22.

27. Baine, *Portions* 161-66.

28. See S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965) 369, and Morton D. Paley, *Energy and the Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 166.

29. Morton D. Paley, "Blake's *Night Thoughts*: Explorations of the Fallen World," in Alvin H. Rosenfeld, ed., *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1969) 142-43, 135-36.

30. H.M. Margoliouth, *William Blake's* Vala (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) xix.

before his work on the *Night Thoughts* illustrations and the poem named after her, and grew into focus during that work, but not without difficulty, as witnessed by such occasional slips as a switch between the names of Vala and Enitharmon in *The Four Zoas* 10:17-18 (E 825).[31]

Apart from the tempera itself, there is no evidence to tell us whether by ca. 1800 Blake had already connected Vala with Bathsheba, since the reference in *Jerusalem* to Bathsheba as a daughter of Vala is considerably later. Such a connection, which puts a particular emphasis on the story of David and Bathsheba, though one already implicit within it, needs to be supported by an interpretation of the two children, the most significant departure of the design from both biblical narrative and iconographic tradition. Whose children are they, and why are they present?

The Bible narrative shows considerable interest in the children born to David by former wives and concubines, who are listed in 2 Samuel 12:8; there is further comment in 2 Samuel 5:13-16, 1 Chronicles 3:1-9 and 1 Chronicles 14:3-7. The focus is on children born to David by Bathsheba; 1 Chronicles 3:5 specifies that four children, including Solomon, were born of this relationship, while 2 Samuel 12:13-18 recounts the death of the first born, condemned by God in exchange for the commutation of David's own death sentence when the latter repents. However, the children in the tempera are obviously not David's, and the Bible records no children born to Bathsheba and Uriah.

That the children are Bathsheba's is evident from the familiarly affectionate way in which her arms drape over their shoulders. If Blake has imagined them as born to Bathsheba and Uriah, he may have added them to intensify the pathos of vulnerable women and children exposed to the powerful desires of a king, who is breaking up not only a marriage but also an apparently affectionate family. Such an interpretation, however, does not account for the gesture of the boy, who turns his back on us, and faces in the opposite direction from his mother; his right arm, though hidden from us by Bathsheba's body, seems to reach upwards to caress her hair or neck. There is a puzzling mixture of affection and rejection in his bodily relation to his mother that invites further reflection.

If Bathsheba can be understood from the perspective of Blake's myth, so perhaps can the children, and such a repositioning might throw light on the boy and his ambiguous gesture. Though a boy and a girl together are common in the *Songs*, the key configuration in the early prophecies had been a man, a woman, and a male child: Los and Enitharmon with Orc, their first born. A new emphasis appeared with the image of a woman accompanied by a boy and a girl in the large color print formerly known as *Hecate* (B 316);[32] around this time (nominally 1795) the configuration of a woman with two children, a boy and a girl, became more central to Blake's pictorial imagination. In the *Night Thoughts* watercolors, there are recurring images of a woman with two such children of varying age; they are babes in arms in *NT* 4, lie dead before her in *NT* 28, representing "Nature's . . . Joys" killed "while we clasp"; they become Body and Soul in *NT* 290; they embrace in *NT* 413, and commit adultery in *NT* 467; finally, they are shown at several stages simultaneously in *NT* 512, in spaces created by the branches of Jesus as the vine on which humanity grows: "O what a Root! O what a Branch is Here? / O what a Father! What a Family!" In the course of these illustrations, the young boy/girl couple take on a wide variety of both narrative and allegorical functions.

This new visual emphasis on a young couple (whether implicitly siblings or in a sexual relationship), without illustrating the mythology directly, may nevertheless reflect a shift in the roles of some of its key figures; Los and Enitharmon, who had appeared as parents in earlier poems such as *The Book of Urizen*, now reappear as children of Enion—which shows how difficult it is for interpretation to pass with conviction from visual image to poetic myth, unless the image is in intimate connection with that myth.

Given Blake's later association of Bathsheba with Vala, should we identify the two children in the tempera with Los and Enitharmon, the most conspicuous youthful male and female pair in Blake's mythology, a pair moreover who had recently been revisualized as children rather than as parents? The idea is tempting, but brings problems. One is that the origin of, and relationship between, Los and Enitharmon are both expressed through a wide variety of metaphors: Enitharmon emanates from Los as they both

31. See John B. Pierce, *Flexible Design: Revisionary Poetics in Blake's* Vala *or* The Four Zoas (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1998) 74.

32. There has recently been a move to retitle this print *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy*, on the basis of a catalogue entry by Gert Schiff written for an exhibition in Japan; see "The Night of Enitharmon's Joy," with comments by Morton D. Paley, in *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 36.1 (Summer 2002): 38-39. Schiff accepts a good deal of my earlier reading ("Reading Blake's Designs: *Pity* and *Hecate*," *BRH* 84 (1981): 337-65), but identifies the central person with Enitharmon in the act of "Forbid[ding] all Joy" (*Europe*, E 62); the print "allegorizes Enitharmon's scheme to enslave mankind by way of sexual repression." There is much overlap between our views, but in a later account (*Reading*, 121-31) I proposed that the print offers a Blakean "accommodation" of the story of Medea killing her two children, relating an underlying Blakean meaning to an extant narrative. Schiff's version of allegory seems to me to offer a rather weak explanation of why Blake has portrayed Enitharmon as a witch: "By depicting Enitharmon as a brooding witch, Blake shows that both her religion of chastity and her promise of an afterlife are nothing but evil spells." I am also uncomfortable with Schiff's statement that "The woman's demeanor is expressive of the most perfect indifference"; this ignores the significant triple frown lines visible on her brow in all copies of the print, and also the strongly marked sideways turn of her head. My own second reading, hypothetical though it must remain in the absence of supporting text or inscription, does at least address these issues.

3. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 32. Courtesy Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

separate from the Spectre of Urthona (E 333), they are born as brother and sister from Enion (E 359), they are man and wife, even William and Catherine, as at the end of *Milton*.[33] But nowhere are Los and Enitharmon described as born from Vala, though there is some indication that the reverse is at least metaphorically possible, as in the "Preludium" to *Europe* (E 60) and the later statement that "Vala shall become a Worm in Enitharmons Womb" (E 326). Enitharmon does sing a "Song of Death" in which she describes herself as walking "in the visions of Vala" (E 305), but this is remote from the scene depicted in the tempera.

A group that appears in plate 32 of *Jerusalem* in the Blake Trust/Princeton facsimile looks at first as if it might throw some oblique light on the issue (illus. 3). This shows a nude Jerusalem between two of her daughters,[34] while a third flies upward with an arm affectionately intertwined with a sister's. Jerusalem has her arms extended to caress the children much as Bathsheba caresses hers in the tempera, while the daughter on our right has an arm affectionately extended to Jerusalem's neck and shoulder in a fashion reminiscent of the boy's arm extended (albeit invisibly to us) behind Bathsheba's back. But as usual analogies must be pursued with caution. The daughter who flies upwards in *Jerusalem* 32 invites us to read her freedom from gravity as a sign that she is a visual metaphor for a thought or mental creation;[35] Bathsheba's children appear as grounded creatures of flesh and blood, though that does not disbar metaphoric connotations. We interpret Jerusalem's nakedness as primarily metaphorical, as part of the definition of "Liberty," whereas Bathsheba's nakedness, whatever further connotations it may possess, is in the first place naturalistically motivated by the story depicted. The two images belong to different semiotic worlds, and we cannot transfer more significance from the *Jerusalem* illumination to the tempera than a feeling of reassurance that the children in the tempera really are Bathsheba's.

Two passages in Blake's poetry might be used to incorporate Los and Enitharmon into the story of David and Bathsheba. One is from plate 29 of *Milton*: "Los conducts the Spirits to be Vegetated, into / Great Golgonooza," while "Enitharmon and her Daughters take the pleasant charge. / To give them to their lovely heavens till the Great Judgment Day" (E 128). Los here functions not according to any of Frye's mythical associations,[36] but as a kind of psychopomp, a Hermes leading souls down to be incarnated, while Enitharmon builds a pleasant environment for them during their stay here. The other passage, from *The Four Zoas*, lists "Joseph Benjamin David Solomon" among others as "Sons of Los & Enitharmon" (E 380). Supported by these passages, we could suggest that Blake re-imagined Bathsheba as one of the "Daughter[s] of Vala" engaged in the progressive incarnations of the human imagination—the history of Israel—and added the children to represent versions of Los and Enitharmon acting in their part-time role as spirits assisting in the incarnation of Solomon, one of their "sons"; if Bathsheba can be a daughter of Vala, then Solomon may be a son of Los.

However, this suggestion too is not problem free. In order to imagine these children as Los and Enitharmon assisting in the incarnation of Solomon, we have to imaginatively superimpose upon the calm garden scene a difficult to visualize cosmic environment in which powerful mythical/historical forces embodied within figures from biblical narrative work to reshape human culture. Mitchell writes that "[Blake's] usual approach to . . . texts, in contrast to the general practice of eighteenth-century illustrators, is to provide not a plausible visualization of a scene described in the text but rather a symbolic recreation of the ideas embodied in that scene."[37] That is true, but interpretation of

33. For a fuller account, see Peter Otto, "The Multiple Births of Los in *The Four Zoas*" *SEL 1500-1900* 31.4 (1991): 631-53.

34. The identification is made on the basis of the associated text by David V. Erdman in *The Illuminated Blake* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974) 325.

35. See Janet A. Warner, *Blake and the Language of Art* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1984) 127-34.

36. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947) 277-78.

37. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 18.

a scene as a "symbolic recreation" is here rendered difficult by the artist's inclusion of concrete detail that resists such translation into symbol. In the illuminated poetry, Blake can and does, as Mitchell writes, largely obliterate "the visual and objective aspects of the poetic landscape" in favor of "the phantasmagoric 'fluxile' spaces of the prophetic books, in which the 'look' of Blake's scenery changes with every change in the mind of the perceiver."[38] But in the present case it takes considerable effort to imagine these two children, firmly visualized as about to bathe in a pool near David's palace, as "actually" facilitating the incarnation of Solomon, who will be conceived some time in the future.

The possibility of seeing the human energies represented by Los and Enitharmon as present within Bathsheba's children as pictured here depends upon our understanding of the nature of Blake's mythology. We know this mythology largely through the poetic narratives in which it is articulated. Many of Blake's own comments, however, focus not so much on these narratives as on the individual figures of his myth, who are described as embodying fundamental energies. Blake sometimes identifies these named energies with figures embedded in preexisting stories; for instance, in *A Descriptive Catalogue* Blake writes that "The giant Albion, was Patriarch of the Atlantic, he is the Atlas of the Greeks, one of those the Greeks called Titans. The stories of Arthur are the acts of Albion, applied to a Prince of the fifth century" (E 543). This identifies a name from his own mythology first with a figure from Greek myth and then "applies" that figure to a prince in the legendary history of England. Moving in the reverse direction, from poetic character to archetype, Blake identifies Chaucer's Pilgrims with "the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life" (E 533), who in turn are identified with the gods of Greece: "The Franklin is one who keeps open table, who is the genius of eating and drinking, the Bacchus; as the Doctor of Physic is the Esculapius, the Host is the Silenus, the Squire is the Apollo, the Miller is the Hercules, &c." (E 536). Blake does not here give the Blakean names of these "visions of the eternal attributes, or divine names" (E 536), but we may try to do so if we wish. Blake evidently sees his own figures as representative of energies capable of acting out situations far removed from the narratives of his own mythological poems. The pattern follows approximately that outlined by Le Bossu, and we can imagine the same processes at work in "applying" part of the story of Vala to Bathsheba.

In another passage, Blake writes of "having been taken in vision into the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia," where he "has seen those wonderful originals called in the Sacred Scriptures the Cherubim . . . being originals from which the Greeks and Hetrurians copied Hercules, Farnese, Venus of Medicis, and all the grand works of ancient art" (E 531). These words imply that Blake's "Giant forms" (*Jerusalem* plate 3, E 145) are also copies of the originals seen in vision: "Names alter, things never alter" (E 533). However, what we know is always mediated by names, either Blake's own, or those given by equally gifted poets like Chaucer, who also had an intuition of these archetypes; like Jung, Blake seems to have believed that the archetype itself is never the object of direct experience—though it may be glimpsed in "vision"—and can normally only be known through secondary embodiments that have been culturally or personally configured. As poet, Blake sometimes maintains the fiction that his particular names are the unaltering "things" themselves, but he implicitly allows on occasion that his names are only one way of putting things, that they designate a partial and temporary rendering of an underlying reality.

Blake's figures thus have two complementary and intertwined modes of being; in the one, they act out roles in narratives in which they are born, split, and undergo a variety of transformations. In the other, they are described as representing universal and unchanging energies or powers. One perspective that helps to unify these models is provided by a passage on the "bright Sculptures of / Los's Halls," which suggests that Blake's mythology is grounded on what might be called the elementary forms of kinship, the building blocks of social human life, that mediate between constant archetypal energies and the most fundamental forms of narrative:

> All things acted on Earth are seen in the bright Sculptures of
> Los's Halls & every Age renews its powers from these Works
> With every pathetic story possible to happen from Hate or
> Wayward Love & every sorrow & distress is carved here
> Every Affinity of Parents Marriages & Friendships are here
> In all their various combinations wrought with wondrous Art
> All that can happen to Man in his pilgrimage of seventy years
> Such is the Divine Written Law of Horeb & Sinai:
> And such the Holy Gospel of Mount Olivet & Calvary[.] (E 161)

These lines describe the "Sculptures" as constituted by single figures who combine into persisting narratives, Laocoön groups struggling with difficulties rather than solitary and stationary Apollos. Blake's way of putting this appears to give ontological priority to his own mythology—the sculptures exist within the Halls of Los, which were "builded by Los & his mighty children"—but since he lists David and Solomon among those children, Blake simultaneously implies that his mythology and the writers of the testaments exist in one and the same world.

38. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art* 21.

For Blake the figures of his mythology had a potential for life both before and after the poetic narratives from which most of our knowledge of them derives; they could exist as single archetypes embodying various energies, and they could enter and transform figures acting out the narratives of already existing texts, poetic or historical. In the latter state, transfigured and with borrowed names, they can appear in designs that represent actions nowhere described in his poetry, and significantly changed from the borrowed preexisting narratives, though we may then find ourselves unable to make confident identifications without help from Blake himself.

Milton illustrates the complex relationships that can arise when Blake's mythical names are embodied in a context in which they interact with other texts, both poetic and biographical:

> Then Milton knew that the Three Heavens of Beulah were beheld
> By him on earth in his bright pilgrimage of sixty years
> In those three females whom his Wives, & those three whom his Daughters
> Had represented and containd. (E 110)

Three levels interact in these lines. The first is represented by the "Heavens of Beulah," a term that points to a mode of experience only reachable through interaction with "females"; these "Heavens" are spaces or states in Blake's mythology, and appear elsewhere in his poetry. They are "containd" within the second level, constituted by the "Wives" and "Daughters" who are figures from history, with ascertainable names and biographies. These in turn "contain" the third level of those "females" who taken together form Ololon, a complex mythological figure who appears in no other poem. In this passage, Blake's mythology is imaged as a deep structure embedded within history; in Swedenborgian language, it is the "spiritual" sense of "natural" figures grounded in the world. To complicate the picture further, we are told that Milton discovers that "his Wives & Daughters names were these / Rahab and Tirzah, & Milcah & Noah & Hoglah," who sit around him "as the rocks of Horeb round the land / Of Canaan."[39] These rocks have names: "Hor & Peor & Bashan & Abarim & Lebanon & Hermon" (E 110). Figures from Milton's family history are here identified through analogy with female figures from the Old Testament, which suggests that family patterns replicate "combinations" that recur throughout history, as is implied in their identification with mountains, images of the permanent. The mythical and universal is embodied within the historical particular; the "bright Sculptures" that represent "Every Affinity" exist and act below and within particular events.

Ololon comes into being by an interaction between Blake's mythology as it existed prior to the writing of *Milton* (in such forms as "the Three Heavens of Beulah") and the persons and events of the life of the historical poet; she mediates between fundamental energies and the moving patterns of history. In the final plates of *Milton* we see a spectacular demonstration of the analysis and decomposition of Ololon into several distinguishable figures and concepts; having played out her role in the poem, she is resolved back into her component parts. As a mediating structure, the mythology is open to influx from both sides—from the archetypes represented by the "bright Sculptures," and from the moving shapes of history. Blake's language—"represents" and "contains"—implies the less than total overlap between levels.

Blake's image of the "bright Sculptures" that embody fundamental "Affinit[ies] of Parents, Marriages & Friendships" reflects upon the possible presence of Blake's mythology within the figures of *Bathsheba*. The most substantial "Sculpture" represented in the tempera is that of a mother with two children, boy and girl to represent the future of all humanity, but without visible father, and thus open to the winds of change and damage. If this is truly an archetype, it has no obvious name, though many possible significations. Bathsheba as mother draws our eyes, as she drew those of David, but is not presented from the point of view of those northern artists who implicitly or explicitly held her self-exposure partly responsible for David's acts. This Bathsheba, though frankly naked, bears neither jewelry nor guilt. She is first and foremost a mother with her children, prompting us to respond protectively; the family atmosphere, and the presence of the other nude woman already bathing, imply that this is, or should be, a secluded quasi-paradise of baths and flowers in which the gaze of adult males is not welcome, or welcome only with a clear statement of non-sexual intent. David, in responding sexually to Bathsheba, is invading a protected space. The vulnerability of such a family group without visible father forms a vital part of the subject of this painting, and the naked attractiveness of Bathsheba herself associates her with other stories that focus on the vulnerability of women to the desires of powerful men, like that of Susanna and the elders.

The presence of the other woman is related to this image of a protected space rather than to the iconographic history of the episode or to any explicit event from Blake's myth. There are very few previous handlings of the story that show such apparently unrelated women bathing in the nude, Aldegrever's version being one of those few. Usually, the only other women shown are either young and clothed attendants or old bawds bringing David's letter. The seated woman in Blake's design is already dressing her own hair, and looks up at Bathsheba's arrival without stopping her own toilet; she appears not as a servant, but as simply spec-

39. The ultimate source for Blake's imagery may be Paul's allegory of Abraham's wives in Galations 4:21-31, in which "Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, . . . is Agar"; there is stimulating comment in a number of sources, including Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 32ff.

tator of a drama not her own. However, she does show by contrast just how attractive Bathsheba is; it was beauty, and not merely nakedness, that urged David to grasp for himself a woman whose children mark her as associated with another man.

Within the frame of this "Sculpture" of a family group and its significance, we can perhaps also see in Bathsheba and her children aspects of named figures from Blake's mythology. As shown above, the flowers, in conjunction with Blake's later textual reference, support the notion that Bathsheba enacts some of the meanings represented by Blake under the name of Vala; she will give birth to Solomon, taking a place in the line of descent that leads to Jesus; she is, in that sense, a figure in Blake's "Female line," a "Daughter of Vala." However, her unashamed nakedness makes it difficult to completely erase the memory of Blake's visualizations of Jerusalem from our minds, and we can see her as also part of the saving vision that continues throughout history. In a narrative, Blake could have described her with some of the machinery used to describe Ololon as a complex creature; in a single tempera Blake can only include multiple perspectives and coexisting contrary values indirectly through analogy or implication.

It is also possible that Blake might have called the children Los and Enitharmon in a hypothetical lost addition to *A Descriptive Catalogue*, as a form of shorthand; the line cited above identifying Solomon as a son of Los supports the possibility. Blake could describe all genuine poets as "Sons of Los," so that the boy in the tempera could be seen symbolically as the father of both David and Solomon, poet and architect respectively, despite the absurdity thus produced at the level of the originating biblical narrative—an almost literal case of "The child is father to the man."

The girl is less specific in stance and gesture; she is a bit player, who fills out a pattern, but needs no elaborate rationale for her presence. The line from Blake's poetic mythology cited above gives us a function that can be used to annotate her role here, but with no useful gain in understanding. It seems that the girl's chief function here is to fill in a space, to help constitute that basic family group that had become a feature of Blake's designs from the late 1790s on.

However, such an "accommodation" of the children into Blake's myth does not provide a complete or even adequate account of what they are doing in the tempera with their mother Bathsheba, and the roles suggested give rise to fairly violent conflict with the host narrative. We have also yet to account for the complexity of the boy's gesture and stance; without an understanding of these, we cannot give a firm reading of the tempera. The boy's gestures imply a breaking away from the direction of family bonds towards his own different path, though the break has not been fully implemented at the moment caught in the design. The mother's arm passes in front of his neck to rest on his shoulder; that continued linkage, and his own raised but hidden right arm, both show that he is still entwined affectionately with his mother. The interaction suggests the pivotal moment in which a boy moves from the protected condition of childhood towards the freedom and potential dangers of manhood.

However, the situation is not totally articulate or persuasive in its *designo*, and there remains an unresolved discontinuity in the visual syntagmatic structure; what should be a quasi-grammatical sequence of meaningfully connected bodies contains implicit internal contradictions that render a firm reading of their interaction difficult or impossible without assistance from an attached or associated text. The boy's back is turned as he not only faces away from us and the other members of his family, but also appears to move away from them and from us; his right and forward foot is firmly planted while his left foot is raised, only the toes touching ground, indicating movement. All three members of the family group are in fact caught in contradictions between stasis and movement; all are drawn as if in motion, rearward feet raised with only toes touching ground, and yet forward motion for all three is virtually impossible—Bathsheba and her daughter would step straight into the bath, the boy would choke on his mother's arm. We can enjoy the bodies without becoming aware of the internal contradictions, but as soon as we attempt a full reading of their implied intentionality we confront problems that admit no full solution. Blake's desire to create pleasing bodies has here conflicted with the desire to create bodies that articulate a legible intent, and the resulting forms resist attempts to impose clear and consistent meaning.

At play here is the larger question of the readability of Blake's bodies and faces. Blake's own comments are optimistic; he directs us repeatedly towards the bearers of explicit human intentionality in a picture, and away from the mere furniture: "Rubens thinks Tables Chairs & Stools are Grand / But Rafael thinks A Head a foot a hand" (E 513), and again "Complicated & Minute Discrimination of Character . . . is the Whole of Art" (E 653). In practice, however, Blake often either used the well-established but rather crude and simplified schema of facial emotion published by Le Brun and others, or, as here, offered faces surprisingly void of explicit emotion.

There was much discussion during the 18th century about the powers and limits of facial expressiveness in painting. One of the focal points was the concept of mixed passions, which had been exploited by Benjamin Ralph in his popular *The School of Raphael; or, the Student's Guide to Expression in Historical Painting*, which included such attempts at subtle analysis of expression as this account of Raphael's cartoon of the *Draught of Fishes*: "In Peter's countenance, fear, wonder, and solicitude are blended in a most extraordinary manner," and this description of the face of the lame man in the cartoon of *The Lame Man Healed*: "the expression of joy and gratitude which appears in it, is finely bal-

anced by a mixture of doubt and astonishment."[40] Reynolds in his fifth Discourse, without mentioning Ralph's name, questions those

> who praise excellencies that can hardly exist together; and above all things are fond of describing with great exactness the expression of a mixed passion, which more particularly appears to me out of reach of our art. Such are many disquisitions which I have read on some of the Cartoons and other pictures of Raffaelle, where the Criticks have described their own imaginations; or indeed where the excellent master himself may have attempted this expression of passions above the powers of the art; and has therefore, by an indistinct and imperfect marking, left room for every imagination, with equal probability to find a passion of his own.[41]

Blake registers his disagreement: "If Reynolds could not see. variety of Character in Rafael Others Can" (E 653), which at first sight seems to bypass Reynolds's point, which was about not "variety of Character" but the possibility of representing a "mixed passion." But Blake also wrote "expression cannot exist without character as its stamina" (*A Descriptive Catalogue*, E 549); for him expression was the outering of a permanent, or quasi-permanent, inner state. That puts in question not only his confidence in an artist's power to express subtle and fleeting states of mind through modifications of face and body, but also his belief that such states had real existence. Blake's defence of "Complicated & Minute Discrimination of Character" (again "Character" where we might have expected "Expression") as "the Whole of Art" (E 653) has some pathos, given his own difficulties in producing readable expression outside the realm of the powerfully exaggerated and simplified. In the present case, there is a singular lack of clear expression on the faces of all present; if there is "Minute Discrimination of Character," it is too subtle to register.

Blake also had occasional trouble combining multiple bodies into persuasive and fully articulate relationship, and in relating bodily movement to the immediate physical context; both these weaknesses are in evidence in *Bathsheba*, inhibiting confident reading of the meaning held in "a foot a hand." Blake doubtless learned some anatomy as an art student, but was not interested enough on a long-term basis to consistently create bodies capable of communicating subtle states of energy or thought,[42] though some of his bodies do indeed express a direct and powerful intentionality. These recurring weaknesses, areas in which Blake simply did not exert his powers adequately, put in doubt the wisdom of pushing too far an interpretation of the intentionality encoded within the gestures and faces of his figures. In the case of *Bathsheba*, an attached or inscribed text might have enabled a more confident response, though at the cost of a partial overwriting of the design itself, as has happened in the case of *A Vision of The Last Judgment*, where the accompanying text has drawn more attention than the extant drawings; the case might of course be different if the tempera had survived.

As interpreters of Blake, we are caught between a rock and a hard place. There is a temptation to assert or adopt a "firm perswasion" to remove the mountain of doubt and make a thing "so" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, E 38-39). But the results of such firmness can be disastrous, as Ezekiel goes on to demonstrate—"what greater subjection can be"—and little is won by abandoning one shaky interpretation only to replace it with another almost equally suspect; Blake's Milton knew the danger of becoming the "Tabernacle" of Satan, "A covering for thee to do thy will, till one greater comes / And smites me as I smote thee & becomes my covering," for these are the laws of Satan's "false Heavns" (*Milton*, E 139). The history of interpretation of many of Blake's designs that come without attached text shows the high level of risk in making firm identifications, the large color prints offering some particularly good examples.

In that spirit, and in the absence of any associated text, I shall not make an attempt at a definitive interpretation of the meaning and identity of the boy in *Bathsheba*, nor of his complex but puzzling gesture; Blake has simply left insufficient evidence for us to answer these questions with confidence. Some incorporation of figures from Blake's mythology into the story of Bathsheba seems very likely, and the evidence offered above suggests Los as the most probable candidate for the figure of the boy. It is also clear that some act is in progress that will change the relationship between him and his mother, but exactly how we do not know. Such a change would probably fit into what we learn from the illuminated poetry of the relationship between boys and mothers, but not easily into either the relationship between Bathsheba and this otherwise unknown son, or the workings of the energy embodied in the figure of Los and possibly acted out by this boy. The attempt to read the children's identities, and the boy's gesture, through the lens of Blake's myth reaches a premature end without producing any firm conclusion. The residue of unintelligibil-

40. Benjamin Ralph, *The School of Raphael; or, the Student's Guide to Expression in Historical Painting* (first published London, 1757; cited from London: John Boydell, [1800?]) 23, 26.

41. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Ralph R. Wark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 78-79; Wark's notes refer to Félibien, but Ralph seems closer to the context. There is a fine example of what Reynolds is talking about in E.H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (London: Phaidon, 1972) 224n23, which lists a variety of interpretations of the expression of the central figure in Botticelli's *Primavera* ranging from "melancholy" to "laughing."

42. Blake learned enough to make a good drawing of a cast of the Belvedere Torso (B 115v), but his well-attested dislike of life classes (see Malkin in Bentley, *Blake Records* 423) suggests that anatomical accuracy was not a primary concern.

ity haunts and teases the viewer, who must handle the uncertainty as best he or she can.

A partial solution to the problem is to cease beating so hard on the portal of explicit meaning, though invited to do so by Blake himself, and seek satisfactions elsewhere. Baxandall, after considering various iconographic readings of the imagery of Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, turns to "the authority of the pictorial character, forms and colours," commenting that "[i]n a verbal explanation of a picture the authority of such matters, as compared to the significance of something or other found verbalized in some directory of symbols, is difficult to drive home. But their authority is primary, if we take the visual medium of pictures with any seriousness at all; they, not symbols, are the painter's language."[43] Even Blake, with his unusually strong emphasis on meaning, had an urge to produce a varied and interesting surface. The children, and the boy's interestingly differentiated orientation and gesture, may have been added for visual complexity and variety as well as for the kinds of meaning explored above. The three interconnected bodies afford Blake some exercise of his skills in creating gentle *contrapposto*—the girl and her mother both turn their faces slightly away from their forward foot, and turn slightly towards each other in an affirmation of affectionate relation. The bodies are harmonious and pleasingly molded, though without any particular subtlety of anatomical observation. The body of the seated woman is by contrast lumpy and not totally convincing; the waistless torso has been compressed vertically in a manner that recalls the flying figure of *Elohim Creating Adam* (B 289), and the foreshortened right leg modulates clumsily into the rounded knee. Blake's dislike of life classes had a cost.

In other areas Blake has successfully put the claims of surface interest and variety into creative tension with significance. He has, for instance, followed tradition by relegating David to a top corner, but has picked him out with a kingly crimson robe, incidentally proving the good sense of Richardson's statement that "*sometimes the Painter happens to be Obliged to put a figure in a Place, and with a Degree of Force which does not sufficiently distinguish it. In that Case, the Attention must be awakened by the Colour of the Drapery, or a Part of it, or* by the Ground on which 'tis painted, or some other Artifice."[44] The minimization of David, contrasted with Bathsheba at center front, creates tension between the narrative, in which David provides the motivating energy, and the surface composition, in which he plays so small a part; his isolation within the window formed by the columns, the wall, and the frame of the painting joins with the color of his robe to give his small figure a power out of all proportion to its size on the canvas. The crimson of his robe echoes the bright red of the honeysuckle on the left hand column and the roses at the bottom right of the design, reinforcing the symbolic associations of those flowers proposed above. The separation of the spaces in which David and Bathsheba exist emphasizes the intrusiveness of his act, which is about to break up a virtual haven of innocence.

The flowers in the foreground and the backdrop of rather lumpy and undifferentiated trees further the impression of an enclosed and sheltered garden paradise that is about to be broken into by the serpent of sexual desire prepared to inflict damage and even death in the pursuit of its will—to invoke the imagery of Blake's *Satan Watching Adam and Eve* in the *Paradise Lost* illustrations (B 529:5, 531, 536:4), appropriate particularly as the last of these, as Baine noted, shows Eve holding a rose and Adam a lily. David's body is constructed on the basis of diagonals and oppositions, showing a strong *contrapposto* in the opposed movements of his right leg and both arms that counter his turned head. This animation differentiates him from the calmly modulated frontal aspect of Bathsheba and her daughter. David's energetic desire is expressed also by the angle presented by the castle wall upon which he walks to the frontal plane of the bath—a note of harmonic discord in the othewise planar composition. Males in this composition are sources of disquieting energy, females centers of calm nurture.

We look at the female figures from a low vantage point, the legs of the figures softly reflected by the water that forms the lower boundary of the design. Our vantage point is directly in front of Bathsheba, and the exact center of the surface of the design is in the dark space between Bathsheba and her daughter, at just the height of her genitals. The columns create a secondary internal frame within which the female figures are placed, and within that frame Bathsheba's genitals occupy the exact center, which is also close to the implied vanishing point of the painting, though, as is usual with Blake, there is little perspectival information with which to work. The sexual nature of the impending action has been well mapped onto the surface of the design.

Overall, the painting is a mixture of successes and relative failures. Blake has visualized the well-known episode from the Bible in a form unique enough to stimulate a search for its underlying intentionality, with the unprecedented children as its focus. But he has not provided the information—pictorial or textual—needed to enable that search to reach a confident conclusion. An exploration of the relationship of the figures and action of this design to the names and narratives of his mythological poetry produces interesting suggestions, but these suggestions are complicated by our inability to fully read the intent of the boy's gestures, though these are specific enough to assure us that they were intended to carry specific meaning. One result has been the critical silence surrounding those children, apart from my own well-meant but ill-judged earlier account. Edgar Wind once wrote that "the presence of unre-

43. Baxandall, *Patterns* 132-33.

44. Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1725; reprinted Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1971) 131-32.

solved residues of meaning is an obstacle to the enjoyment of art. However great the visual satisfaction produced by a painting, it cannot reach a perfect state so long as the spectator is plagued by a suspicion that there is more in the painting than meets the eye."[45] That statement was made in a book featuring a new reading of Botticelli's *Primavera* that stressed "the intellectual character of Botticelli," though it also aimed to maintain our sense of the painter's "*lyrisme exact.*"[46] However, even all Wind's skilfully applied learning has not put an end to the multiplication of interpretations of Botticelli's work, which suggests that painting is inherently an art that resists definitive iconographic interpretation. Wind's language calls to mind Blake's comment about the "wonderful originals called . . . the Cherubim" which he saw "in vision," which contained "mythological and recondite meaning, where more is meant than meets the eye" (*A Descriptive Catalogue*, E 531); we can do our best to reach out for that "more," but Blake is even more resistant than Botticelli to the imposition of firm iconographic conclusions.

If we turn to plastic values, we experience an analogously mixed state of arousal / frustration, though there is here no parallel with Botticelli's fascinating surfaces. The figures of the family group are attractive and graceful, but lacking in the kind of anatomical and expressive accuracy that might give them a more deeply satisfying articulateness. The scene contains a good deal of vegetation, split into two very differently handled realms; in one we have a background of blurred and melded trees, that appear to have been added simply to provide a contrastive but non-interfering mat against which the bodies of the family group appear to advantage, and in the other we have the rather repetitive and underindividualized though strongly registered flowers, that appear to have been added to indicate specific meanings; the two realms do not cohere into a closely observed and naturally varied garden landscape, though the generalized indications of a quasi-paradisal garden do support the innocent implications of the frank nudity. The sky too is made up of streaks of color that indicate evening, but do not fuse into a persuasive sky; the desire to be faithful to a specific textual reference has won a tug-of-war over the production of a convincing background to the action.

In short, the design does not fully satisfy either the intellectual or aesthetic interests that it arouses, though it offers enough to engage our interest. In defending a painting less problematical than *Bathsheba*, Blake told Trusler that "What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care" (E 702). One can retreat before the imputed slur, and bravely claim that a painting is after all perfectly perspicuous to an adequately prepared viewer, or one can see the statement as a form of bullying, justified in the face of all that Trusler as author of a book subtitled *The Way to be Rich and Respectable* meant to Blake,[47] but not a statement we should accept as a control over our own responses. We can enjoy the painting for what it has to offer, without feeling ashamed to admit that Blake in this and other designs has partially subordinated plastic and pictorial values to the quest for significance, without giving means to fully satisfy the latter. There is a gentle irony in the fusion within one person of the poet who wrote "The School Boy" (E 31) and, while receiving no formal education in letters, wrote some of the greatest poetry in the language, with the artist who underwent a full seven year apprenticeship as professional engraver, followed by two years' study at the Royal Academy, and yet often had trouble producing fully satisfying independent designs. The illuminated poetry remains the area within which Blake most successfully integrated the two identities, the textual base providing a continuous support for and interaction with the powerful images that surround and comment upon it.

45. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries* 15.
46. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries* 126.
47. Bentley, *Blake Records* 60.

N E W S L E T T E R

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, will present a major William Blake exhibition, 19 January 2003 to 25 May 2003. The show, entitled "Vision and Verse: William Blake at The Huntington," will be curated by Robert N. Essick. The Huntington has mounted a number of small Blake exhibitions over the years, but space limitations meant that only a few dozen works could be displayed at any one time. The recent development of the former carriage house on the Huntington grounds into the MaryLou and George Boone Gallery will permit a generous selection of the Blake collection to be shown. All the watercolors, including the three series illustrating John Milton's poetry, will be included, along with many plates from Blake's illuminated books, the Job and Dante engravings, drawings, manuscripts, separate plates, and commercial book illustrations. The exhibit will honor the institution's founder, Henry E. Huntington, for his prescience in collecting outstanding works by Blake at a time when the artist/poet was still little known. There will be no catalogue, but an illustrated brochure will be available free of charge to all those who visit the exhibition. Further information about the Huntington and its exhibition program is available online at www.huntington.org.

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