

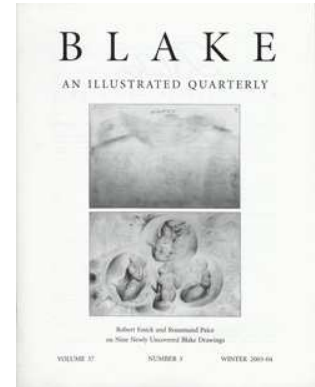
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## Newly Uncovered Blake Drawings in the British Museum

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BY ROBERT N. ESSICK AND ROSAMUND A. PAICE

In late July and early August, 2001, Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi, co-editors with Morris Eaves of the William Blake Archive ([www.blakearchive.org](http://www.blakearchive.org)), and David Clarke and Rod Tidwell, London-based professional photographers, spent a week shooting over 1200 transparencies of Blake's works in the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum. In the course of this work, the group discovered eight previously unknown pencil sketches by Blake and one by either Blake or his brother Robert. All are on the versos of recorded works. Since the publication in 1981 of Martin Butlin's monumental catalogue of Blake's paintings and drawings,<sup>1</sup> the staff of the Print Room has been removing a few of Blake's drawings and prints from their old mounts, for reasons either of conservation or exhibition, and rematting them according to current standards. Some of these efforts were motivated by the Blake exhibition at Tate Britain, 9 November 2000 to 11 February 2001, but in at least one case the rematting probably occurred as early as 1982. Some of the works were pasted down, on all four edges, to their old backing mats, whereas the new matting procedures required the sheets to be hinged at the top. Hence, the versos were uncovered during rematting and left permanently available for inspection. It was of course great fun for the photography team to lift a mat, turn over a drawing or print, and discover a "new" Blake.

None of the sketches presented here will enhance Blake's reputation as an artist. All, however, are related to projects, ranging chronologically from his earliest attempts at history painting (c. 1780) to the Dante watercolors (1824-27), which play a significant role in our understanding of Blake's career. The study of preliminary drawings, be they ever so slight, can lead to insights into an artist's working habits, compositional methods, and stylistic development. Even scholars centrally interested in the symbolic meanings of Blake's designs can learn something about the evolution of his iconography through a consideration of early preliminaries and variants. Though our own emphasis in what follows will not be interpretive, by reproducing these drawings, and recording basic

documentary facts about them, we hope to introduce them into the canon and make them available to scholars writing more detailed and intensive studies.<sup>2</sup>

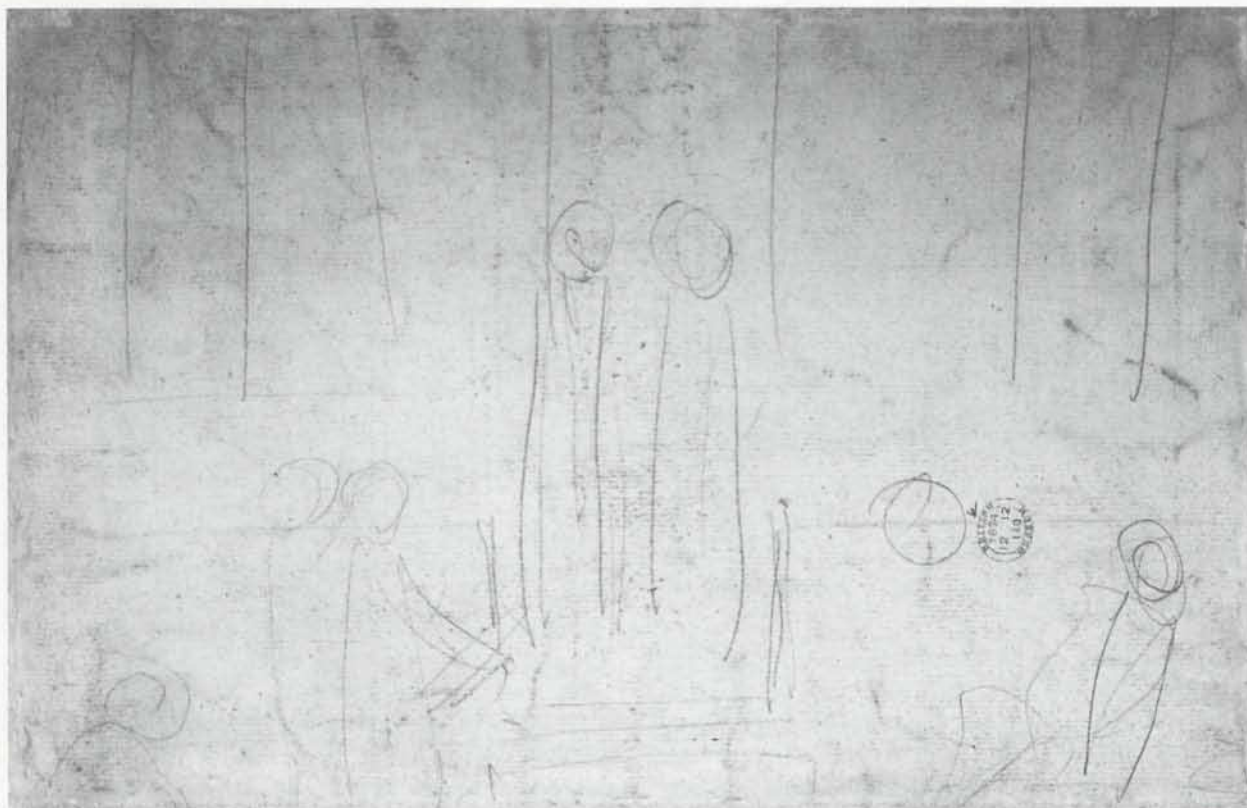


While studying at the Royal Academy schools, Somerset House, in 1779-80, Blake made several studies of the human form, apparently from live models in the "life" class. Some are untraced (Butlin nos. 866-69), but two are extant: a male nude (possibly Robert Blake) seen from the side (Butlin 71) and a muscular male nude seen from behind (Butlin 72). Both these examples are in the British Museum and show a detailed concentration on small pencil strokes to outline and shade the human form with anatomical accuracy. The nude seen from behind, acquired by the Museum in 1874, bears on its verso a hitherto unrecorded drawing of a very different character (illus. 1). The composition is not the product of academic precision, but a loose "first thought." In spite of these differences in style, both the recto nude and the scene found in the verso composition suggest an academic context. In the center of the latter composition are two standing figures, apparently elevated on steps or a plinth of some sort. These may be live models or casts being studied by an audience arranged below them. In the lower left portion of the composition are three figures: the head and upper torso of a (seated?) figure seen in right profile and bending over to the right; and two figures, probably standing, though on a lower level than the raised central couple. The right-most figure in this group of two holds a tablet or sketching pad in his (?) right hand, lowered at a 45-degree angle. The circle to the right of the central couple, and just to the left of the British Museum collection stamp, may be the beginnings of the head of another figure. A final figure, sketched in the loosest possible manner, sits, kneels, or stands in the lower right corner of the sheet. This figure seems to be bending slightly backward, as if to gain a more distant perspective on the central group. In contrast, the figure furthest to the left may be bending over an (unpictured) sketching pad. The vertical lines in the upper background, left, right, and center, may be the large windows of Somerset House; note particularly the horizontal line, possibly indicating a window sill, beneath the three vertical lines on the left. Perhaps while dutifully drawing in the precise style represented by the recto drawing, Blake took a short break to sketch rapidly the room he was working in, and some of his fellow students.

1. *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1981). Also includes a catalogue of Robert Blake's drawings. References to this standard catalogue are cited hereafter as "Butlin" followed by entry number.

2. Details of medium, paper, size, and any other pertinent facts are given in the captions for each illustration. The British Museum accession numbers are given only for the newly discovered drawings. All works reproduced are by William Blake unless noted otherwise.





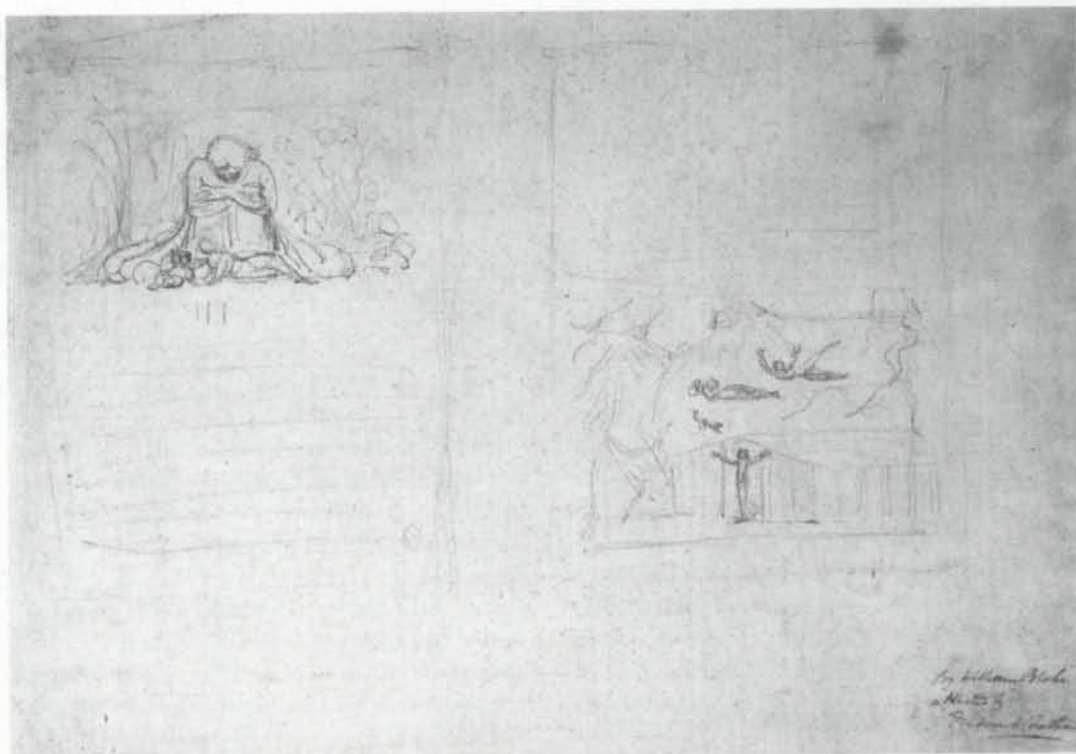
1. Standing and seated (?) figures, possibly a drawing class in the Royal Academy. Pencil, 22.6 x 34 cm. on sheet 22.6 x 35 cm., c. 1779-80. Verso of accession no. 1874.12.12.110, *Academy Study: Standing Male Nude Seen from Behind*, Butlin 72. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.

This crude sketch takes on more significance when we consider the transition from sketches of objects before Blake's physical eyes to his imaginative compositions. Early in his career, Blake appears to have been working on a compositional formula, probably based on Renaissance models, suitable for the picturing of biblical scenes: one or two central figures, seated and raised on a plinth or standing, with clusters of figures right and left, and one or more of these subsidiary figures holding a scroll, tablet, or book.<sup>3</sup> This same basic format, for which the newly discovered verso sketch may very well be the first extant example, finds expression in three wash drawings of c. 1780-85: *Moses and Aaron (?) Flanked by Angels* (illus. 2), *The Elders of Israel Receiving the Ten Commandments* (Butlin 113 recto) and *Enoch Walked with God* (Butlin 146). In the first of these, the small figure seated on the left, holding a tablet, is difficult to identify as one of the titular angels, but he can clearly be associated with the

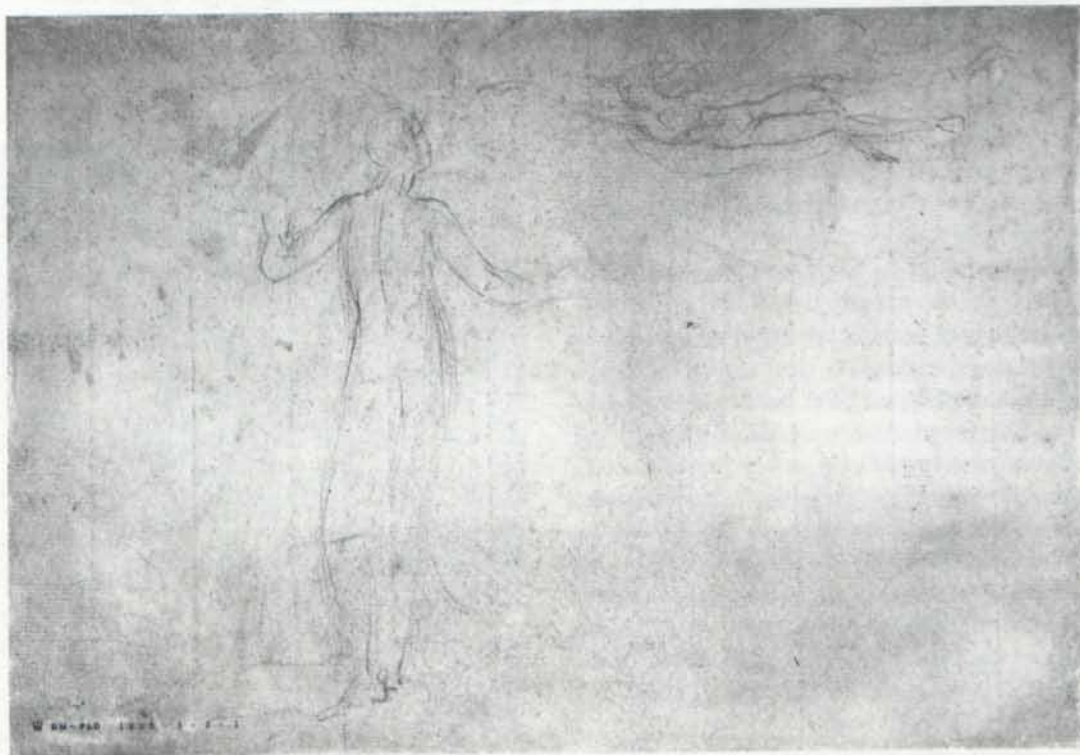


2. *Moses and Aaron (?) Flanked by Angels*. Pen and india ink, approx. 45.5 x 59.5 cm., c. 1780-85. Butlin 112. Graphic Arts Collection, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey. Reproduced by permission of Princeton University Library.

3. Morton Paley has kindly pointed out to us the general similarities between Blake's figures holding and/or inscribing books in his early drawings and several figures similarly occupied in Raphael's *School of Athens*, including Aristotle (center), Pythagoras (lower left) and an unidentified youth center right.



3. Sketches for *The Book of Thel*: *Thel and the Clod of Clay*, and *Thel Fleeing from the House of Clay*. Pencil, each drawing approx. 15 x 11.5 cm. on paper 22.4 x 31.7 cm., 1789. Butlin 218. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.



4. Sketch for *The Book of Thel*, plate 6. Pencil, 20 x 21.5 cm. on sheet 22.4 x 31.7 cm. with the top portion of a fleur-de-lis watermark, 1789. Verso of accession no. 1983.3.5.1 (see illus. 3). British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.



similarly placed draftsman in the verso drawing (illus. 1). The style of the new sketch, one in which human figures are rendered in the most minimal manner, with two vertical lines to outline bodies and ovoid shapes for heads, is an even simpler version of what we find in the verso sketch (apparently a preliminary version of the recto) on *Three Figures under a Yoke with two Children* (c. 1780-85, Butlin 82). Such rudimentary sketches indicate that Blake began his compositions by thinking about the general compositional format for a design, and particularly the placement of figures within a planar space. Even such important ingredients as clothing and the limbs of figures would come later.

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Late in 1982, the British Museum acquired a particularly intriguing preliminary drawing for a design in one of Blake's illuminated books. The sketch shows a two-page opening for *The Book of Thel*, with the design eventually etched at the bottom of plate 7 appearing as a headpiece for the left-hand (verso) page and an unpublished design, apparently showing the "house" of the "matron Clay" (plate 7, lines 14, 16), at the foot of the facing recto page (illus. 3).<sup>4</sup> Although the evidence provided by this drawing is not conclusive, it does support the theory that the final plate of the poem, with its dramatic shift in point of view and tone, is not the ending Blake had first planned.

When the Museum accessioned its new treasure, early in 1983, it removed the *Thel* drawing from its old mat and revealed yet another preliminary drawing for the illuminated book (illus. 4). This surprisingly large drawing—the figure on the left is approx. 18 cm. tall—is a boldly executed preliminary for the design on plate 6 of *The Book of Thel* (illus. 5). Like all of Blake's drawings for designs that he intended to execute as relief etchings, this sketch has right and left the reverse of the etching and is in no sense a "sized" preliminary intended for transfer to the copperplate. In the drawing, Thel stands on the left and looks toward the personified Cloud upper right. A single line extending to the left of Thel's head suggests a cloud outline; a few squiggles in the lower left corner of the sheet hint at the earth, tree trunk, and other vegeta-

4. For discussions of this recto drawing, see G. E. Bentley, Jr., "From Sketch to Text in Blake: The Case of *The Book of Thel*," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 19 (1986): 128-41; and Blake, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, *Blake's Illuminated Books* vol. 3, general editor David Bindman (London: Blake Trust/Tate Gallery, 1993) 71. Plate numbers and copy designations for the illuminated books follow G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1977), hereafter cited as "Bentley."



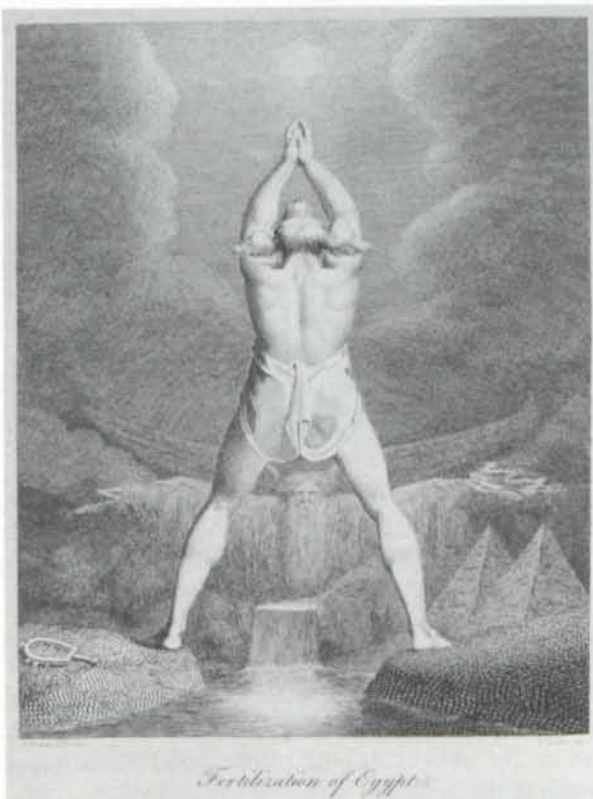
5. *The Book of Thel*, copy L, plate 6. Design only, approx. 8 x 10.8 cm. Relief etching with watercolor washes, 1789-90. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

tion pictured in the relief etching. It is unclear if the few fragmentary lines lower right, severely rubbed (perhaps in the course of early matting), and now hardly visible, contain the seeds of the large plant supporting the infant Worm in the published design.

The differences between the two figures in the drawing and their etched versions are slight but significant. Thel's arms are more extended in the print, with considerably less bending at the right elbow (left in the drawing). The Cloud soars toward Thel in the drawing, rather than away from her as in the etching, and more clearly looks at her. Perhaps the most significant variant, though, is the fact that Thel is looking up at the Cloud in the drawing, whereas she gazes downward toward the Worm in the illuminated book. On plate 6 of *The Book of Thel*, the eponymous heroine addresses the Worm and is addressed in turn by the Clod of Clay. Thel's discourse with the Cloud appears on plate 5, and thus the design as sketched would seem more appropriate as a tailpiece on that plate than as a headpiece to the next. The design top left in the recto drawing was shifted one place back, from headpiece to tailpiece, in the book. With the verso sketch, the shift in the course of production may have been in the other direction—forward from the bottom of one plate, where it would have illustrated the dialogue between Thel and the Cloud, to the top of the next, where it illustrates Thel's address to the Worm with the Cloud present as audience rather than interlocutor. The design was altered accordingly, the modifications including at least a change in Thel's sight line, as indicated by the position of her head, and probably the addition of the Worm and his vegetable bed.

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6. *Fertilization of Egypt*, etching/engraving by Blake after Henry Fuseli for Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden*, 1791. Image 19.8 x 15.4 cm. Collection of Robert N. Essick.

The *Fertilization of Egypt*, first published in the 1791 edition of Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*, is one of Blake's more impressive plates after a design by his friend Henry Fuseli (illus. 6). A newly discovered verso sketch of a single motif adds to the already well-documented history of the design's development. The earliest known version is a pencil drawing on which Frederick Tatham has written "Sketched by Fuseli for Blake to engrave from" (illus. 7). This attribution has been questioned by David Bindman, but Butlin has accepted it.<sup>5</sup>

5. See the discussion in Butlin 173; Bindman's comments, cited by Butlin, were "in conversation." If the pencil drawing was executed by Blake, then there must have been an earlier version by Fuseli, given the presence in the engraving of Fuseli's name as the design's inventor ("H. Fuseli. RA:inv"). Butlin claims that Albert S. Roe also questioned the attribution to Fuseli; but in the work Butlin cites, Roe states only that "the basic inspiration for the design may well have been suggested by Blake," and continues to refer to the sketch in question as "the preparatory drawing by Fuseli." See Roe, "The Thunder of Egypt," *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence: Brown UP, 1969) 158-95, at 160. The engraving, but not the drawing, appears in the standard catalogue of Fuseli's paintings and drawings: Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli* (Zurich: Verlag Berichthaus; Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1973) 1:533.

Perhaps the best reason for the ascription to Fuseli, one not mentioned by these authorities, is the fact that he was left handed and produced diagonal hatching strokes rising from right to left. All the hatching in this drawing is of that variety. Right handed artists, like Blake, habitually draw hatching that rises from left to right.

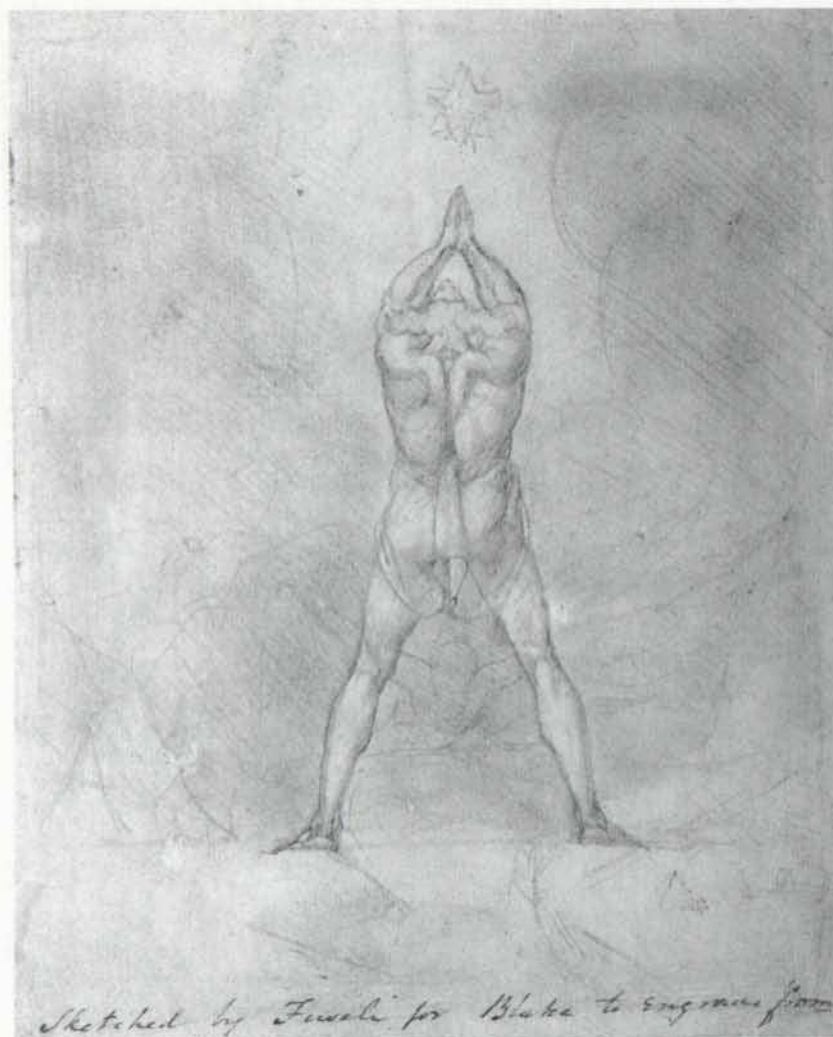
When dealing with the new drawing on the verso of Fuseli's drawing (illus. 8), we cannot avoid similar questions about authorship. We are fairly confident, however, that it is by Blake. The careful, even studied, handling of the pencil is uncharacteristic of Fuseli's work, including the recto drawing, and produces the sort of detail study that an engraver would work up in preparation for his labors on the plate. A precedent for this sort of Blakean intervention on a work by Fuseli can be found on Fuseli's imaginary portrait of Michelangelo (Butlin 172), engraved by Blake for Fuseli's *Lectures on Painting* (1801). Fuseli pictured the figure only from the thighs up; Blake, however, worked out how to represent Michelangelo's legs and feet for the full-length portrait plate in a rough pencil sketch upper right on Fuseli's drawing.

The object in the verso sketch is an ancient Egyptian musical instrument, the sistrum. A few sketchy lines in the recto drawing, just to the right of the figure's right foot, also indicate the position of the sistrum. There too, the instrument is cocked at a 45-degree angle relative to the sides of the sheet of paper.<sup>6</sup> These are clearly the same object, although the example on the recto has an extension at its top, indicated by a single line, which is not present in the verso drawing. The next stage of the composition's development, a wash drawing by Blake (Butlin 173), does not contain the sistrum. Yet it is pictured in the engraving, where it is once again modified in various small ways. The appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of the motif suggest a scenario in which Blake failed to include the sistrum in his finished drawing (by design or oversight), later decided to include it, or was told by Fuseli to put it back into the composition, and then drew the verso sketch just prior to beginning his engraving.

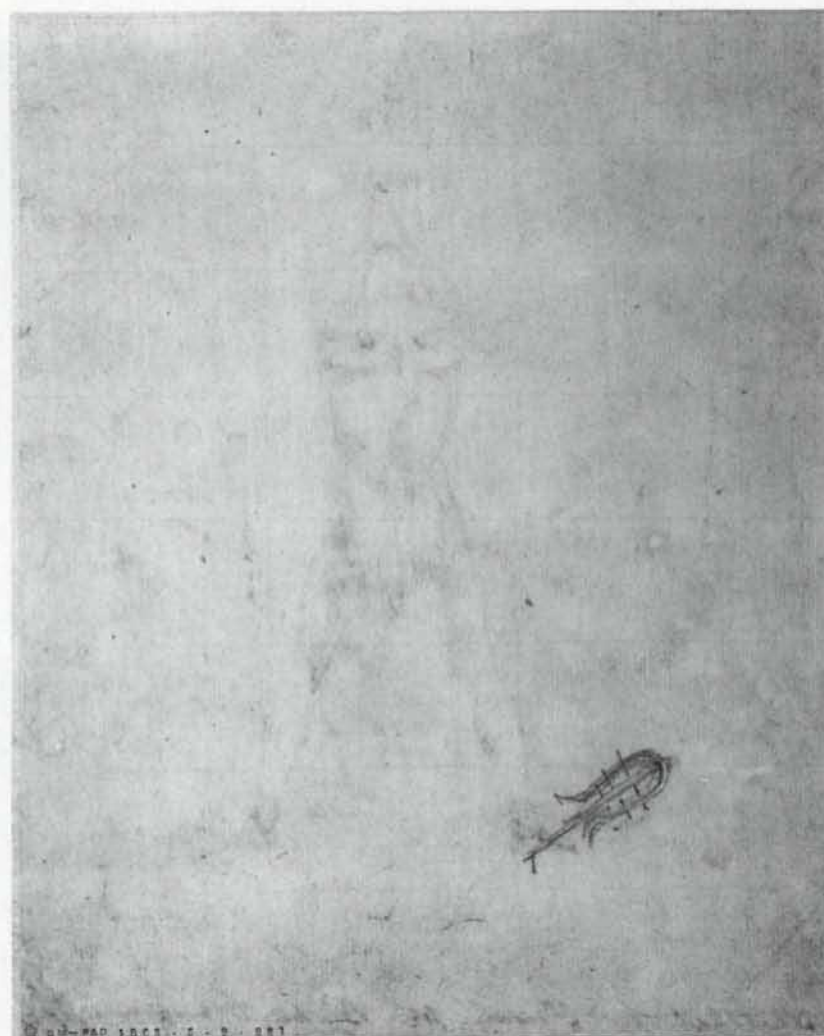
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6. Robert N. Essick wrongly suggests that the sistrum "might be vaguely suggested by a few lines forming a rough triangle," below and to the right of the figure's right foot in Fuseli's drawing, and fails to mention the fine pencil lines actually representing the sistrum. The instrument is not mentioned in Darwin's poem or his notes to it. See Essick, *William Blake's Commercial Book Illustrations* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991) 47.

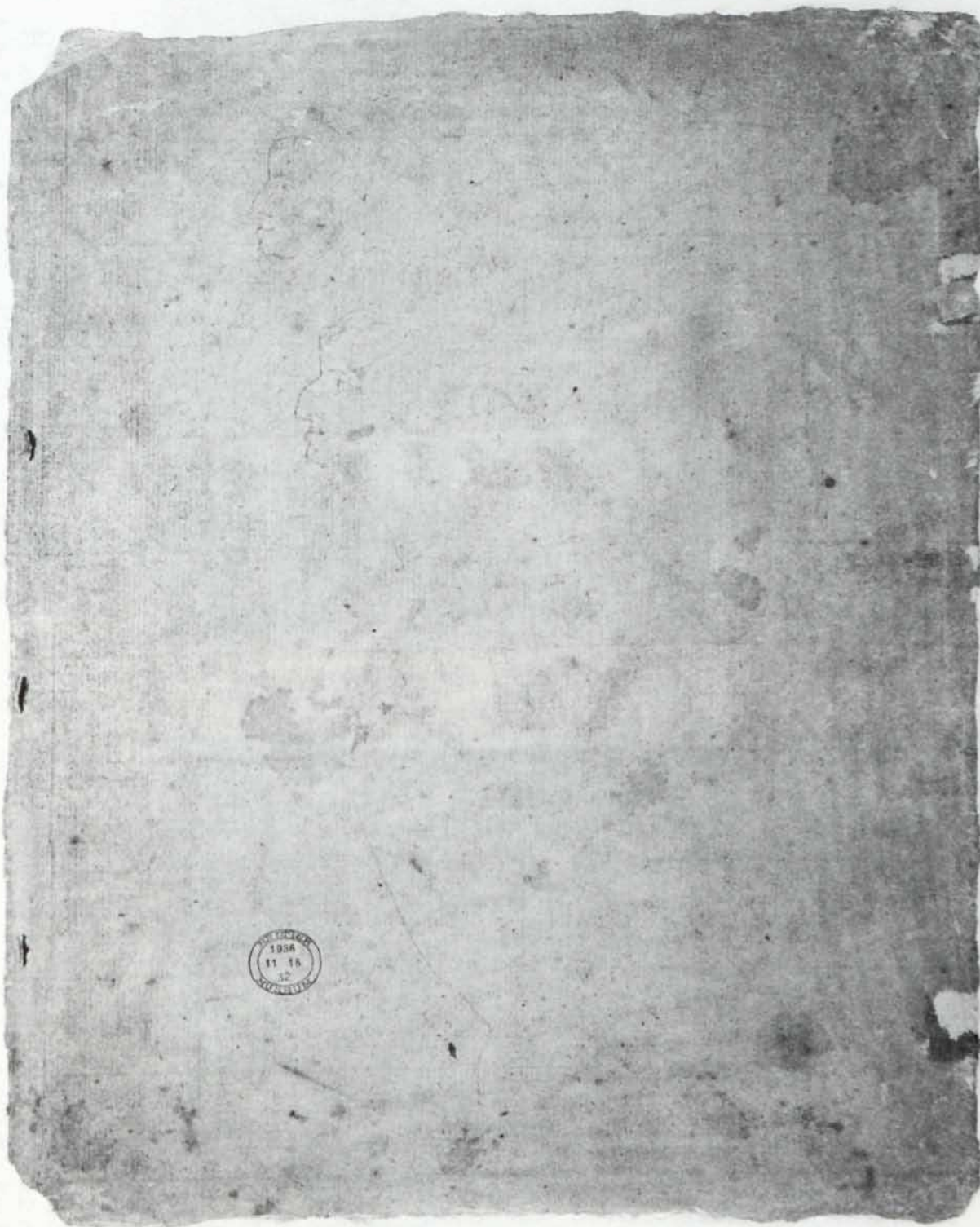




7. Henry Fuseli, *Fertilization of Egypt*, recto. Pencil, sheet 24.1 x 19.4 cm., c. 1791. Inscribed in ink by Frederick Tatham, "Sketched by Fuseli for Blake to engrave from." British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.

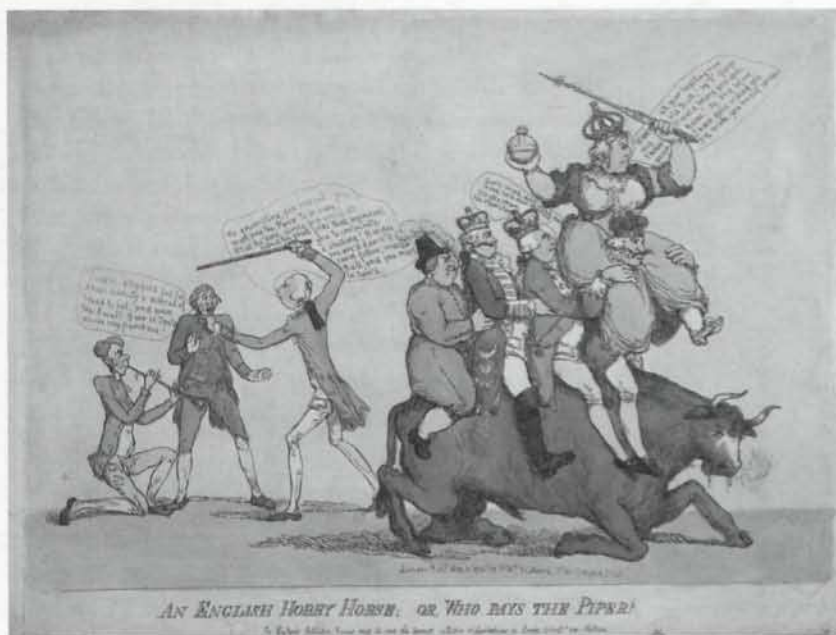


8. Sketch of a sistrum, drawn by Blake on the verso of Fuseli's drawing of *Fertilization of Egypt* (see illus. 7). Pencil, 3.4 x 3 cm. on sheet 24.1 x 19.4 cm., c. 1791. Accession no. 1863.5.9.931 verso. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.



9. Sketches of two heads in profile. Verso of *Europe* copy a, plate 1. Pencil, top head 3.5 x 2 cm., bottom head 4.3 x 2.5 cm., on sheet 32.8 x 26.2 cm., c. 1794? Accession no. 1936.11.16.32 verso. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.





10. (left) Anon., *An English Hobby Horse; or, Who Pays the Piper*. Hand-colored etching/engraving, 30.3 x 42.3 cm., published 11 May 1791 by William Holland, Oxford Street, London. The Emperor Leopold, exhibiting the caricatured nose and projecting lower lip of the Hapsburg family, is the right-most figure astride the bull's back; he holds Catherine II of Russia on his shoulders. She too is given Hapsburgian features, perhaps because by the 1790s they were associated with tyrannical monarchs in general. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

11. (below) *Lucifer and the Pope in Hell*. Etching/engraving, first (proof) state, 18.3 x 24.6 cm., c. 1794. Detail of European monarchs in the fiery pit. Collection of Robert N. Essick.

Blake appears to have begun proofing the plates for his illuminated book *Europe* (1794) early in the production process. There are several miscellaneous groups of these impressions, including what has been designated as 'copy a' in the British Museum. This contains the only known first-state proof of plate 1, the famous frontispiece often called *The Ancient of Days*. The recently revealed verso of this impression bears numerous stains, the British Museum collection mark, a pencil line (possibly by Blake) just to the right of the mark, and two heads in profile, certainly by Blake, in the upper left quadrant of the sheet (illus. 9). Although small and sketchy, both heads exhibit the physiognomic characteristics famously associated with the European ruling family, the Hapsburgs. As documented in a sixteenth-century description of the Emperor Charles V, the Hapsburg nose was "aquiline and a little bent," and the lower jaw was "long and projecting," resulting in a protruding lower lip.<sup>7</sup> These features, clearly shown in a painting of the Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519) and his family,<sup>8</sup> seem to have died out as a family trait after Leopold I (1640–1705),<sup>9</sup> but they survived as distinguishing facial elements in caricatures of the reigning Hapsburgs even in Blake's day (see illus. 10).<sup>10</sup> Whether or not Blake associated these facial



features with the Hapsburgs in particular can only be surmised. He did, however, use them in the context of imperial oppression: in *Lucifer and the Pope in Hell*, a separate plate of c. 1794, at least two of the monarchs trapped in the fiery pit appear with the same characteristically Hapsburgian features (illus. 11).

We cannot automatically assume that the slight verso heads are contemporary with the *Europe* frontispiece printed on the other side of the sheet. Blake probably retained the prints constituting copy a until late in his life, and could have used their versos as sketching sheets at a

7. Quoted in Roger Lockyer, *Habsburg and Bourbon 1470–1720* (London: Longman, 1974) 215.

8. *The Family of Maximilian I* (1515), by Bernhard Strigel (c. 1465–1528). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Maximilian I is back left; his grandson, the future Charles V, is bottom center.

9. See Otto von Habsburg, *Charles V*, trans. Michael Ross (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1970) 217.

10. *An English Hobby Horse; or, Who Pays the Piper* (pub. 11

May 1791 by William Holland, Oxford St., London). See Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, vol. 6: 1784–1792 ([London: British Museum], 1938) #7857. Another example can be found in *The Genius of France Extirpating Despotism Tyranny & Oppression from the Face of the Earth. Or the Royal Warriors Defeated* (pub. 21 Dec. 1792 by S. W. Fores, No. 3 Piccadilly, London). See George, vol. 6, #8143.





12. Sketch of a head in profile. Pencil, 4.3 x 3.7 cm. on sheet 18.7 x 18.5 cm., c. 1794? Butlin 767 verso. Collection of Robert N. Essick.

much later date.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, a somewhat similar head (illus. 12), although less Hapsburgian in its features, appears on the verso of a sheet bearing on its recto nine grotesque heads that have long been associated, both in concept and in provenance, with Blake's so-called "Visionary Heads," which he began to execute for John Varley c. 1819. Yet this sheet of studies provides a less than solid touchstone for dating the newly discovered profiles. As Butlin (767) points out, "this sheet of drawings is not particularly characteristic of Blake and, if by him, may be considerably earlier than the Visionary Heads. The drawing on the back [illus. 12] is similar in scale and style." We are more certain than Butlin that all these ten heads are by Blake. When placed in the context of Blake's sketching style of the 1790s, the heads are certainly "characteristic"; moreover, taken as a product of this earlier period, the inscription on the recto, "all Genius varies Thus / Devils are various Angels are all alike," reveals itself as undeniably Blakean in both its handwriting and its spirit, and echoes *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) more powerfully than it accords, in artistic style and content, with Blake's work of the 1820s.

11. Blake's retention of the impressions in copy a seems probable for at least two reasons. The impressions do not constitute a complete copy of *Europe*, and thus it is unlikely that Blake would have sold this miscellaneous group of prints to a patron as a "copy" of the work. There is no record of a sale during Blake's lifetime, and the nineteenth-century history of the group of prints now called copy a suggests that it passed into the hands of an owner who did not meet Blake until the 1820s. The first record of copy a is in John Giles' auction of the prints in 1881 (Bentley 161). Giles was Samuel Palmer's cousin and is not known to have had any contact with Blake, or to have known of his work, until after Palmer met Blake in the 1820s.

The dating of illus. 9 and 12 must remain speculative, but they would appear mutually to support a date of c. 1794, the date of the *Europe* proof on the recto of illus. 9. Blake's concern with contemporary political issues, in *Europe* and his other "Continental Prophecies" of 1793-95, is beyond doubt. This is also the period in which he was producing his most explicitly political separate prints, including *Lucifer and the Pope in Hell*, with its Hapsburgian heads and its caricature portrait of George III in the person of the Pope.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it would be consistent for Blake concurrently to have been doodling caricatures of the Hapsburgs, and producing the sheet of devilish heads and their accompanying inscription, in about 1794.

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Blake's large color prints, conceived and first executed in 1795, are often considered to be among his greatest achievements in the visual arts. These twelve images include *God Judging Adam* (Butlin 294-96) and *Pity* (Butlin 310-13). Previously unrecorded sketches for both have now been revealed by rematting activities in the British Museum.

Proof copy a of *Europe*, mentioned above, contains an impression of plate 18 in a unique first state of three. The recently revealed, much-stained verso bears a light pencil sketch of a horse, facing to the left, and two small figures (the one on the right barely visible) below and to the left of the animal's head (illus. 13). This is a very preliminary version of motifs that evolved into *God Judging Adam* (illus. 14). The pencil sketch is clearly related to the front-most horse in the color print: note particularly the arch of the neck, the fiery mane, and the positions of all four legs. The horse faces in the same direction as it does in the color print—an odd feature, given that it must have been facing in the opposite direction on the millboard or copperplate (probably the latter in this instance) from which impressions were printed. At some point in his development of the composition, Blake must have decided to reverse its right/left orientation to retain in impressions of the color print what we find in this preliminary sketch.

If God's judgment is the subject of the sketch, as it is in the color print, the two figures lower left (only just visible in the reproduction) immediately suggest Adam and Eve. The latter is eliminated in the color print, while Adam's size, posture, and position relative to the horse are changed considerably. The diminutive size of both figures in the sketch seems inappropriate, given the composition's probable theme, and subordinates the human to the animal. It is hardly surprising, then, that Adam is

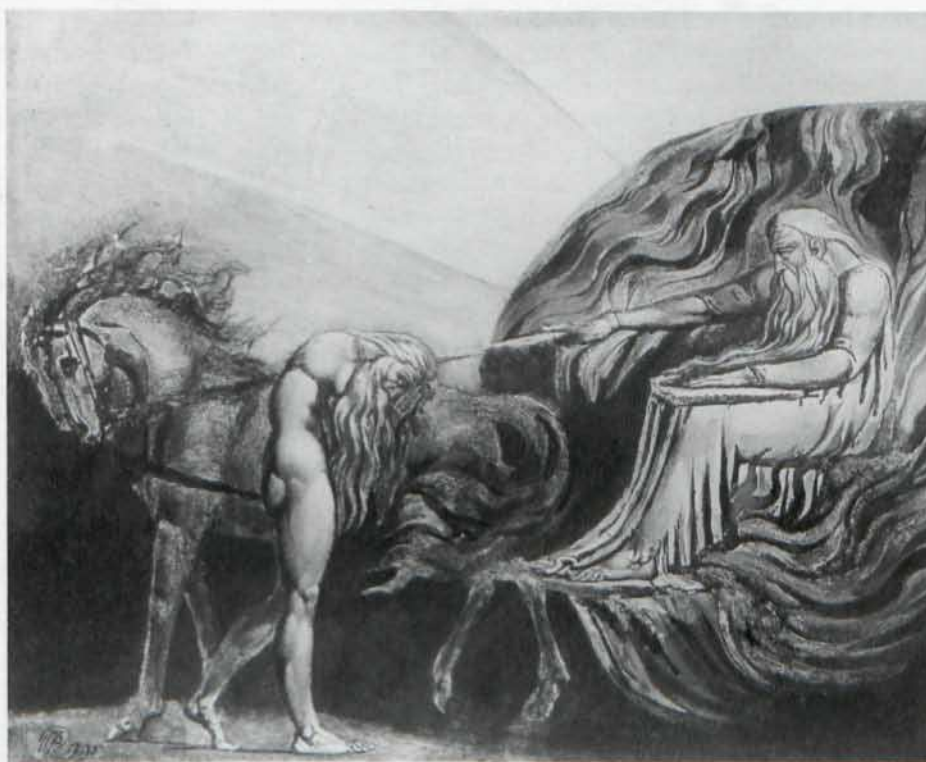
12. On the caricature portrait of George III in this print, see Robert N. Essick, *The Separate Plates of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 42-43.





13. Sketch for *God Judging Adam*. Verso of *Europe* copy a, plate 18, impression in the first state. Pencil, 16.5 x 25 cm. on sheet 26.3 x 33 cm., 1795. Accession no. 1936.11.16.39 verso. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.

14. *God Judging Adam*. Color print finished in pen and ink, and watercolors, 43.2 x 53.5 cm. Designed 1795, printed 1795 or c. 1805, retouched c. 1805. Butlin 294. Tate Britain, London.





enlarged, and brought closer to God and to the center of the design, in its final form.

The omission of Eve is harder to explain. Both offenders would seem to be present in the judgment scene in Genesis 3, although it is possible to interpret the verses as indicating that Eve is still hiding from God during his initial address to Adam (Genesis 3:9 through 3:12). Perhaps, once the figure of Adam was enlarged, the composition would have become too crowded if Eve had been retained. It is also possible that Blake never considered including Eve; the two figures in the sketch could be alternative versions of Adam.



We have long known that Blake executed four works preparatory to his large 1795 color print, *Pity* (Butlin 310-12; see illus. 17). One is a rough pencil sketch, obscured by later over-writing, in his Notebook (British Library; Butlin 201.106). Three are on separate sheets in the British Museum: a smaller and unfinished color print (Butlin 313), a pencil drawing with a vertical format (Butlin 314), and another drawing with the horizontal format of all four printed versions (Butlin 315; illus. 15). The verso of this last work contains a newly revealed cluster of sketches (illus. 16) that adds several twists to the story of the design's development. We are far from certain about how to place this version within the chronology of com-

position; it could have been executed as a trial variant at any point during work on the more finished recto drawing, but the most likely time would be prior to the recto sketch. The new drawing presented here would itself seem to record two stages of composition. What we believe to be the first version of the babe is near the center of the sheet, partly covered by the legs of the woman just above. We can see his elevated arms, the left one extending at a 45-degree angle to the left of the woman's upper right thigh. Raised across the thigh is the babe's right hand, which looks like a cross (a detail unclear in reproduction). There is also a good deal of rubbing-out in this area; perhaps Blake first drew the child in the central position, rubbed out some of the lines defining his body, and then over drew the woman.

The female clearly pictured in the new drawing is particularly odd; her posture is very different from what we find in all other versions of the composition. She appears to be holding a whip, or reins, in her raised right hand; her left arm, extended along the neck of her horse, may be holding reins. To the right and slightly below her are a star and a moth or bat; a similar pairing of squarish shapes to the left of the latter suggests the possibility of another moth or bat. Neither of these motifs appears in any of the other versions, although the moth/bat is reminiscent of the flying creatures in the color print of *Hecate* (Butlin 316-18; sometimes entitled *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy*). No such creature is mentioned in the literary source

15. *Pity*. Pencil, 26.8 x 41.6 cm., c. 1795. Butlin 315. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.







16. *Pity*. Pencil, 26.8 x 37 cm. on sheet 26.8 x 41.6 cm. with a "J WH[ATMAN]" watermark, c. 1795. Verso of Butlin 315 (see illus. 15). Accession number 1894.6.12.12 verso. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.

for *Pity*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* 1:7. Elsewhere in the play, however, we do find references to both bats (3:2 and 4:1) and stars (twice in 1:4); perhaps these passages prompted Blake's inclusion of the motifs.

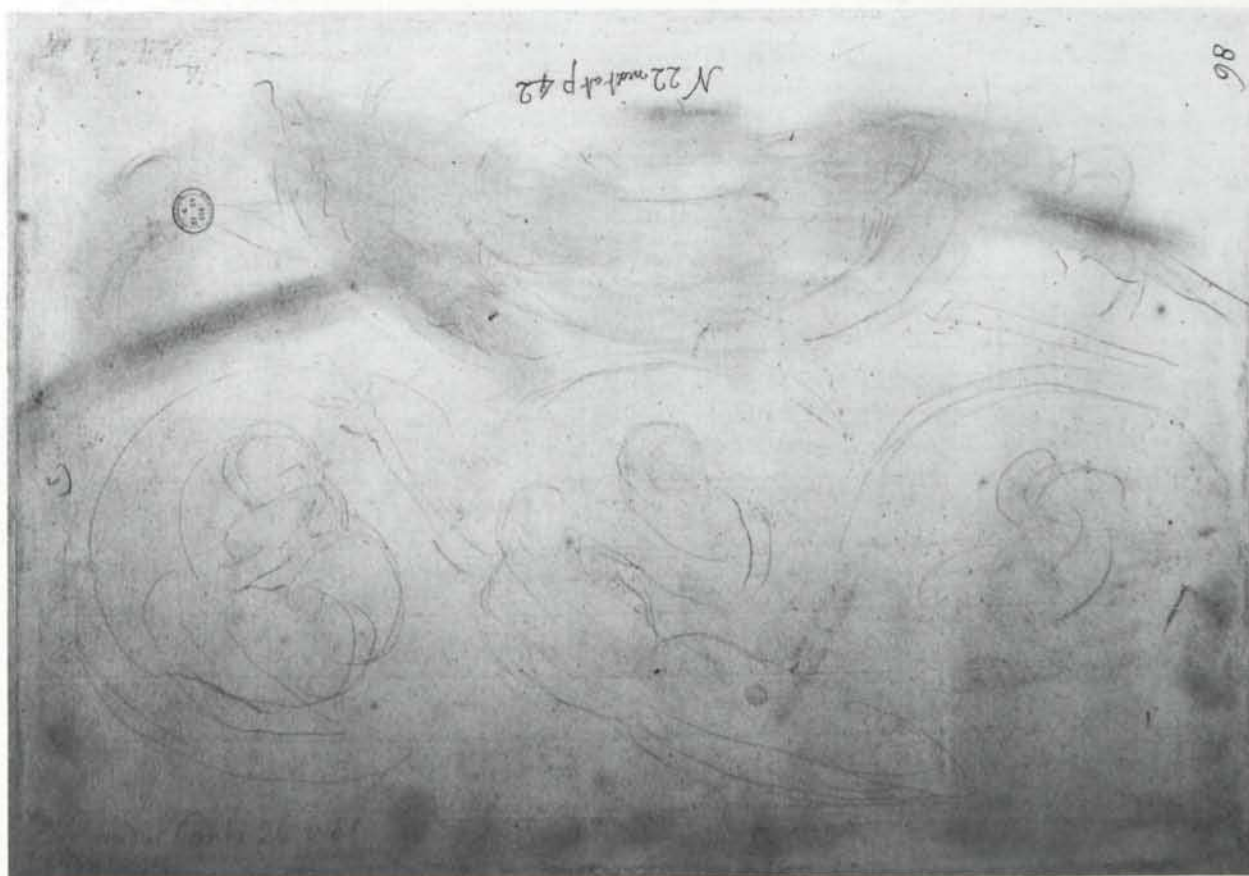
Another sketch of the design appears in the lower half of the sheet. The clearest motif in this second sketch is the child, lower center, with arms raised, in a posture close to what we find in the recto drawing and all other versions. A few sketchy curved lines indicate adult arms reaching down to gather him up. The mound-like form just below the bat/moth, lower right, is probably the rump and upper hind legs of a horse. The curving lines to the left of the



bat/moth may be the posterior and lower back of the horse's rider. A few, hardly discernible lines just below the legs of the woman in the upper design suggest the rider's face, turned toward the viewer and a bit downward to look at the child. (We admit that we would not be able to "read" these faint lines as a human face without cross-checking with the color print.) The line lower left, descending from left to right, and the similarly bold line further to the right along the bottom margin of the sheet, vaguely suggest hills, but we are unable to relate them compositionally to either version of the finished design.

It would appear that Blake first sketched the design in the middle of the sheet, with horse and rider facing right, and then sketched another version in the lower half of the sheet, horse and rider facing left (as in all other drawings of the design and reversed in the print). This second drawing may be Blake's earliest execution of the composition that he finally selected for the color print (illus. 17). The Notebook sketch could have been Blake's first attempt at the basic format found in the color print, but it is also possible that the Notebook design was executed a few years earlier and is not directly related to the development of the print. If that is indeed the case, then Blake, after trying a somewhat different design for *Pity*, reverted to an earlier prototype.

17. *Pity*. Color print finished in pen and watercolors, 42.5 x 53.9 cm., 1795. Butlin 310. Tate Britain, London.



18. Sketch for *St. Peter, St. James, Dante and Beatrice with St. John Also* (see illus. 19). Pencil, 32 x 48.4 cm. on sheet 51.9 x 36.5 cm. with a "W ELGAR / 1796" watermark, c. 1824-27. Verso of accession no. 1918.10.12.9, *The Laborious Passage along the Rocks*, Butlin 812.45. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings. The pencil and pen inscriptions, none in Blake's hand, refer to the recto design, not to this verso sketch. They are as follows: "N 22 next at p 42" (top center); "86" (top right); "Paradiso Canto 26 v 81" (bottom left); "3" (left center); "14 hell Canto 14" (top left, partly erased).

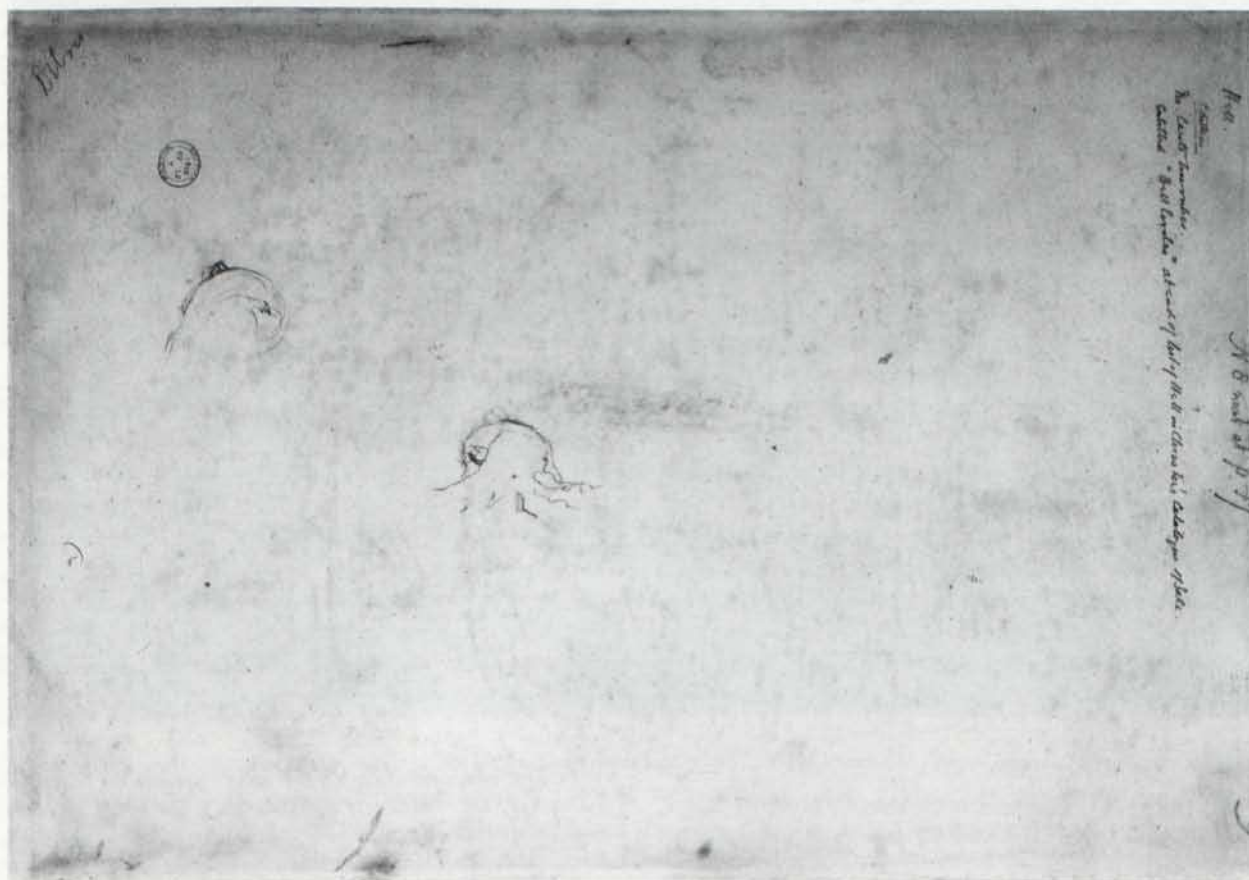


19. *St. Peter, St. James, Dante and Beatrice with St. John Also*. Pen and watercolor over pencil, 36.5 x 52 cm., c. 1824-27. Butlin 812.96. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.



Blake's illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy* range from slight but energetic sketches to fully developed watercolors (Butlin 812-26). Some of the latter (e.g., Butlin 813) exhibit slight verso drawings. Recent rematting has exposed two more preliminary sketches. *The Laborious Passage along the Rocks* (Butlin 812.46) bears on its verso (illus. 18) a preliminary sketch for *St. Peter, St. James, Dante and Beatrice with St. John Also* (Butlin 812.96; illus. 19). This vigorous drawing contains first thoughts on paper for all five figures, but in postures that vary from the finished watercolor. The most significant differences can be seen in the figure of Dante, lower center. In the sketch he appears to be ascending upward to the left, with his (left?) arm extended. In the watercolor, he hovers in a vertical position with both arms bent at the elbows, hands raised and fingers spread in astonishment. The top figure, St. John, has been rubbed out in the sketch, but the remaining fragments suggest a different configuration for him from that which we find in the watercolor. He would appear to be hovering horizontally, with his head on the right and his arms extended along the sides of his body. In the watercolor, St. John descends towards Dante, arms bent over his upper body and legs bent at the knees. Both of these major revisions tighten up the composition considerably, with the figures more contracted and intensified.

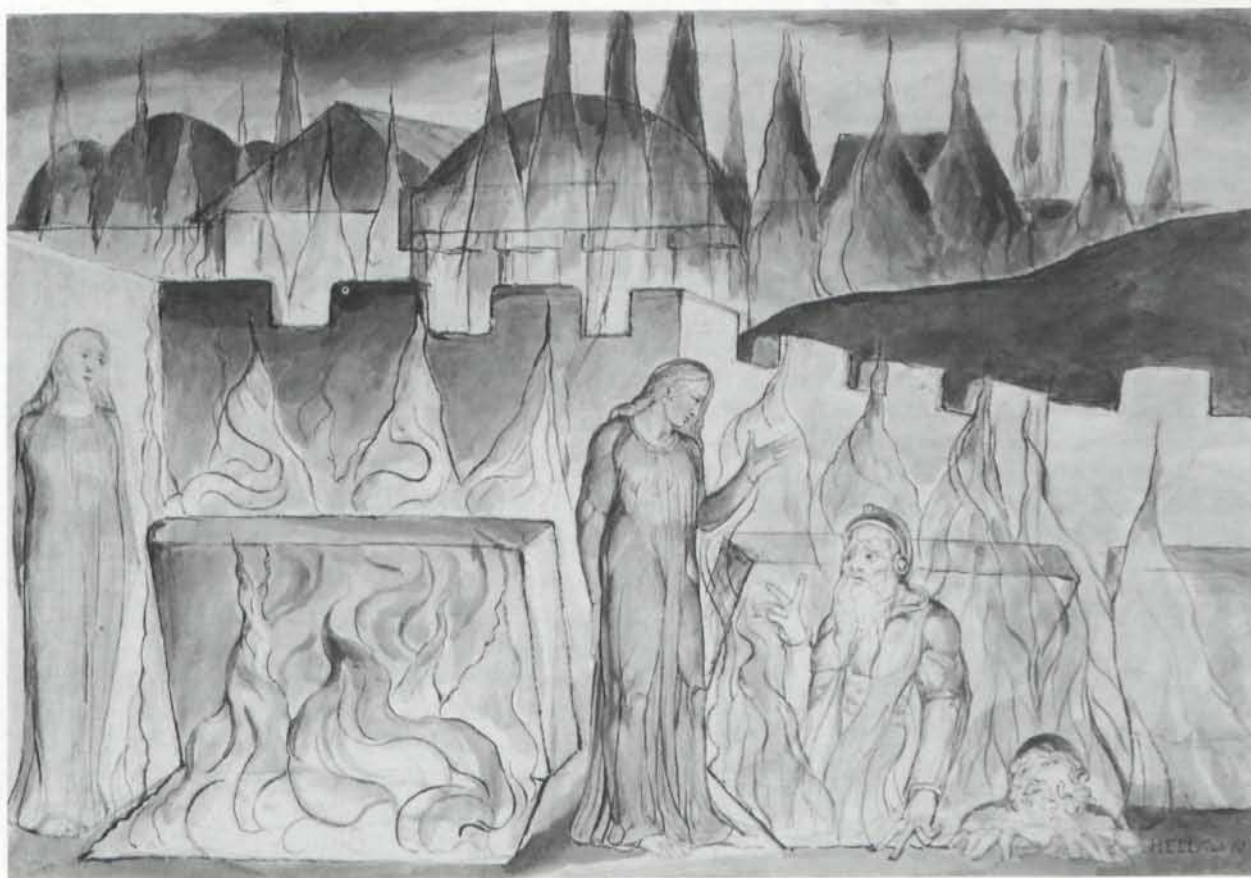
03



Undoubtedly the least of the drawings that we wish to introduce into the Blake canon are the two forms (illus. 20) now revealed to be on the verso of another Dante design, *The Circles of Hell* (Butlin 812.101). The left-most sketch is almost certainly a human head, canted to the right and seen from below. There are several such heads in Blake's art, including the large separate plate of *Head of a Damned Soul in Dante's Inferno*, which Blake

20. Two heads? Pencil, each head approx. 4 x 6 cm. on sheet 51.5 x 36.3 cm. with a "W ELGAR / 1796" watermark, c. 1824-27. Verso of accession no. 1918.10.12.7, *The Circles of Hell*, Butlin 812.101. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings. The black chalk and ink inscriptions, none in Blake's hand, refer to the recto design, not to these verso sketches. They are as follows: "N 8 next at p 17" (right center); "9" (lower right corner); "Hell. / Carthew / No Canto numbers. / Entitled 'Hell Circles' at end of list of hell in Christie's Catalogue of Sale." (upper right); "6" (just below center left); "Detris" (top left corner). The long inscription upper right must have been written after the sale of the Dante watercolors at Christie's, 15 March 1918. "Carthew" is a reference to the collector Alice G. E. Carthew, although her connection with this work is unknown. "Detris" may be a reference to the agent who purchased the work for the British Museum; the same name is written next to the listing of the recto watercolor in a copy of the Christie's catalogue in Essick's possession.





21. *Dante Conversing with Farinata Degli Uberti*. Pen and watercolor over pencil and perhaps black chalk, 36.7 x 52 cm., c. 1824-27. Butlin 812.21. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings.

engraved after Fuseli c. 1789. Given this precedent, it is not surprising that Blake incorporated the motif into his own Dantean efforts. The boat in *Charon and the Condemned Souls* (Butlin 812.5) is populated with several similar heads; another, even closer to this sketch, appears lower left in *Dante and Virgil Gazing into the Ditch of the Flatterers* (Butlin 812.33). Numerous other variations on the basic composition—e.g., head bent back rather than to one side—can be found throughout the watercolor series.

The other form on the newly visible verso may look at first glance like some sort of Blakean polypus, but we believe that it too could be a human head. It would seem to be related to the head of Cavalcante Cavalcanti, which peers just above the ground in the lower right corner of *Dante Conversing with Farinata Degli Uberti* (illus. 21).<sup>13</sup> In the sketch, the head is bent sharply back and to the right, and is seen from below, but it is turned only slightly

to the left and lifted just a bit in the watercolor. The tentacle-like lines below the head in the sketch become Cavalcanti's hands and fingers in the final version.

Both of the newly revealed versos of the Dante watercolors bear pencil numbers, as recorded in the captions to illus. 18 and 20. These add to, but do nothing to clarify the mysteries concerning, the numbers found on most of the visible versos of the Dante watercolors. Apparently the designs were at one time bound in a volume while in the John Linnell collection, although they must have been disbound when a selection of the watercolors was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1893.<sup>14</sup> The numbers are not by Blake, but may have been added by a member of the Linnell family or someone working at their behest. Apparently the watercolors were bound in an order that did not accord with the sequence of passages illustrated in Dante's poem. Two sets of numbers would appear to be an attempt to reorder the designs with a view toward the

13. The head is identified as Cavalcanti's in Albert S. Roe, *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953) 77.

14. Our comments here on the verso numbers are based on Butlin 812 (see particularly 1:555)—with a few added speculations of our own. Butlin notes that his observations are based on the researches of "Miss Mary Laing."



sequence of illustrated passages. First, numbers without prefatory words or abbreviations (e.g., "86" in illus. 18) apparently record the bound order. Second, a number preceded by "N" or "No" (or some such abbreviation for "number") and generally followed by "next at p" (or something similar) record the revised order, created with a sense of the sequence of passages illustrated, followed by the page number (according to the binding order) of the next illustration in the revised sequence. Some of the versos also record the canto numbers illustrated. The lengthy inscription upper right in illus. 20 was written after the sale of the Dante watercolors in 1918 (see caption).



Blake based what may be his first extant experiment in relief and white-line etching, *The Approach of Doom*, on a drawing by his beloved brother Robert. The newly revealed verso of this drawing bears a standing figure, with upper body and head turned sharply to the right,

and the left arm reaching to the left; to the right of that figure is a small head, probably a trial variant of the standing figure's head (illus. 22). Although no such figure appears in either the recto drawing by Robert Blake or in the relief etching, one cannot rule out the possibility that William Blake made this sketch on the back of his brother's drawing while helping him with it, or while preparing his relief etching based on it. No other figure study by Robert is so dramatically twisted; only a few of his drawings approach the liveliness of some of the pencil lines, no doubt sketched very rapidly. Robert's work, including the recto design, is far more studied and rectilinear, and no figure in any of Robert's other drawings exhibits a similar posture—or even a similar sense of energy. The detached head, however, is more typical of Robert's work in its blank, mannequin-like outline. Lacking more definite evidence, it might be safest to attribute these verso sketches to "Blake—William and/or Robert."



22. William and/or Robert Blake. Sketches of a standing figure and a head. Pencil, standing figure approx. 18 x 6 cm. on sheet 33.5 x 47.4 cm. with a large fleur-de-lis watermark, c. 1786-87. Verso of accession no. 1894.6.12.16, *The Approach of Doom* by Robert Blake, Butlin R2. British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings. The inscription, "by Robert Blake," written vertically on the left side of the sheet, is not in the handwriting of either Robert or William.



The preliminary drawings presented here prompt a few general observations on Blake's mode of composition. They are all traces of Blake's habit of thinking with his hands, as it were. We get the sense from these rapid, often ill-formed works that Blake was testing out various possibilities without prior plans as to what he was trying to achieve. With the exception of the studied drawing of the sistrum (illus. 8), each of the newly discovered drawings is an act of discovery, not the execution of a pre-existent conception, formal or iconographic. Such practices are hardly unique to Blake; legions of artists since at least the Renaissance have used sketching for these purposes. It is, however, easy for those who concentrate on Blake's texts and his complex ideas to overlook the freedom, the purposeful thoughtlessness, of his sketches. His lifelong experience of this working method may have given rise to his ideas about the seamless relationship between conception and execution, and thoughts on how the former can emerge through the latter. As Blake wrote in about 1808, "Invention depends Altogether upon Execution."<sup>15</sup>

15. Annotations to Reynolds' *Discourses*, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, Newly Revised Edition, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1982) 637.

## MINUTE PARTICULARS

### "Friendship," Love, and Sympathy in Blake's *Grave* Illustrations

BY ALEXANDER S. GOURLAY

In his essay announcing the very exciting discovery of Blake's original designs for Robert Blair's poem *The Grave*, Martin Butlin describes one of them as depicting "eight exquisite airborne female figures, two, accompanied by six cherubs, rising above a crescent moon, while the others soar up and encircle them; together they hold the thread of life." He adds, "This allusion to the Fates is presumably based on the line, in the midst of a long passage on the horrors of suicide on page 18, that reads 'Our Time is fix'd, and all our days are number'd!'" (71). The design, which was not one of those engraved and published in Cromek's 1808 edition of the poem, is reproduced here as illus. 1; I have seen only this image, for the pictures themselves are not presently accessible.<sup>1</sup>

Butlin's hypothesis about the subject of the design responds in part to the prominent motif of thread being spun and passed between female figures, which resembles the way Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos spin and pass the thread of life between them in traditional representations of the course of mortal life. Versions of this motif can be found in several of Blake's designs, including the "Arlington Court Picture" (a.k.a. "The Sea of Time and Space," Butlin, *Painting and Drawings* no. 803) and his illustrations to Gray and Milton. But that particular thread-passing usually ends when Atropos takes her cruel shears and fatally snips the thread—in this design, by contrast, the penultimate woman helps the topmost figure wind the thread in traditional fashion onto a large skein on her wrists, and no cutting tools are in evidence.

Several lines of Blair's poem that appear on pages 4 and 5 of the 1808 edition fit the illustration more closely than the passage about suicide on page 18:

Invidious Grave! How dost thou rend in sunder  
Whom love has knit, and sympathy made one!  
A tie more stubborn far than nature's band.  
Friendship! Mysterious cement of the soul!  
[P. 5] Sweet'ner of life! And solder of society!  
I owe thee much.

The left figure within the arc of the moon is probably Sympathy, holding a distaff wound with raw material

1. Nathan Winter of Dominic Winter Book Auctions provided helpful advice. For some news on the watercolors, see Goodwin.