

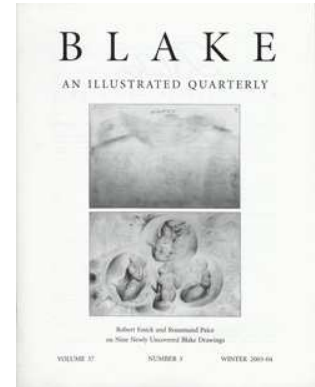
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“Friendship,” Love, and Sympathy in Blake’s Grave Illustrations

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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."¹⁵

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.¹

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.



1. Proposed title: "Friendship." Courtesy of Libby Howie.

(called "roving"), which she pulls out while twisting the fibers in her fingers to form the thread that constitutes the "stubborn tie" of friendship. Blair's text distinguishes this thread from "nature's band," the one that ties body and soul, which corresponds more closely to the thread handled by the Fates. Sympathy passes the thread of friendship to Love, who is identified here emblematically with traditional images of Charity/Caritas in that she is surrounded by cherubs like those who represent the six acts of mercy.² Love feeds the thread down to the cherub at her left foot, who passes it under his chest and up to his fellows on her left (our right), one of whom slips it behind Love's back to the leftmost cherub and down again to a cherub near her right foot, from whom it passes to the woman at lower left and then around the circle of women to the top. The six women (presumably mortal and sublunary though some transcend the lunar sphere) gracefully cooperate with each other and with the lunar immortals Love and Sympathy, passing the thread among themselves to "cement" and "solder" their friendship, until the last floats above Love and Sympathy and looks directly upward through the loosely wound skein, which in real-life spinning is the last stage before the thread is dyed and then "wound off" into a ball.

Blair's exclamation, "Invidious Grave! How dost thou rend in sunder / Whom love has knit, and sympathy made one!" laments the fact that friends bound together by love can be parted by death. The text is ambiguous about the extent of the rupture between living and dead friends, but Blake's design contains no hint that the Grave could ever break the more durable bond of friendship. The picture as a whole seems to be a straightforward celebration of friendship, love, and sympathy, even if there are reasons to suspect that Blake thought of them all as mere shadows of a greater love. Female love, female beauty, and the textile arts (especially weaving) are sometimes represented in Blake as potentially delusive, blinding, or binding, and are associated with the seductive charms and limitations of the natural world as opposed to the sublime glories of the spiritual realm. Since spinning and its correlatives are the postlapsarian business of Eve and her daughters, spinning in Blake sometimes seems a fallen activity, productive and even satisfying but not in itself redemptive. Nevertheless, I find little that could be seen as sinister in this design, which suggests that the difference between corporeal and spiritual friendship is one of degree rather than of kind. Even the spiral arrangement of the cooperating women echoes the circular or helical movement of spinning itself, and implies a special connection between pleas-

2. The figure of Love in the Blair design is clearly related to the Charity-based figure of the "Church Universal" (E 559) or "Christian Church" (E 553) in Blake's several depictions of the Last Judgment.

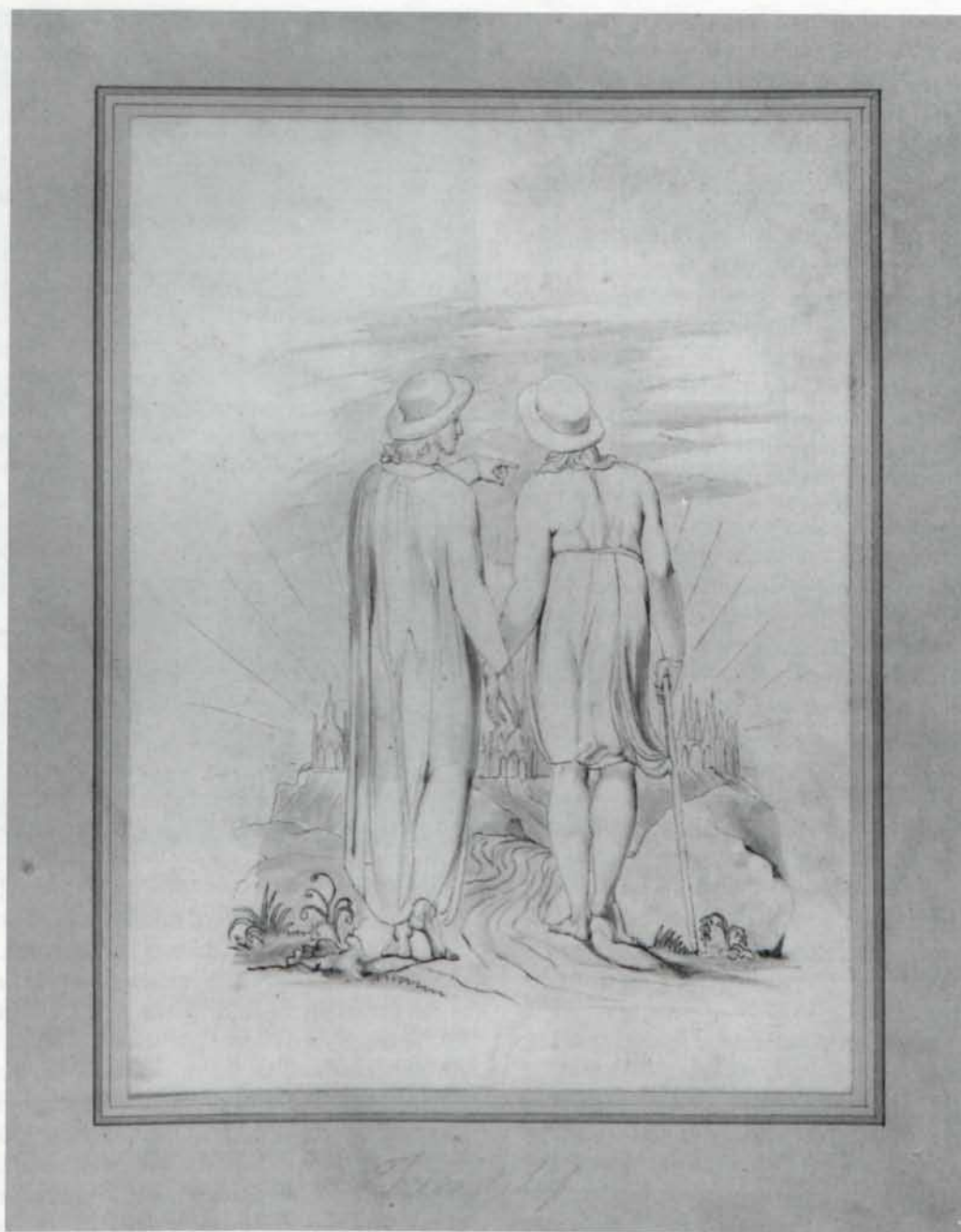
ant sociability and spinning. The smaller female floating above Love and her friend Sympathy and looking upward through the accumulating skein may indicate the importance of vision in transcending the sociable spiral of friendship.³

In their 1982 edition of *The Grave* Essick and Paley speculate that the unengraved subject listed as "Friendship" in Cromek's first prospectus for his edition of the poem might illustrate the latter part of the passage quoted above (75), and I believe they are right. But friendship is also an issue in another of the newfound unengraved designs for *The Grave* (illus. 2); Butlin reports that the mount for this drawing is inscribed "Friendship" in an unknown hand and notes that this title is in Cromek's prospectus (71). The design shows a gowned, bearded man (Jesus in a traveler's hat) pointing forward and rightward with his left hand as he walks along a rutted road in step with a mortal traveler who uses a walking stick; almost hand in hand, they approach a radiant city on a hill that has at least two open gates. The road swerves right and disappears into a (river?) valley before it connects with the approaches to either of the gates, and the vegetation at left of their feet seems more vigorous than at right. The picture is one of two among the rediscovered designs that appear to illustrate images in a long passage near the end of the poem on page 29 in the 1808 edition:

Heaven's portals wide expand to let him [Jesus] in;
Nor are his friends shut out: as a great prince
Not for himself alone procures admission
But for his train; it was his royal will,
That where he is there should his followers be.
Death only lies between, a gloomy path!
Made yet more gloomy by our coward fears!
But nor untrod, nor tedious; the fatigue
Will soon go off. Besides, there's no bye-road
To bliss.

Butlin describes one newly discovered picture, which he does not reproduce, as "Christ leading the blessed souls into heaven" (71), and reports that it is related to several other Blake designs, including a sketch of a gowned figure leading souls toward a gothic doorway (see fig. 28 in Essick and Paley). If it is anything like the sketch, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, this new design probably illustrates the first five lines of the passage above, which

3. This floating female is clearly related to a very similar figure in the "Arlington Court Picture," probably a girl, who reclines beneath a tree while holding (as helpful children often did) a skein of thread that a standing woman winds off into a ball; this thread is physically separate from those handled by the Fates at the bottom of the picture and by the weavers and other women at right, and it is not clear who spun it. See Heppner 262; he suggests that the girl is looking up to indicate the source of the skein.



2. Proposed title: "There's no bye-road / To bliss"; inscribed "Friendship." Courtesy of Libby Howie.

describe Jesus leading a "train" of souls to "Heaven's portals." The picture inscribed "Friendship," on the other hand, appears to respond in general to the idea of Jesus as guide and in particular to the phrase "There's no bye-road / To bliss," for it shows Jesus giving traveling directions to a living man on his way to heaven. While it is true that the beginning of the passage refers generally to the "friends" of Jesus, and the almost-clasped hands, similar outfits, and synchronized steps emphasize the compatibility of the two figures, "Friendship" seems to me to be

at most a secondary theme rather than the subject of this picture. As it turned out, neither contender for the title of "Friendship" was published, but it is not likely that Blake sold Cromek two different pictures by that name. Perhaps Cromek and company had to sort out for themselves the subjects of Blake's designs after the relationship between artist and publisher turned sour: whoever wrote the word on the mount may have sought "Friendship" among the pictures and guessed that that title must apply to this picture of two congenial males.

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A Dutch Bibliophile Edition of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1928)

BY OSKAR WELLENS

After the publication of Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* in 1863, "Blake was," in the words of G. E. Bentley, Jr., "immediately elevated from obscurity to fame and notoriety."¹ It is no matter for surprise that henceforth numerous editions of his works started rolling off the presses, not only in England and America, but also on the Continent. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, By William Blake*, appeared in Maastricht, the Netherlands, in 1928, an edition that deserves some special attention, for it was brought out in a limited run designed for bibliophiles only. This note is meant to throw some light on the genesis of this remarkable publication.²

First a word on its publisher Alexandre Alphonse Marius Stols (illus. 1) is in place here, for he was a monument in the annals of notable publications of Dutch as well as of foreign belletristic works.³ Born in Maastricht in 1900 as the son of a printer and publisher, Stols was from an early age steeped in the world of book production which exerted a strong fascination over him. However, his father never wanted his son to succeed in the business, but instead sent him to the University of Amsterdam in 1919 to acquire a degree in law. In that lively city Stols was caught up in the maelstrom of intellectual and cultural life, commencing his lifelong acquaintance with writers, sculptors, painters, and actors. He also attended lectures on art history, paleography, philosophy, and Dutch and French literature. In 1923 he changed to the University of Leiden, where he graduated with a B.A. in law. Meanwhile, he had started printing and publishing his own works, which over the years included an extraordinary range of prominent Dutch and Flemish poets and novelists, many of them rising to prominence. Stols seems to have been endowed with an unusual flair for spotting genuine literary talent. From the very beginning of his publishing career Stols also catered for an international market, printing works by Paul Valéry, Shakespeare, Paul Claudel, Rainer Maria Rilke, André Gide, etc. His correspondence with writers and artists all over the world—more than 10,000 letters have been pre-

1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed., *William Blake: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975) 11 (Introduction).

2. Listed in G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books: Annotated Catalogues of William Blake's Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1977) 303, and in George Watson, ed., *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) 624.

3. Among the many articles and books on Stols, see especially C. van Dijk, *Alexandre A. M. Stols, 1900-1973, Uitgever en Typograaf: Een Documentatie* (Zutphen: Walburg, 1992).