

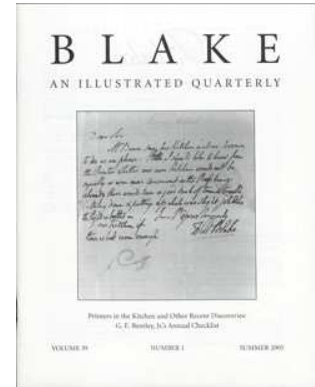
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M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

Blake's Four . . . "Zoa's"?

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

Blake's Four ... "Zoa's"?

By JUSTIN VAN KLEECK

Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place
William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 3

The manuscript of *The Four Zoas* is famous in Blake studies for its complexity, difficulty, and manifold challenges to traditional approaches to texts, as well as for its richness of interpretive possibilities. Whether one chooses to focus on the text, on the illustrations, or on the two together, those large folio and several smaller leaves require serious decisions for readers, scholars, bibliographers, and editors. And this is true in all its dimensions, from the highest organizational level—those two pesky Nights the Seventh; the second Night that is not quite "Night the Second"—progressively downward to the minute particulars—the multiple transpositions and additions; the status of those circled passages on pp. 5, 6, and 7; the many notes not by Blake.

I recount all of these well-known data to put in relief an extremely minute particular that appears to have gone largely unnoticed in editorial and critical treatments of *The Four Zoas*. While preparing a transcription of the manuscript for part of my dissertation and a new electronic edition,¹ I noticed the presence of an apostrophe between the "a" and "s" of "Zoas" on the title page (see illus. 1 and 2), which is one of Blake's late revisions to the poem written in pencil above the cancelled original title "VALA".² My reaction was first surprise, then confusion. In my years of studying the poem closely in its many printed and then facsimile forms, I had never noticed, nor been directed to, the presence of this curious mark on

I would like to thank Robert N. Essick for his helpful comments on this essay and Morris Eaves—who may still be reeling from my two-day crash course on the manuscript—for his encouragement.

1. My dissertation project is an editorial history of the *Four Zoas* manuscript currently underway at the University of Virginia; the textual transcription was originally for the dissertation but now will be part of the *William Blake Archive* at some time in the future. I based my original transcription on the facsimiles by Bentley (1963) and Magno and Erdman (1987), as well as on a microfilm from the British Library, and then I consulted the manuscript itself from 7 to 11 March 2005. I am grateful to the entire staff of the British Library Department of Western Manuscripts for granting me access to this "Z Safe Restricted" artifact, as well as for their helpfulness and kindness during my visit (including lugging the bound manuscript back and forth to the safe for me!).

2. G. E. Bentley, Jr., dates the revision of the title page to "perhaps 1807" (*Vala or The Four Zoas* 165) and thus late in the long process of Blake's engagement with the manuscript, which probably began sometime around "1797" as written on the title page.

the very first page of the manuscript. Indeed, despite many differing opinions about the title—the manuscript's very (disturbed) identity, as it were—I could not recall having heard any mention of Blake's "Zoa's". Thus, what follows is an attempt to fill in what I believe to be a hole in treatments of the manuscript to date.

The history of the title is an interesting facet of *The Four Zoas*, which I offer here in brief to help explain part of my surprise and confusion. The first public acknowledgment of the manuscript is William Michael Rossetti's catalogue in Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*. The catalogue entry in List 2 ("Uncoloured Works"), no. 7, gives the title as "Vala, or the Death and Judgment of the Ancient Man: a Dream of Nine Nights; by William Blake" (Gilchrist 2: 240). The pencil addition is not mentioned and the cancellations are ignored (the spelling of "Judgement" is also changed, but that by the by). E. J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats, the first to edit and publish the manuscript's text for their *The Works of William Blake* (1893), take a similar approach to the title. Certainly, they played a crucial part in determining the shape of the poem as it appears today—reordering the manuscript's disarrayed pages, making sense of transpositions and revisions, editing (and altering) the text for publication. The pencil notes by Ellis and others reveal their struggle with the material as they found it, which they describe in "About 'Vala'" (2: 295–301). For them, the poem is without doubt "VALA", for here they explain how after Blake initially gave it this title,

Another title was considered as better suited to the poem and was written higher up on the page. It was to have been called

THE FOUR ZOAS

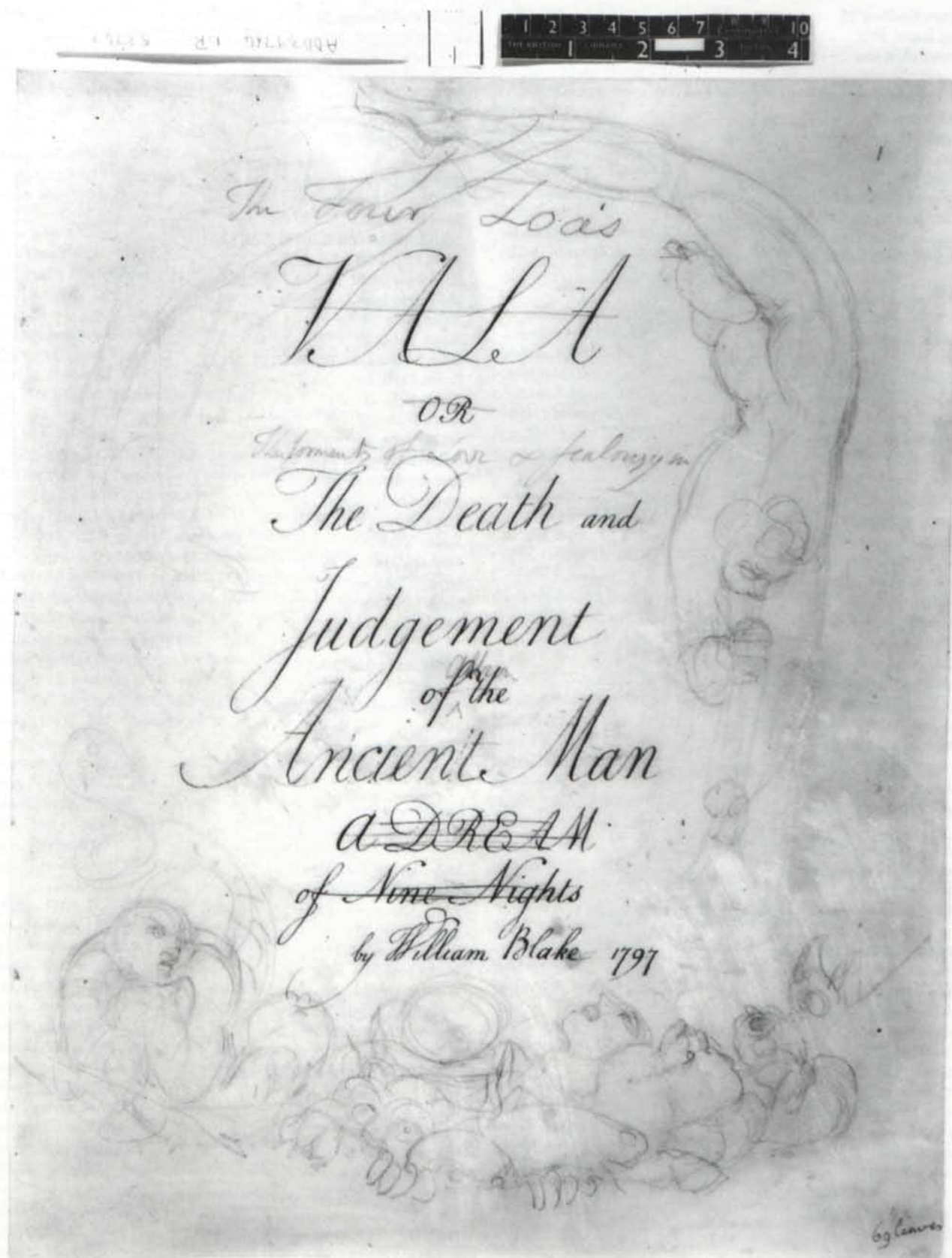
OR

THE TORMENTS OF LOVE AND JEALOUSY. (2: 296)

But according to them, Blake reconsidered, and "VALA" "was boldly repenned as the true title, and repeated as the heading of the poem's first page" (2: 297).

Despite Ellis and Yeats's argument, and their publication of the poem as "VALA" (and their later republications of portions of that text in individual editions), John Sampson published brief selections from "*The Four Zoas*" in his 1905 edition, *The Poetical Works of William Blake* (see 345). In his 1913 edition, along with providing fuller selections and a reproduction of the manuscript's title page (facing 348), he transcribes the first part of the title in his bibliographical introduction as "THE FOUR ZOAS" (xxxix). Subsequent to Sampson's use of this title, in 1918 the manuscript was entered in the British Museum's catalogue as "*The Four Zoas*", Add. 39764, after being auctioned at Christie's on 15 March and then donated anonymously to the Museum on 11 May of that year.³

3. The auction catalogue gives the title of the manuscript, Lot 206, as "VALA: OR, THE DEATH AND JUDGMENT OF THE ANCIENT MAN: A DREAM OF NINE NIGHTS; by WILLIAM BLAKE, 1797" (28). The description, however, notes that "The Title was altered by Blake (in pencil) to *The Four Zoas*"



1. *The Four Zoas*, page 1 (title page); with inch/centimeter scale. By permission of the British Library. Add. 39764.

Geoffrey Keynes, too, transcribes the title (in its "second form") as "The Four Zoas" in his *A Bibliography of William Blake* (1921). Here, Keynes begins what has been a common editorial and critical approach to the title, listing both forms: "VALA, or: THE FOUR ZOAS" (32). He would go on to follow this same practice in his later critical editions of Blake (1925, 1927, 1957, 1966 ff.)

It is only with D. J. Sloss and J. P. R. Wallis's *The Prophetic Writings of William Blake* in 1926 that we find the title transcribed as "'The Four Zoas'" in their bibliographical preface to the poem (2: 136). Nonetheless, they did not make a particular note about the presence of the apostrophe, nor did they give the poem that title (or explain their choice) in their edition—it is still *The Four Zoas*. In subsequent full editions of the text, no later editors have noted that there is something between that "a" and "s," despite growing attention to the material manuscript and despite literal transcriptions of at least the title and a discussion of the revision: H. M. Margoliouth in *William Blake's Vala* (1956) xiv; G. E. Bentley, Jr., in *Vala or The Four Zoas* (1963) 1 and see also 165, *Blake Books* (1977) 457, and *William Blake's Writings* (1978) 1072 and 1725; David V. Erdman in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1965) 738 and *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (newly rev. ed. 1988) 817; W. H. Stevenson in *Blake: The Complete Poems* (2nd ed. 1989) 292; Alicia Ostriker in *William Blake: The Complete Poems* (rpt. 1981) 273 and 921-22. So too have editors of other types of editions consistently published the poem as *The Four Zoas* without a discussion of the apparent apostrophe in the title. Landon Dowdey gives a prose rendering and an eclectically Blakean visual re-presentation of the manuscript in his *The FOUR ZOAS* (1983), discussing the title in appendix B (3). In their facsimile *The Four Zoas by William Blake* (1987), Cettina Magno and David Erdman do not transcribe the text but do comment on the title page and the revision (25-26).⁴

All of these editors, it must be emphasized, have made valuable contributions to Blake studies, and some have also played significant roles in the fields of editing and bibliography. But the texts we receive in editions largely determine the interpretations of those texts, by the editors themselves and by others, and thus critical discussion of *The Four Zoas* also has not acknowledged the possible apostrophe, despite growing attention to the network of revisions and ambiguities in the text. For example, the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group made both punctuation in general and *The Four Zoas* in particular key parts of their criticism of Erdman's 1982 edition when reviewing it in 1984. Meanwhile, David M. Baulch, exploring the "multiple plurality" of the manuscript and the advan-

tages of hypertext, begins by zeroing in on the word "zoas," its implications for "many sets of four zoas," and the challenges posed to editors, yet he does not mention the richly ambiguous mark in the new title (154). These are just two of the many important articles devoted to the textual state(s) of *The Four Zoas*, whether as a whole or in part.⁵

The number of recent monographs on *The Four Zoas* is even more encouraging in many ways, since most of them make the revisionary and unbounded complexity of the manuscript a central part of their interpretations. Donald Ault's *Narrative Unbound* (1987) is probably the most extreme example, "the first minutely detailed interpretation of the verbal text," yet he transcribes the title as "'THE FOUR ZOAS'" (xii). More significantly, he moves on to discuss the "heterogeneity" of the poem and states, "Perhaps the most immediately visible mark of this self-differing of the text ... is in Blake's revision of the poem's title"—without drawing attention to one particular mark in that revision (xiii). George Anthony Rosso, Jr., (*Blake's Prophetic Workshop* [1993] 165) and Andrew Lincoln (*Spiritual History* [1995] 32, including a transcription of the original title) both discuss the revision to the title. John B. Pierce gives a reproduction of the title page and explains how "The title changes are easily visible, even the rather tentative addition of 'The Four Zoas'" (*Flexible Design* [1998] xxix; see also xix and 65-66). Peter Otto (*Blake's Critique of Transcendence* [2000]), while paying careful attention to the manuscript and the revisions, focuses on the title page in his interpretation of the poem's trapped circularity without actually transcribing the revised title (3, 342-46).

Perhaps the first question we might ask in this context is, what exactly is this mark? As described above, an apostrophe shows up as part of the title only in Sloss and Wallis's prefatory transcription, but they offer neither an explanation of why their actual title is given without it nor a discussion of what it is or could be. Now, looking at the title page as reproduced in both Bentley's and Magno and Erdman's facsimile editions, which are the means by which most readers will view the manuscript, it is evident that the mark is placed where one would normally expect to find an apostrophe. Further, it does not appear to be part of, nor in any feasible way related to, the pencil sketch just above it, and it is unlike the various random marks scattered across the page. (All of this is also true in the reproductions of the page in Sampson's 1913 edition and in Pierce's 1998 critical work.) At first glance, then, I interpreted it as an apostrophe. And yet at the same time, we can see in all of these reproductions that the mark is distinctly darker than the added pencil line.⁶ But facsimiles can tell only so much, of

and then refers to Sampson's use of that title in his 1905 edition. The manuscript was sold to "Parsons" for £420.

4. In *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (1981), Martin Butler also transcribes the first line of the revised title as "The Four Zoas" (1: 275); he reproduces the title page in vol. 2, no. 430.

5. For example, *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* has devoted several issues entirely or in large part to *The Four Zoas* (see my bibliography).

6. In this instance, Magno and Erdman's infrared photography actually conceals more than it reveals, darkening the pencil marks on the page so that distinguishing tone is difficult; still, the difference between the title and this particular mark is somewhat perceptible. Bentley's, Sampson's, and Pierce's reproductions show the difference much more starkly.



2. *The Four Zoas*, page 1 (title page), detail. By permission of the British Library. Add. 39764.

course, and often what they tell is different from the original tale. In the manuscript itself, the mark is almost certainly in pencil, as the color and the slight granulation (characteristic more of pencil than of ink writing) suggest. It is quite clearly darker than the pencil writing below it, but its placement makes it very hard when scanning the line—or even simply looking at the page—to deny the strong possibility, if not the likelihood, that it is an intentional apostrophe.

Even if we agree that this is an apostrophe rather than an accidental accidental, the issue of intention raises a second and far more difficult question: is this mark (and the intention) Blake's? The history of the manuscript makes answering such a question more complex than it might be otherwise. As the presence of non-Blakean text on many pages testifies, such a miniscule scratch of the pencil could have been added by a number of individuals between the time the manuscript left Blake's hands late in his life and the time when Sampson first reproduced the title page in 1913: John Linnell or someone in the Linnell family, Gilchrist or Rossetti, Ellis or Yeats, are all equally viable candidates.⁷ The contrast between the mark and the text below it makes this possibility an important one. However, most instances of such non-authorial text are limited to page and line numbering or other editorial notes, and the unknown censor of the illustrations seems to have been largely concerned with visual bowdlerizing. Further, it would be quite odd if Ellis or Yeats or someone working with them had added the mark, since they transcribe that portion of the title *without* it.⁸ Why try to pass something off as Blake's and then neglect to include it in the transcription of Blake's text?

7. The best example of inscriptions not by Blake are Ellis's two notes at the top of p. 15, the first from 1891 and the second from 1904, regarding the placement of that leaf; the pencil note takes up a fair portion of the top margin and continues down into the right margin as well. Many other pencil notes by some unknown individual(s) occur on various pages—for instance, the pencil note "Beginning of / Night VII" in the middle of the left margin on p. 95 that is almost certainly not in Blake's hand, or the small note "Ellis / p. 81" written just above it. These latter notes for page collations with the Ellis-Yeats text appear with great frequency throughout the manuscript, beginning in the top left corner of p. 5.

8. They also do not record any such alteration in their list of "Author's and Editor's Verbal Emendations," nor do they describe it in their "Descriptive Notes" (3: 149-74).

We can next try to rule out the individual who added the page number "1" in the right corner, also in pencil but lighter than the mark. This is surely not Blake's notation, as Bentley argues in his discussion of the poem's order and reorderings (*Vala or The Four Zoas* 197). But we can check the number against the mark using Sampson's reproduction from 1913. In that image, the page number does not appear, which ostensibly suggests that it was added some time later. Looking more closely, however, it is also clear that Sampson's reproduction is not of the *full* page, the image being cropped at least at the sides. So might not the page number simply be cut off? First, the "6" of "69" is almost fully visible in the lower right corner. I measured both the bottom of the "1" (which is the leftmost point of the number) and the left edge of the "6" in the manuscript, and I found that the first point is approximately 3.7 cm. from the right border of the page and the second is approximately 3.3 cm. from the border. Thus, at least *some* portion of the "1" should appear in Sampson's reproduction if it had been there at the time; tilted cropping is possible but does not appear to have occurred, since the text and sketches are situated properly in relation to the image borders. Bentley's account of the British Museum's page numbering (after Keynes) adds to the likelihood that the number on the title page is indeed later than the possible apostrophe.⁹ But even if we disregard entirely the "1" in relation to our current point of enquiry, the ambiguous mark *is* there in the 1913 reproduction, but Sampson does not comment on it.

Much more important in thinking about the mark's authority is the internal and external evidence of Blake's characteristic use of an apostrophe for the plural form of "Zoa." Blake adopted the Greek word *zoa*, already plural for *zoon*, as used by John in Revelation for the four "Living Creatures." Whether or not Blake knew the number of the original, pluralizing *zoa* with -s is one way he anglicized the word and thus brought it under the domain of English grammar—a linguistic syncretism entirely suitable to Blake. In English, adding an apostrophe to form the simple plural of a word ending in

9. Keynes's *Bibliography* offers visual proof of the numbers added by the British Museum: his reproduction of manuscript p. 27 (in the current order), facing p. 34 of his work, shows that the "13" in the upper right did not have a line through it in 1921, nor was there a "14" written above and to the right.

a vowel was and is fairly common practice. Two examples of Blake's use of the apostrophe for simple plural are "Eccho's" in the line "Demons of Waves their watry Eccho's woke!" on p. 13 of the manuscript (l. 23 in Bentley, *Vala or The Four Zoas* 16 and Erdman, *Complete* 308) and, more tellingly, the naming of the Zoas as "Life's in Eternity" on p. 123 (l. 38 in Bentley, *Vala or the Four Zoas* 131 and Erdman, *Complete* 393).

While the singular word "Zoa" and its plural form do not appear anywhere else in *The Four Zoas*, Blake did use the plural form of "Zoa" in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Of course, Blake is famously inconsistent (or we might say liberated) in his grammar, and so there are instances of both "Zoa's" and "Zoas" for the plural in these works. However, "Zoa's" is the more frequent spelling, occurring twelve times, three in *Milton* (copy C, 20:19, 43:14, 45:8) and nine in *Jerusalem* (copy E, 36:26, 36:32, 36:45, 41:27, 42:24, 58:48, 74:2, 74:5, 88:56); Blake used the latter form, without the apostrophe, only four times: once in *Milton* (copy C, 38:29) and three times in *Jerusalem* (copy E, 59:14, 63:4, 74:53).¹⁰ In purely quantitative terms, then, "Zoa's" is the more common plural form of Blake's neologism. Whatever the case may be with this specific instance of the word, the fact that he *did* use "Zoa's," and more often, is highly significant when judging the "accidental" nature of the mark.¹¹

My concern with the exactness of the title of *The Four Zoas* may seem to be making a proverbial molehill on the mountain of the manuscript. Nevertheless, I think that the history of this ambiguous mark in the title of *The Four Zoas* raises two important, interrelated issues: the centrality of interpretation to editorial practice and the dependence of subsequent interpretations on the products of that practice. Obviously, editors to date have interpreted the mark as not being an intentional apostrophe by Blake and thus not significant enough to appear in the title. While one can respect these editorial judgments, the evidence that I have presented seems to call, if not for a change in the accepted title, then at least for a textual note in future editions discussing the physical

mark as it appears to an editor, the possibility that it is indeed Blake's apostrophe, and the bases for that editor's ultimate decision. This is especially true given that scholars and readers largely depend on reproductions and printed texts in lieu of the original manuscript. There never may be a way to prove once and for all that Blake deliberately added this mark, but my hope is that editors will recognize the value that their explicit commentary would have for anyone suddenly seeing a world in this textual grain of sand.

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10. My source for the plate images and line numbers for these copies of *Milton* and *Jerusalem* is the *William Blake Archive* (<http://www.blakearchive.org>), which presents copy-specific plate orders and numbers every individual line of text on a plate, including plate numbers (hence differences from printed editions). I also collated these readings against 300 dpi digital images of the corresponding plates in copies A and D of *Milton* and A and I of *Jerusalem* stored (unpublished) in the *Blake Archive* and found no variants (though the apostrophe in 36:45 of *Jerusalem* copy I printed very lightly); I would like to thank the editors of the *Blake Archive* for access to the images. Lastly, I checked these readings against Erdman's *Complete*, with which they all agree, and Bentley's *Writings*, with which they agree except that Bentley omits the apostrophe in his *Jerusalem* 36:25, 36:44, and 58:47 (my 36:26, 36:45, and 58:48)—though each has one in the copies cited here.

11. A more tantalizing option is that the apostrophe indicates a possessive: the work to follow is that of the Four Zoa (already plural), something along the lines of, say, Chapman's Homer—the authors, after all, being in Eternity. This is doubtful, though, since Blake did not cancel "by William Blake 1797."

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