

“HUMAN FORMS DIVINE”: WILLIAM BLAKE’S *THE RAISING OF JAIRUS’S DAUGHTER*

Elizabeth E. Barker

Introduction

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The existence of the painting has long been known: Rossetti included it in the first catalogue *raisonné* of Blake’s works, published in 1863 (cat. 143, 447). Yet before coming to Amherst, *Jairus’s Daughter* appears never to have been exhibited in any public venue, including during the artist’s lifetime. Nor has the painting been widely published. Although mentioned in several studies, it has received little extended attention, and been reproduced only twice before the present instance, in black-and-white illustrations whose imperfect quality gives a mistaken impression of poor preservation (Keynes, 34 and Butlin, pl. 1193). The acquisition of *Jairus’s Daughter* by a public museum will surely rectify its former neglect. This article seeks to begin the process of rediscovery, and to suggest avenues of further enquiry.¹

The Commission

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As to Myself about whom you are so kindly Interested. I live by Miracle. I am Painting small Pictures from the Bible. ... My Work pleases my employer & I have an order for Fifty small Pictures at One Guinea each which is Something better than mere copying after another artist.
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¹ I am grateful to Ilona Woronow, Liliane Louvel, Christelle Serée-Chausinand, and the other participants in the International Word & Image Conference, “Re-Readings and Re-Viewings of Sacred/Archetypal Narratives in Literature and the Arts,” held at the College of the Holy Cross, 27-28 June 2013, for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Butts’s role in the history of art has never been contested. Yet the extent of his family’s involvement with Blake and the life experiences that shaped his taste have, until recently, remained opaque. Archival discoveries by Viscomi and Johnson offer clues to his interest in Blake’s Bible subjects (*Phoenix, Marketplace, Green House*; Johnson 2010, 2011). A Church of England worshipper—and not a Swedenborgian, as early Blake biographers had supposed—Butts’s mother was a devout Methodist and personal acquaintance of John Wesley. Butts’s first cousin and close friend Thomas Hardwick (1752-1829) was an architect in a neo-Palladian style known for his sensitive church restorations and skilled watercolor designs.

Johnson’s research has also cast light on Butts’s wife, Elizabeth Mary Cooper Butts (1753-1825). Four years older than her husband, and raised in a family of artisans—her father and brothers were successful carvers, gilders, and upholsterers—“Betsy” was a skilled needlewoman and entrepreneur, who ran a boarding school for girls at the Buttses’ London residence. One example of her needlework has survived (*Two Hares*, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), executed in the style imitating brushstrokes called needle painting. Such handiwork was a mainstay of girls’ education in this period, and Blake has been credited with designing this example. Although Betsy Butts may have composed the design herself (as Briggs’s recounting of the family tradition may suggest), the proposal is not unreasonable: Blake would have been familiar with embroidery patterns from his father’s hosiery and haberdashery shop, where such patterns were typically sold; and he might have learned to prepare them at Henry Pars’s drawing school, which offered instruction in the design of embroidery, fabrics, and wallpaper, as well as in fine art (Swain, 7-9, Mazzeo).²

² A third candidate for the design might be (Henry) Thomas Martyn, who operated the “Academy for Illustrating Natural History” next door to the boarding school in Great Marlborough Street, where he put his students to work hand-coloring the illustrations to his lavish publications on shells and insects, botany and hot air balloons (Bentley 2001, 185, McConnell).

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In the absence of conclusive evidence, it seems simplest to consider the 1799 commission as given by the Buttses to Blake—or indeed, to the Blakes.³ Both Thomas and Betsy Butts acted as consumers of Blake's work by devoting their household's income to its production and by acting as its primary viewers, and not only William, but also his wife, Catherine Blake—who acted as a studio assistant to her husband—participated in its creation. The two couples were of similar ages, and although unequal in income, regarded one another as friends. Glimpses of a warm mutual regard flicker across the extant correspondence, which documents regular social visits and the exchange of gifts, jokes, and poems. William and Thomas exchanged poems; Catherine painted a watercolor for Betsy; William dedicated "The Phoenix" to Betsy, and wrote only to Thomas about his poetry.

Blake appears to have completed the commission. Assuming, as Butlin himself speculates, that three untraced works (including a purported variation of Amherst's painting) assigned separate numbers in the catalogue *raisonné* are identical with works catalogued elsewhere (that is to say, if cat. 412 is identical with 411, 417 with 418, and 432 with 419), then exactly fifty paintings are recorded. Seventeen depict Old Testament subjects, thirty-two depict New Testament subjects, and one shows an allegorical figure of Charity.

Thirty of the paintings are now known. Most were executed on canvas, although a few have metal supports of copper or tinned iron, and one was painted on paper laid down onto canvas. Blake created them using an artistic medium of his own invention, which, in the catalogue of his 1809 exhibition, he called "portable fresco," and which art historians now describe as tempera, involving glues, watercolor, and finishing touches in black ink—a medium recently illuminated by Townsend (2003, 2010).

The temperas commissioned in 1799 are of two sizes (then standard for engraver's copper plates, Butlin, 318): twenty-five correspond to the dimensions of Amherst's painting (approximately 10 ½ x 15 inches, 26.7 x 38.2 cm), and five are approximately three inches wider and higher (12 ¾ x 19 ½ in., 32.4 x 49.5 cm). The smaller images trace a range of subjects from the Old and New Testaments, and include a subset of apocryphal scenes, such as *The Virgin Hushing the Young Baptist, Who Approaches the Sleeping Infant Jesus* (Butlin, cat. 406). The large images include the seminal New Testament subjects of *The Baptism of Christ, The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*, and *The Last Supper* (Butlin, cat. 415, 416, 422, and 424), as well as the less usual, apocryphal subject of *The Christ Child Asleep on a Cross* (Butlin, cat. 410).

³ Bentley notes the possibility that Blake's unnamed "employer" might have been Betsy, rather than Thomas Butts (2001, 191, n.).

The Buttses' manner of storing and exhibiting their collection is not recorded, but it likely involved frames and mounts supplied by Betsy's father and brothers, and encompassed more than one place of display. The Buttses may well have had works by Blake dispersed across three locations: the family's domestic areas in the spacious Great Marlborough Street house; Betsy Butts's school rooms, where religious instruction would have played a prominent role and where Blake may also have taught (Bentley 2001, 187 and Ishizuka);⁴ and the suburban residence in Dalston (in the borough of Hackney in north-east London) that the Buttses maintained from 1793 to 1808 (*Green House*). The availability of multiple display locations could explain the presence of duplicates in the Butts collection, as Viscomi has noted.

Such dispersed display would likely have included the Bible paintings commissioned in 1799. And although the fifty temperas of biblical subjects have traditionally been considered as single group, it seems reasonable to speculate that the series came to include two sub-series, distinguished according to size. After all, the works in Blake's other series of illustrations—to Young, Gray, Milton, Shakespeare, and the Book of Job—are consistent in size (Butlin, cats. 330, 335, 527, 528, 529, 536, 538, 542, 543, 544, 547, 550, 551). Blake's eighty watercolors of biblical subjects owned by Butts do form a notable exception to this pattern, however, one that might possibly be explained by the presence of various sub-groups within the main series, and by the continued growth of the Butts family collection after Blake's death (Butlin, cats. 433-526, *Marketplace*).

Perhaps the Buttses regarded the larger works, featuring paradigmatic New Testament subjects and comparatively decorous figures—in which only small children, in *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*, appear nude—as better suited for display in the school rooms. If so, then Blake may have relished the notion of their placement. Writing to the Rev. John Trusler three days before his letter informing Cumberland of the Bible paintings commission—and perhaps emboldened by its prospect—Blake compared his dull-witted recipient unfavorably to children:

[...] I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Vision, & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children, who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped. Neither Youth nor Childhood is Folly or Incapacity. Some Children are Fools & so are some Old Men. But there is a vast Majority on the side of Imagination or Spiritual Sensation. (E. 703)

⁴ Viscomi attributes the presence of washline surrounds and inlaid mounts on Blake's biblical watercolors to such pedagogical use (*Green House*, 16-17).

If the Bible temperas did form two series, a focused larger group and an extended smaller set, then *The Christ Child Asleep on a Cross*, as the only subject repeated (albeit with variations) in each size, would take on new significance.

Perhaps Blake repeated it—while conspicuously omitting any conventional representation of the Crucifixion—because it performed some comparable function, by serving as an emblem of key spiritual beliefs, factors that would make it equally as intelligible outside the chronological arrangement as

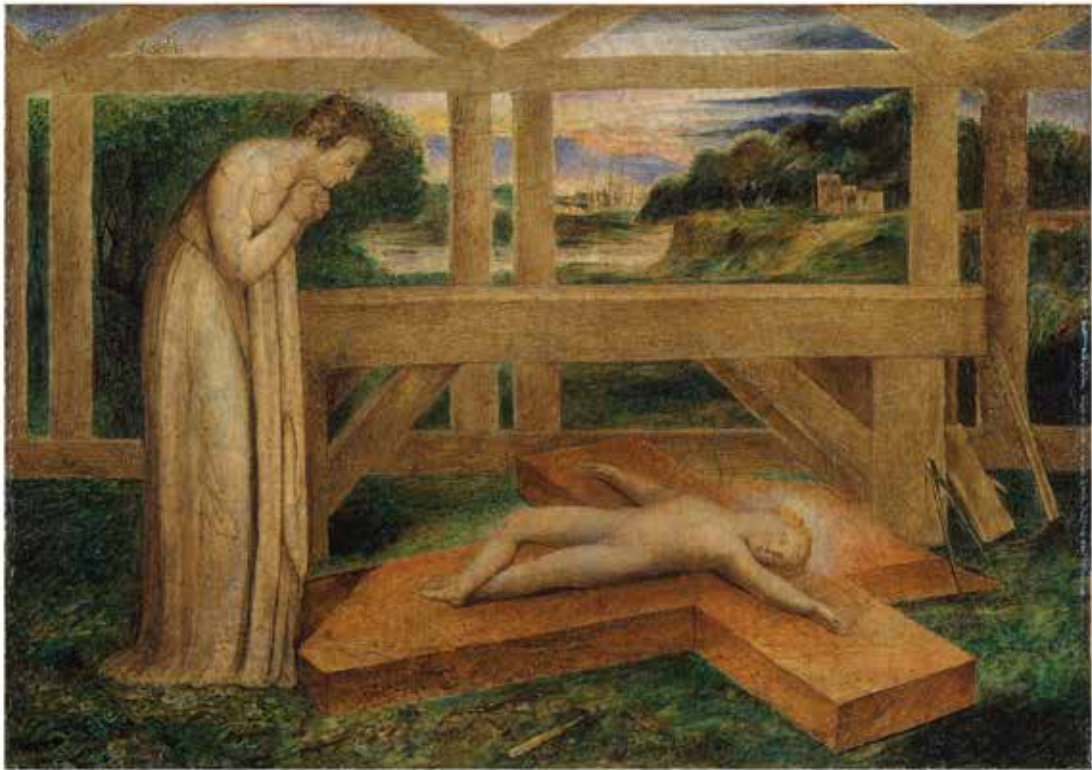


Fig 2: William Blake, *The Christ Child Asleep on the Cross*, 1799-1800. Tempera on canvas. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. P.27-1953

within it. If so, then it could assist in illuminating other works from the series, including *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*.

Both versions of *The Christ Child Asleep* present the naked infant sleeping on a cross, his limbs positioned as if in crucifixion, observed by his mother, and overshadowed by (in the larger variant) Joseph holding a compass or (in the smaller version) a scaffolding and carpenter's tools—their strict geometries contrasting strongly with the curving forms of the verdant landscape (Butlin, cats. 410, 411, Bindman, 1977, 123).

The intimation of Christ's future sacrifice is clear. The meaning of the symbols of Reason (Law) and Imagination (Spirituality) have been interpreted variously, as forces that are merely contrasted, or strongly opposed, and/or ultimately reconciled. The strong antinomian streak identified by most scholars in Blake's writings about religion (ideas connected to the seventeenth-century Ranter tradition that were returning to popularity in late eighteenth-century London) would suggest a triumph of the spirit over laws.⁵

As Rowland demonstrates, Blake consistently criticized “scriptural literalism and devotion to a transcendent deity” in his writings; for Blake, “the indwelling Spirit rather than tradition or books” served as the foundation of theological knowledge (Rowland, 22). Blake's character of the devil phrased the extreme implications of this approach in plate 23 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790): “no virtue can exist without breaking [the] ten commandments: Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules” (E. 43). Blake put it even more succinctly when he quoted 2 Corinthians 3:6 on the engraving *Thus Did Job Continually* (1828): “the Letter Killeth / The Spirit giveth Life.”

The Christ Child Asleep's scaffolding and compass, objects associated with rigid construction, must reference the deadly strictures of universal moral law, of which the scene's prominent wooden cross is surely a product. If the scene is regarded symbolically, rather than as an imagined historical episode, then Bindman's conclusion, “Christ's sacrifice will be at the hands of Reason in the form of the Law of Solomon” could be extended to include Christian dogma as well as Jewish law (Bindman 1977, 123). Such a reading would be consistent with Blake's lines in *The Everlasting Gospel* (1818-20): “The Moral Virtues in Great fear / Formed the Cross & Nails & Spear” (E. 876).

According to this reading, *The Christ Child Asleep*, a work not based on any Biblical text, seems to warn against the dangers of reading the Bible literally or adhering to its laws. By extension,

⁵ For more on this resonant topic, which lies beyond the scope of the present article, see Morton, Moskal, Hill, Mee 1992 and 1994, Thompson, Rix, and Rowland. For a dissenting opinion, see Jesse.

it seems also to warn against too orthodox an interpretation of the Bible tempera paintings to which it belongs. Instead, it directs viewers to regard the temperas not as reflections of holy writ, but as gateways to perception and stimulants to imagination—as Blake appears to have regarded the Bible stories themselves (Rowland, 10, 242). If so, then Blake's temperas might be regarded as comprising a visual counterpart to, rather than merely a corollary of, the Bible. To understand what Blake and the Buttses saw when they looked at *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, then, the Bible text can serve only as a point of departure.

The Bible Story

And when Jesus was passed over again by ship unto the other side, much people gathered unto him: and he was nigh unto the sea. And, behold, there cometh one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and when he saw him, he fell at his feet, And besought him greatly, saying, My little daughter lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live. And Jesus went with him; and much people followed him, and thronged him. [...]

While he yet spake, there came from the ruler of the synagogue's house certain which said, Thy daughter is dead: why troublest thou the Master any further? As soon as Jesus heard the word that was spoken, he saith unto the ruler of the synagogue, Be not afraid, only believe. And he suffered no man to follow him, save Peter, and James, and John the brother of James. And he cometh to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and seeth the tumult, and them that wept and wailed greatly. And when he was come in, he saith unto them, Why make ye this ado, and weep? the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn. But when he had put them all out, he taketh the father and the mother of the damsel, and them that were with him, and entereth in where the damsel was lying. And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise. And straightway the damsel arose, and walked; for she was of the age of twelve years. And they were astonished with a great astonishment. And he charged them straitly that no man should know it; and commanded that something should be given her to eat.

Mark 5:21-24, 35-43 (King James version)

The miracle of the raising of Jairus's daughter is related in the Gospels of Matthew 9:18-19 and 23-26, Mark 5:21-24 and 35-43, and Luke 8:40-42 and 49-56. The account in Mark, the longest and most poetic of the three (and almost certainly the first written), has proved the most informative for visual artists (May and Metzger, 1167-1168). The passage begins by identifying the location: Capernaum, the town where Jesus had begun his ministry by preaching in the synagogue and performing an exorcism, and to which he had returned across the Sea of Galilee after calming its waters. There, Jesus encounters Jairus, a member of the governing body of Capernaum's synagogue, an institution then invested with civic as well as religious authority. Jairus asks Jesus to heal his twelve-year-old daughter, who lies in his home on the point of death.

At this point, the narrative is interrupted by the story of the woman with a twelve-year issue of blood. Having spent all her money on physicians and only grown worse, she comes upon Jesus in the throng of the crowd, secretly touches his garment, and is instantly healed. Jesus discovers her, and, rather than expressing anger at her secrecy or her act of touch (while in a ritually unclean state), he blesses her. Certain elements from the story of the hemorrhaging woman—a passage of twelve years, an act secretly performed, a healing touch, a body that is ritually unclean, and a woman whom Jesus calls daughter—echo through the remaining portion of the story of Jairus's daughter. This interweaving of stories is a literary device unique in Mark, and its rhetorical structure may derive from an oral tradition that predated its writing (Cotter, 55).

Artists, however, have not typically depicted the stories of the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage and the raising of Jairus's daughter together.⁶ The raising of Jairus's daughter usually appears as a discrete scene, occasionally juxtaposed with Christ's other resurrection miracles, which are easily distinguished by their distinctive settings: Jairus's daughter in a house, the widow of Nain's son outdoors but not yet buried, and Lazarus in the grave (Joynes, 128).

The gospel returns to the story of Jairus when members of his household arrive with the news that his daughter has died. Jesus nonetheless travels to Jairus's home, which is filled with the sounds of professional mourners. Entering the space where the girl's body lies, Jesus brings with him only her parents and the apostles Peter, James, and John (first singled out on this occasion, and later his companions at the Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane). Then, in one of the few biblical passages that purport to record Jesus' actual words in Aramaic, he commands the girl to arise. She awakens, and begins to walk, to the amazement of the witnesses.

⁶ For a rare exception, see Hans Brosamer, *Christ Performing Various Miracles*, 1520-54. Woodcut. British Museum, London, inv. 1927,0210.27.

In the gospel’s original Greek, certain words describing the raising of Jairus’s daughter and the astonishment of the witnesses recur only in the descriptions of the Resurrection of Christ (Joynes, 119). And the Resurrection is always metaphorically present in images of the raising of Jairus’s daughter, which prefigures the later event. (Stanley Spencer seized on this meaning when he inserted the raising of Jairus’s daughter, glimpsed through the window of a house, in the midst of a Resurrection scene from 1947 in Southampton City Art Gallery, UK. see page 100)

Jesus instructs the witnesses to secrecy (for reasons that are still debated, and have been variously attributed to a mistaken translation of Jesus’ words; an attempt to minimize his celebrity, or delay his identification as the Messiah until the time of the crucifixion; and an appropriation of the *Odyssey*’s widely-known literary motif of disguise), and asks them to bring the girl food—a naturalistic detail that may have served to demonstrate the girl’s restoration to full corporeal life, rather than to a rebirth of her spirit alone.

Blake’s Tempera

Blake’s *Raising of Jairus’s Daughter* presents the instant of girl’s awakening, and of the witnesses’ astonishment. On the left, James, identifiable by his dark hair and beard, John, who is clean shaven, and Peter, whose hair and beard are gray, witness the miracle (Fig. 3).

James’s contrapposto stance recalls the example of classical sculpture, which Blake knew from the prints and plaster casts after the antique that he had collected, copied, and studied in his youth—at auction houses and Pars’s drawing school, in the Duke of Richmond’s gallery and the library of the Royal Academy, and elsewhere. The figures’ elongated proportions and overlapping placement in the composition also evoke the stylistic conventions



Fig 3: *The Raising of Jairus’s Daughter*, details of the apostles.

of medieval art—a tradition in which Blake had happily immersed himself during his apprenticeship to James Basire, when he famously spent five years drawing monuments in Westminster Abbey and other churches.

By the time he came to paint the *Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, Blake had claimed the attenuated figures, clear contours, and hierarchical compositions of medieval art and architecture and of early and Northern Renaissance paintings and prints—a broad stylistic group and long historical period then collectively described as “Gothic”—as his own model. For Blake, such earlier works embodied



Fig 4: *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, detail central group

a perfect union of form and spirituality. By working in a related style, Blake wasn't being nostalgic or historicizing: he was following what he understood to be the only means to create works of genius—"Call'd Gothic in All Ages" (E. 559)—because their appearance revealed their meaning (Myrone and Riding). Attending to the appearance of the apostles in Blake's painting makes their meaning clear: grouped to form a single unit in the composition, and distinguished from the other figures by their oversized, carefully delineated eyes, they stand as witnesses to the miracle.

In the center of the painting, Christ extends his left arm tenderly over the waking girl, his arm and hand sized in proportion to the importance of the gesture that engages his entire body (fig. 4). With lips still parted from speaking the instruction to arise, Jesus uses his (normally sized) right hand gently to raise her.

By showing the burial shroud still draped across the girl's head, and by placing her on a bed whose simplicity resembles a bier, Blake makes clear that she was truly dead—and so, truly resurrected. Most artists before Blake had depicted Christ as a visitor to the girl's home, still wearing his outer robe. But Blake shows Jesus clad only in a simple tunic, painted in the same luminous white as the girl's burial gown and shroud. If their unearthly garments lend an almost supernatural quality to the central figures, their exposed feet recall their physical embodiment and seem to emphasize their shared humanity at the very moment of intense spirituality. The exchange of glances between the two central figures is so resonant, so rapt, that the mood is almost romantic. Their spiritual joy must be the sensation that Blake variously described as being "Drunk with the Spirit" (E. 20) or "drunk with intellectual vision" (E. 757).

In the *Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, Blake has created an encounter as emotionally electric as Michelangelo's famously charged rendition of a life-giving touch (fig. 5).

The evocation of *The Creation of Adam* is unsurprising. Blake's admiration for Michelangelo's art was unbounded, prompting one of his friends, C.H. Tatham, to refer to the British artist as "Michel Angelo Blake" (B.R. 288). Although Blake never travelled to Italy, he knew the Renaissance artist's works through reproductive prints, drawings, and, presumably, the first-hand reports of friends, including the sculptor and designer John Flaxman. In the letter to Trusler quoted above, Blake observed: "my figures... are those of Michael Angelo[,] Rafael & the Antique & of the best living Models" (E. 703). Blake took from Michelangelo (whose work was not universally admired in Blake's time) his use of elongated, tautly muscled figures, and their deployment in compositions of hieroglyphic clarity, comprised primarily of human forms, and eschewing naturalistic details of setting and atmosphere. (For Blake, the tedium of landscape and still life painting was patently absurd: he found it self-evident that "Copiers of Nature [are] Incorrect" and "Copiers of Imagination [are] Correct" (E. 575).)

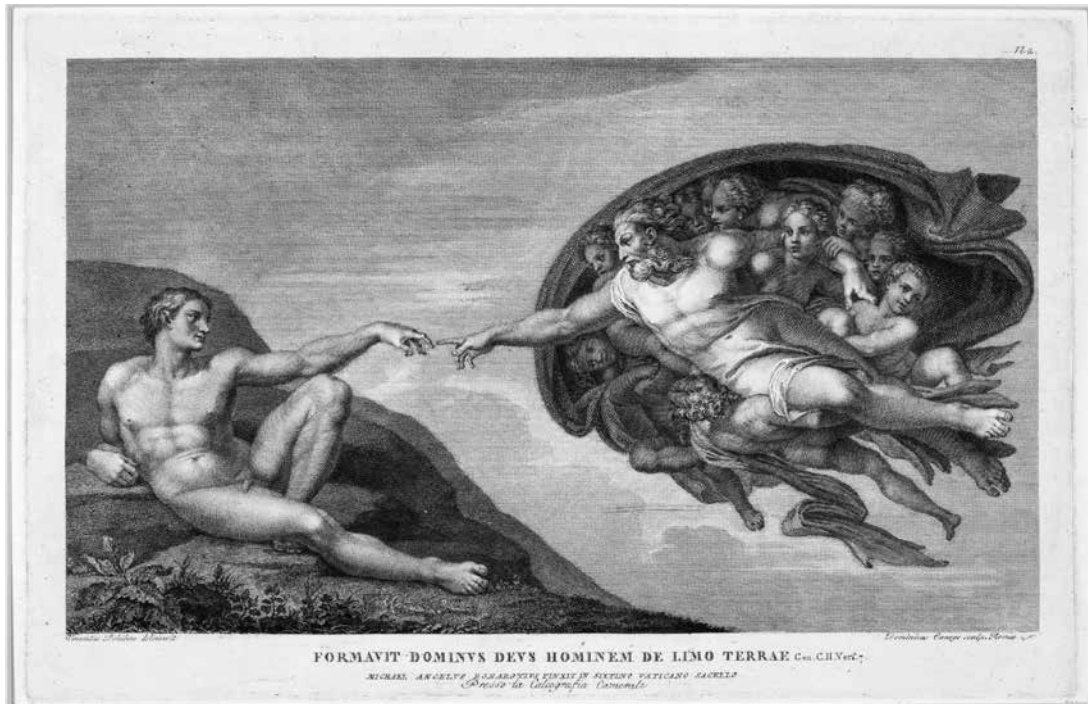


Fig 5: Dominico Cunego after Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, from Gavin Hamilton’s “Schola Italica Picturae,” pl. 2, 1773. Engraving. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. DYCE.1652

Blake’s fascination with the Sistine Chapel frescoes may shed light on the unusual pose assumed by Jairus’s daughter. Her clean silhouette is deceptively simple, since her figure is actually turned: she twists her upper body to face Jesus, resting her weight awkwardly on her right arm, placed behind her, while beginning to raise her left leg. Although her physique couldn’t be further from the athletic types imagined by Michelangelo, the girl’s turning pose may comprise a reinvention of the movements of the *ignudi* on the Sistine ceiling (fig.6)—figures that serve no prescribed iconographic function in the Vatican frescoes, and which Blake may have understood as enlightened human beings elevated to the role of angels, an appropriate source from which to mold his own enlightened figure.

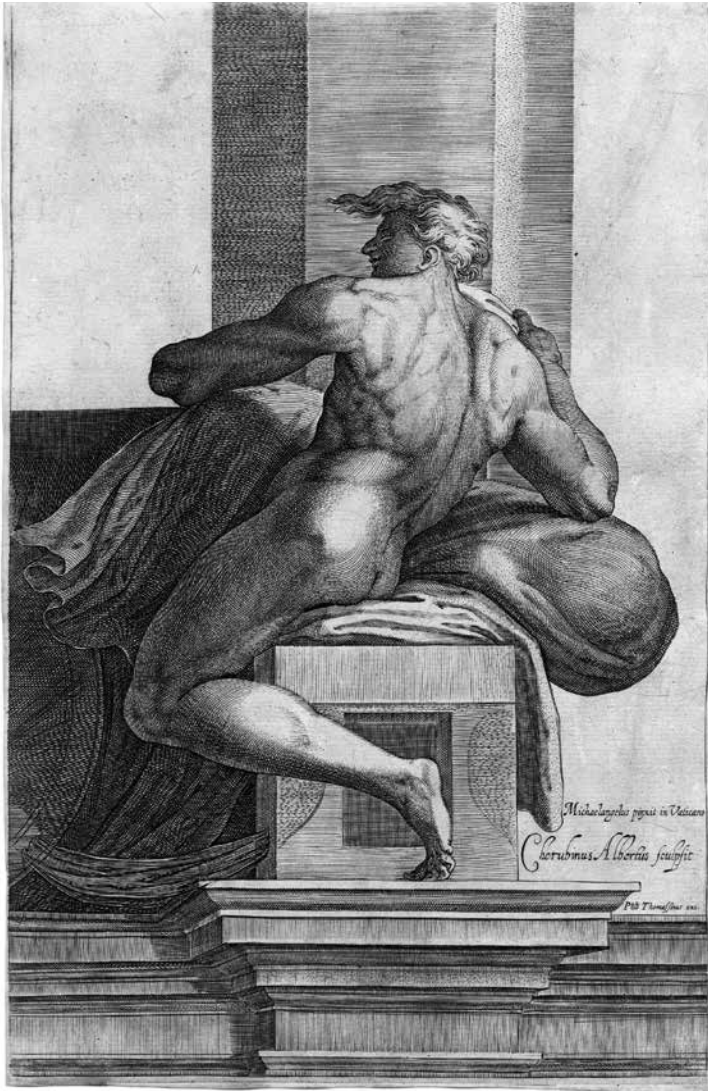


Fig 6: Cherubino Alberti after Michelangelo, A naked man, seated and facing left, after Michelangelo's *ignudi* in the Sistine Chapel , 1570-1615. Engraving. British Museum, London. 1868,0208.83 © Trustees of the British Museum

Of course, the painting's central encounter is not Jesus' and the girl's alone. Christ's gesture also encompasses the girl's parents, who bend solicitously over her at the right of the composition, their bodies rhyming Jesus', creating the arched shape of the central scene. Indeed, it's possible to see the outline of a wide ogee arch traced from the bottom edge of Jesus' garment through his curving body to its pinnacle at his wrist, over the head of Jairus and down the body of the girl's mother.⁷ If the appearance of this resonant form, associated with sacred spaces in Blake's imagery, is more than an optical illusion, then it would seem to represent a first attempt at a compositional device later clarified and strengthened in *Christ in the Sepulchre, Guarded by Angels* (fig. 7).

Jairus has the long gray hair and beard Blake used consistently to designate figures in authority, perhaps most memorably in the *Ancient of Days*. Yet Jairus's wide eyes and opened mouth, together with his placement within the arc of Jesus' open arms, mark him as a convert from—rather than a symbol of—the oppressive laws of an old organized religion (as Blake would have regarded it). The girl's mother, likewise, is included in Christ's gesture, and overjoyed by the miracle. The poignant distance between her long, agitated fingers, fluttering with excitement, and her daughter's head, recalls the iconography of the *noli me tangere*, in which the resurrected Jesus interrupts Mary Magdalene as she attempts to touch him. Equally meaningfully, the mother's robes are red and blue (colors associated with the Virgin Mary), attributes that further recall her daughter's prefiguration of the Resurrected Christ.

In *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, as in other works throughout Blake's long career, the knowledgeable deployment of archetypes of expression, gesture, and pose—forms which Warner linked to the artist's attentive viewing of art, pantomime, and dance, and to his study of manuals of iconography, rhetorical hand gestures, and acting, and which Bentley reminds us may also relate to his avid theater-going (Warner, Bentley 2001, 383-386)—make his figures' motions as intelligible today as when the Buttses first encountered them more than 200 years ago. Considering the near-hieroglyphic consistency of Blake's expressive figures, it is interesting, then, to note the absence in Blake's work of any exact replication of Jesus's pose in *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*.

Perhaps because the resurrected figure is female and still a child, *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter* departs significantly from Blake's earlier scenes of resurrection, which depict Lazarus, a grown man. In the presumed end piece to *There is No Natural Religion* (ca. 1788); in a watercolor design for Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797, fig. 8); and in a related engraving, printed on the

⁷ Later, in about 1809, Blake would adapt the ogee arches he had drawn in Westminster Abbey (Butlin cats. 3, 12, 19) for the distinctive stable of the Nativity scenes in *The Old Dragon, The Night of Peace, and The Descent of Peace* (Butlin, cats. 538.3, 538.6, 542.1).



Fig 7: William Blake, *The Angels hovering over the Body of Christ in the Sepulchre*, ca. 1805. Watercolor. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. P.6-1972

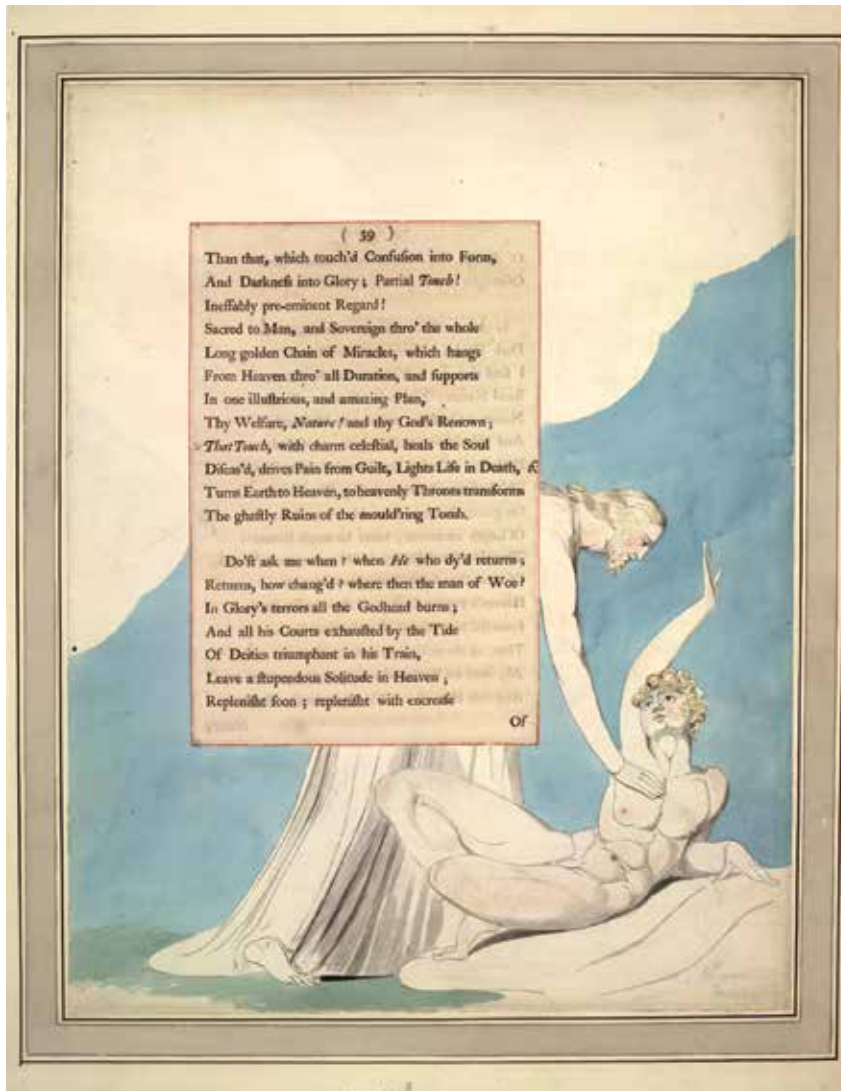


Fig. 8: William Blake, Night IV, page 39, "Than that, which touch'd Confusion into Form," illustration to Young's "Night Thoughts," ca. 1795-7. Pen and gray ink, with gray wash and watercolor; page of text mounted on drawing. British Museum, London. 1929,0713.75AN16356 © Trustees of the British Museum

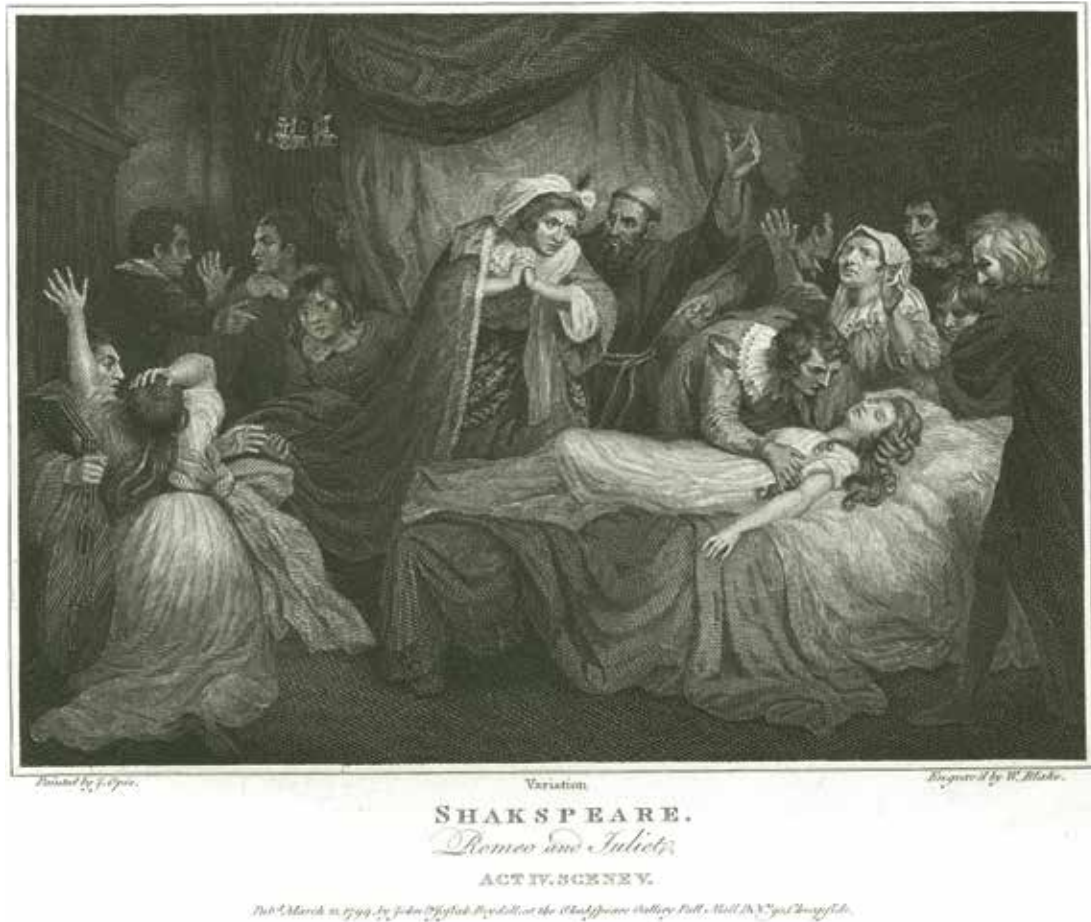


Fig 9: William Blake after John Opie, *Romeo and Juliet* (Act IV, Scene V), published March 25, 1799 for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery. Engraving. Enoch Pratt Free Library, Hilda Holme Collection, Baltimore, Maryland

page beginning “‘Tis this makes joy a duty to the wise” (1797); the resurrected Lazarus appears fully nude, springing upwards from the earth, one arm raised above him and one hand and foot pushing off the ground. In the earliest of the three images, Christ stands beside the figure over whom he extends his hand; in the later watercolor and related engraving, Christ bends, placing his hand on the man’s chest and looking into his eyes.

That exchange of gazes, and the prominent detail of Christ’s nude foot, echoing that of the resurrected figure, would reappear in *Jairus’s Daughter*. Blake’s scenes of Christ’s Resurrection and of *Christ Raising the Son of the Widow of Nain* use different poses.

Blake’s uncluttered, linear composition in *Jairus’s Daughter* also stands apart from the great majority of death bed scenes in circulation at that moment—an era rich in such subjects, including one that that Blake had reproduced in an engraving not long before receiving the commission for the tempera paintings: John Opie’s *Romeo and Juliet (Act IV, Scene V)* (fig. 9). In the *Raising of Jairus’s Daughter*, Blake would distill the histrionic gestures that punctuate Opie’s busy scene into two forward-leaning bodies with open mouths and a single pair of moving hands.

Of course, Blake’s lucid composition stands not only against a tradition of death bed scenes in general, but of images of the *Raising of Jairus’s Daughter* in particular. The iconographic consistency of that tradition makes it reasonable to review only a few characteristic examples here. Many artists drew attention to Jairus’s status by delineating a luxurious interior setting (fig. 10).

Christ often makes the benediction using a regal, authoritative gesture that involves pointing upwards, to the divine source of his power. Occasionally, Christ’s manner is naturalized, giving him something of the manner of a physician, whose gestures appear more diagnostic than life-giving (fig. 11).

Blake rejects such conventional figural compositions. But he may have been attentive to his predecessors’ use of dramatic lighting to suggest the supernatural event. Although he avoids the crack-of-lightening effect of Green’s mezzotint, Blake’s surprising interest in Rembrandt during this period (Bindman 1977, 126) may have brought him into contact with Schmidt’s engraving, after a painting then thought to be by Rembrandt, with its comparatively subtle glow.

Of the dozens of renditions of this subject that Blake could have seen, only two seem likely to have inspired Blake as he developed his own composition. (And Blake would surely have been searching for ideas from other artists’ works: “To learn the Language of Art Copy for Ever. Is my Rule” [E. 636].) The first is a now-rare print: Thomas Piroli after William Young Ottley, *The Raising of Jairus’s Daughter*, from *Twelve Stories from the Life of Christ*, 1796, engraving with aquatint (reproduced in



Fig 10: Valentine Green after Benjamin Wilson, *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, 1784. Mezzotint. British Museum, London. 1873,0809.451 © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig 11: Georg Friedrich Schmidt after Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, 1767. Etching with engraving, second state. British Museum, London. 1915,0106.31 © Trustees of the British Museum.

Bindman 1979, 105). Although its figure groupings are less elegantly disposed than those in Blake's painting, Ottley's scene shares some similarities with Blake's: the girl lies on an antique bed parallel with the picture plane; Christ bends over the girl and holds one of her hands while making a sign of benediction with the other; and her ecstatic parents raise their hands and extend their arms towards her from their position at one end of the bed. Piroli had engraved Flaxman's celebrated designs for Homer, and Blake might possibly have had access this image through Flaxman, his "Dearest Friend" (E. 707). Ottley's simplified setting and linear arrangement of the figures across the picture plane anticipates aspects of Blake's work, although Blake needn't have seen Ottley's design to have composed his own.

Blake's painting is closer to a design by Flaxman, an artist he had known at least since their Royal Academy days, and possibly from boyhood, and whose work bears close stylistic affinities to his during this period. In 1797, Flaxman exhibited at the Royal Academy three "sketches in bas-relief from the New Testament," one of which Cunningham identified as depicting *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, and described as "distinguished for the elegance of grouping, and the clear language which [it] spoke" (276). Although the 1797 design is untraced, Cunningham, writing in 1841, reported that Flaxman enlarged and adapted it for a memorial tablet in 1822 (fig. 12), a claim accepted by Irwin, who notes that the Mawbey relief is unusual in Flaxman's sculpted works for its radically simplified, linear design—elements typically found in Flaxman's work as an illustrator (136).

Flaxman's and Blake's compositions are unquestionably similar, with the figures arrayed essentially in a single plane: the parents on one side, bending towards their daughter, who sits up in the bed, resting her weight on one arm, while Christ and the apostles stand at the other end of the bed. Some connection between the two designs is likely, although the matter of precedence can't be resolved until Flaxman's 1797 design is identified, or its similarity to the 1822 tablet conclusively confirmed. Regardless of which design may have inspired the other, the differences between the two reveals much about Blake's tempera painting. The essential distinction lies in the central gesture. Unusually, Flaxman presents a moment in the narrative slightly later than the one depicted by Blake. Flaxman shows only Jesus' right hand, still holding the girl's, while his left arm is hidden in his garment. In selecting this comparatively naturalistic moment, Flaxman's historicized Christ departs from a longstanding tradition in art of showing Jesus enacting the resurrection with a gesture of benediction.

Flaxman's depiction of Jesus is unusual. But Blake's is unprecedented. Blake's Jesus doesn't stand naturalistically, or command majestically, or evoke the authority of his holy father: instead, he bends deeply over the girl in a moment of evident spiritual exertion, seemingly compelling her head to lift with his outstretched hand, while steadying her rise with the hand that clasps hers. The oversized



Fig 12: John Flaxman, memorial tablet to Emily Mawbey, St Peter's, Chertsey, Surrey, U.K.
 Photograph courtesy of Brian Bouchard

arm that Rossetti faulted in 1863 as anatomically improbable now appears symbolically outsized. In performing the action so directly, without gestural reference to any other, higher power, the figure of Christ seems to manifest Blake's declared belief that Jesus "is the only God." Blake would continue the thought with the extraordinary statement: "And so am I and so are you." For Blake, God and Christ and Man formed three interchangeable parts of an equation that also included a fourth variable, Imagination (Bentley 2001, 9, Rowland 180). As Blake phrased it on his engraving of the Laocöon (ca. 1820): "The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION./ God himself /that is / The Divine Body / [Yeshua] JESUS We are his Members" (E. 273).

Thomas and Betsy Butts—Blake’s “Dear Friend of My Angels” and the “Wife of the Friend of those I most revere” (Bentley 2001, 188, and 190)—surely knew at least some of the radical ideas that Blake embodied in *The Raising of Jairus’s Daughter*. When they viewed the painting, probably in a private domestic space within their central London or their Dalton home, they would have seen Christ performing the resurrection alone, without reference to any higher power, because he is God—as well as Man and the Imagination. They may have regarded the girl as participating in her own resurrection, since she, too, presents “The Divine Body in Every Man” (E. 663, Warner, 22.) They may have seen in the exposed flesh of the main figures’ feet an indication of their “Human Form Divine” (E. 13, 32, 131, 173, 395, and 522), and in the ogee arch traced by the central group an further reference to this idea.

As a family surrounded by girls similar in age to the painting’s subject, the Buttses may have reflected on the child’s access to “Spiritual Sensation” (E. 703). They are unlikely to have needed to refer to the Bible to decipher the story—because of Blake’s lucid choreography, their prior familiarity with the miraculous tale, and the sense (to which *The Christ Child Asleep* alludes) that the Bible is not in itself sacred. To discern the divine in *The Raising of Jairus’s Daughter*, they must not only have looked *at* this extraordinary painting, but *through* it.

Afterword

Because the provenance of *The Raising of Jairus’s Daughter* has not been published in full elsewhere, it is included here, with a request to readers to contact the author with any additional information: Commissioned by 26 August 1799, by Thomas and Elizabeth Butts, London; by inheritance in 1845 to Thomas Butts, Jr.; sold at Foster and Son, London, 29 June 1853, lot 83 (with two other works) for £1.2.6, to John Clark Strange, Streatley, West Berkshire [and still in Strange’s collection when recorded in 1863 by Rossetti]; [...] sold by Captain F.J. Butts at Sotheby’s, London, 24 June 1903, lot 11 for £28 to Bernard Quaritch, London; to William Augustus White, Brooklyn, New York; by gift or inheritance by 1927 to Harold Tredway White; by gift or inheritance by 1960 to Emily deForest White; by gift on 22 April 1962 to Dr. Henry deForest Webster; by gift on 31 December 2011 to the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College. N.B. How the painting moved from Strange’s collection (Bentley 2004, 707-732), in which it Rossetti documented its location in 1863, to Captain Butts’s collection, from which it was sold 1903, remains unknown; the dispersal of Strange’s collection of more than thirty paintings and watercolors by Blake was inconsistent. One of the two paintings presumably acquired with *Jairus’s Daughter* (*Satan Traversing the Realms of Space*, Butlin, cat. 291) was sold by Quaritch in 1904; the other (*Christ and the Seven Virgins*, Butlin, cat. 430) was apparently returned to Butts soon after its purchase, since it was offered in Butts’s 1854 Foster’s sale.

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The abbreviation E. refers to the electronic edition of *The Complete Poetry and prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. Comm. Harold Bloom, Morris Eaves, Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi. Charlottesville, Virginia: Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, first pub. 2001. <<http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/erdman.html>>.

The abbreviations *Phoenix*, *Green House*, and *Marketplace* refer to Viscomi's articles listed below.

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