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Blake's "Blossom"

by RODNEY M. BAINE and MARY R. BAINE

FOR SEVERAL DECADES "The Blossom," from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, has been subject to a sexual interpretation, developed by Joseph Wicksteed and perpetuated by such critics as Geoffrey Keynes and D. G. Gillham.¹ According to these readers, the poem presents an allegory of sexual intercourse, going "into considerable detail in presenting the sexual act and the sexual parts."² Such a reading, however, does injustice to the breadth of Blake's vision; and as John Holloway has pointed out, "not only does it strike us, once we have deciphered it, as a ridiculous and unnecessary way of wrapping up something about 'sexual intimacy'; it is so particularly ridiculous as to be aware of the male sexual organ as a sort of pet."³

Unfortunately, even though the sexual approach has been effectively challenged, no one has yet offered a satisfying reading, and some have even ignored the design. Holloway himself, perhaps the most outspoken of the challengers, could only suggest that the speaker might be a young girl with a flower at her bosom. E. D. Hirsch, who also found the sexual interpretation inadequate, offered three suggestions, two of them identifying the speaker as earth. The third posits a mother as speaker, addressing her child successively as sparrow and robin; but as Hirsch admitted, this interpretation leaves out the blossom altogether.⁴

A satisfying interpretation of "The Blossom" demands our examining the design, properly identifying the speaker and listener, understanding the symbolism of sparrow and robin, and reading "The Blossom" within the context of the other *Songs of Innocence*, especially those in which a mother speaks to or for her child:

Merry Merry Sparrow
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom

1. Joseph H. Wicksteed, *Blake's Innocence and Experience* (London: J. M. Dent, 1928); Geoffrey Keynes, commentary in William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. Keynes (New York: Orion Press, 1967), after Plate 11; D. G. Gillham, *Blake's Contrary States* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 163-66. Blake's text and design are cited in the Orion Press edition, based on copy Z (Rosenwald).

2. Gillham, p. 163.

3. John Holloway, *Blake: the Lyric Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), p. 26.

4. Holloway, p. 27; E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Innocence and Experience: an Introduction to Blake* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 183, 184.

Sees you swift as arrow
 Seek your cradle narrow
 Near my Bosom.

Pretty Pretty Robin
 Under leaves so green
 A happy Blossom
 Hears you sobbing sobbing
 Pretty Pretty Robin
 Near my Bosom.

The speaker in "The Blossom" is surely a mother with her child. In the foliage design a mother holds her child, madonna-like, and in some copies he is clearly nursing at her breast. She is given wings and, in at least one copy (Z), a halo. To see this madonna and child as a Cupid-Psyche couple in order to save the sexual interpretation seems a bit far-fetched.⁵ Mother and child are central in the design; and the gestures of the wingless boy and of two of the surrounding cherubs reinforce this centrality. The mother's halo exhibits the sacramental quality of the relationship between mother and child: it is the same as that between Mary and the Christ-child, where Mary was traditionally given a halo. The "blossom" is surely the child. Samuel Johnson defined "blossom" as "The flower that grows on any plant, previous to the seed or fruit. We generally call those flowers *blossoms*, which are not much regarded in themselves, but as a token of some following production." Johnson's suggestions should be supplemented by another definition in use in Blake's day: "one lovely and full of promise" (*OED* 1, 2b). The "blossom" also suggests Jesus, the Blossom on the Tree of Jesse, a design which Blake adapted for the "Introduction" to the *Songs of Innocence*. Obvious, though usually featureless in the design, the blossom-child is clearly implied in the verses. "Happy," he sees and hears, but evidently has not yet begun to speak. These identifications are strengthened by those in the parallel "Infant Joy," where the madonna and child are, again, central in a foliage design. Here the only attendant is a Psyche-winged angel; but the figures are supported, as in "The Blossom," by the central foliage; and they occupy the center of the blossom itself. Although here the "happy" infant has part of the dialogue, the mother, again, is the main speaker.

The other actors in "The Blossom," both addressed by the mother, are the sparrow and the robin. The presence of birds in the paintings of the madonna and child was traditional. As Friedmann remarks, in this conventional scene "few accessory symbols occur with greater frequency than the figure of a small bird." Although the goldfinch was the most popular bird for such a purpose, "certain other small birds, such as the robin and the bullfinch," symbolize "Sacrifice and especially, the Pas-

5. See Irene Chayes, "The Presence of Cupid and Psyche," in *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), p. 231, n. 23.

sion." Blake's setting, too, was conventional: "The bird is placed in foliage, such as the vines on a trellis in a number of paintings of the 'Madonna in a Rose Garden' type. . . ."6 The happy sparrow in the poem may be represented in Blake's design by any one of the four winged *putti* paired off; the robin is perhaps the winged cherub reading—could it be "The Death and Burial of Cock Robin"? Although it is certainly not clear from the poem itself, Blake may have known this nursery rhyme, popular in England from at least the middle of the eighteenth century.⁷ There we have the same bird actors: the sparrow kills Cock Robin, with his bow and arrow; and at the end of the poem "All the birds of the air / Fell sighing and sobbing." In "The Blossom" the sparrow is "swift as arrow," and the robin is "sobbing, sobbing." Although one should not rely upon the identity of such obvious rhymes, Blake twice coupled the robin with the sparrow, once as objects of sympathy in Enion's lament: "Why fall the Sparrow & the Robin in the foodless winter?" Moreover in the two bird lists where both appear, three out of the five birds, then four of the six, come from the quite limited list of actors in "Cock Robin."⁸

Moreover the nursery rhyme makes use of these two birds in an emblematic way which had been familiar for centuries. Traditionally the sparrow had been carefree; the robin, friendly, and especially sympathetic with suffering. In *Cymbeline* IV. ii. 224–229 Arviragus promises that the robin will deck the grave of Imogene; and in his "Song from Shakespear's Cymbelyne" William Collins reiterated this promise:

The Redbreast oft at Ev'ning Hours
Shall kindly lend his little aid:
With hoary Moss, and gather'd Flow'rs,
To deck the Ground where thou art laid.⁹

Even more apt is the robin's appearance in the late sixteenth century ballad "The Children in the Wood." Here again the robin cares for the dead babes.

No burial 'this' pretty 'pair'
Of any man receives,
Till Robin-red-breast piously
Did cover them with leaves.¹⁰

This popular ballad was reprinted by Bishop Percy and was often separately reprinted into the nineteenth century.¹¹

6. Herbert Friedmann, *The Symbolic Goldfinch: its History and Significance in European Devotional Art*, Bollingen Series, No. VII (Washington: Pantheon Books for Bollingen Foundation, 1946), pp. 1, 9, 118.

7. David Lack, *Robin Redbreast* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), pp. 13, 190.

8. *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, revised ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 10, 305, 744, 130. Subsequent quotations, in the text, cite this edition as *E*.

9. *The Poems of Gray and Collins*, ed. Austin Lane Poole (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1937), p. 295.

10. Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, "Everyman" ed. (London: Dent, 1906; rpt. 1938), II, 297.

11. Lack, pp. 29–57.

In selecting birds as the objects for the child's first experience in sympathy, Blake was following precedents recently popularized in children's books. In 1786, for example, Mrs. Sarah Trimmer published her *Fabulous Histories designed for the Instruction of Young Children respecting their Treatment of Animals*, later known simply as *The History of the Robins*. Here the objects of active benevolence are chaffinches, sparrows, and a family of robins. Stories concerning these birds Mrs. Trimmer "intended to convey instruction applicable to themselves [the readers], at the same time that they excite compassion and tenderness for those interesting and delightful creatures . . . and recommend universal Benevolence."¹² When shortly thereafter, in 1787 or 1788, Mary Wollstonecraft, a friend of Mrs. Trimmer and William Blake, wrote her *Original Stories from Real Life*, a book illustrated by Blake, she too utilized birds in order to enforce lessons of sympathy and benevolence.

Both sparrow and robin are, moreover, closely associated in legend with Christ. In the Gospel of Matthew 10:29 he taught, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will." Shakespeare remembered the verse in three plays: in *Troilus and Cressida* Thersites rails, "I will buy nine sparrows for a penny . . ." (II. i. 770). Hamlet muses, "There's special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (V. ii. 230-31). And in *As You Like It* Adam opines "He that doth the ravens feed, / Yea, providently caters for the sparrow" (II. iii. 43-44).¹³ Blake recorded in *Jerusalem* 25: 8-9:

For not one sparrow can suffer, & the whole Universe
not suffer also,
In all its regions, & its Father & Saviour not pity
and weep. (*E*, 169)

If the sparrow was among the birds of least significance or esteem, the robin, in England at least, was the most highly regarded.¹⁴ Oliver Goldsmith, for example, admired the robin as "a little bird rather celebrated for its affection to mankind than its singing, which, however, in our climate has the sweetest note of all others."¹⁵ Moreover legend associated him even more closely with Christ: ". . . pitying the pain of the cruel crown pressed on the Saviour's brow," he "plucked away the sharpest of the thorns" and so acquired his bleeding breast. Or alternatively, he stained his breast when he attempted to staunch the flow of blood from Christ's side.¹⁶

If "The Blossom" is read with awareness of speaker and listener and of

12. Sarah Trimmer, *Fabulous Histories* (Philadelphia, 1794), p. [vii].

13. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), pp. 987, 931, 785.

14. E. A. Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1958), p. 167.

15. Oliver Goldsmith, *An History of The Earth, and Animated Nature* (London, 1774), V, 332; quoted in Lack, p. 65.

16. Ernest Ingersoll, *Birds in Legend, Fable, and Folklore* (New York: Longman's, Green, 1923), pp. 114, 115.

the traditional symbolism of sparrow and robin, particularly their associations with Christ, it will become far more clear and meaningful, especially when read in the context of the other *Songs of Innocence* which dramatize both the mother-child relationship and the intimate kinship and divinity of all life. In "Infant Joy" there is no mood for anything but happiness; the infant is only two days old. In "The Blossom" too the child is happy, but the mother is preparing him imaginatively to experience sorrow as well as joy. The robin's traditional sacrificial symbolism, especially his role of sympathetic co-sufferer with Christ, ennobles and enhances his suffering. "All the birds of the air," we recall, lament the robin's death: pain and sorrow anywhere in the universe are shared by all—or should be. Certainly the mother feels this sorrow, for all the birds' emotions occur, as she says, "near my bosom." Both child and birds are literally near her bosom, the tame robin and the sparrow apparently in some sort of arbor suggested both by the foliage and the verses, the child in some copies nursing her. But everything that happens does so near our bosoms—has meaning for us and becomes a part of us. In the design we cannot see the anticipated pain in the mother's eyes, but Blake knew this traditional pain in both the Bible and in iconographic tradition. The sensitive artist of the Middle Ages or the early Renaissance, like Giotto, Duccio, or Simone Martini, depicted the potential suffering, both mother's and child's, of which Mary was aware. So did Blake himself in his tempera painting of 1825: here Mary weeps over her child. Surely every mother fears for her child; and in the poem the mother is readying him, helping him to anticipate his own pain by sharing in the sorrow of the robin.

The theme implicit in "The Blossom" is explicit in another of the *Songs of Innocence*, "On Another's Sorrow":

And can he who smiles on all
Hear the wren with sorrows small,
Hear the small birds grief & care
Hear the woes that infants bear—

And not sit beside the nest
Pouring pity in their breast, . . . (E, 17)

In England, appositely enough, there was a "reciprocity" of the traditions of wren and robin.¹⁷ Here again Blake used Christ, infant, and bird to suggest the universal need for sympathy.

Several apparent incongruities in the design are now easier to understand. In "The Blossom" the mother has wings, though the traditional madonna does not; and here these wings are as distinctively avian as angelic. The winged infants who surround the mother do not closely encircle her as do the angels who conventionally encircle the madonna, nor are their wings like those which Blake gave to the single angel in

17. Armstrong, p. 167.

“Infant Joy.” Their behaviour, too, is unconventional: they do not concentrate their admiration upon madonna and child, but devote themselves mainly to their own concerns. Evidently Blake chose to present here not a consistent picture of mother, child, and birds, or of Mary, Christ-child, and angels, but a conflation of the two, to enlarge the imagination of the reader to recognize the identity and divinity of all life.

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