Blake's Pity: An Interpretation

by H. SUMMERFIELD

BLAKE's large colour print known as Pity (c. 1795) (Figure 1) is widely recognized as a literal illustration of Macbeth I.vii.21-25:

And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

In this passage, Shakespeare draws on Psalms xviii.10, and Blake's design illustrates this underlying text along with the verse which follows it:

And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his secret place; his pavilion round about him were dark waters and thick clouds of the skies.

Blake, who believed that the Old Testament spoke at times of the true God, the Divine Humanity, and at times of the legislator of the fallen world, Urizen, would have identified the deity of these verses with the latter. About 1793 he addressed to the secretive Urizen the rhetorical questions

Why art thou silent & invisible
Father of Jealousy?
Why dost thou hide thyself in clouds
From every searching Eye?

In Pity, the figure on the rear horse, who does duty for one of Shakespeare's cherubin, is recognisable as Urizen hiding in clouds and darkness. His hands and arms are outstretched in the Jupiter Pluvius posi-


tion characteristic of that being (see, for example, America, pl.8 [1793], and the sketch Urizen Scattering His Thunderbolts [c. 1795]). Sir Anthony Blunt notes that the figure does not appear in Blake’s preliminary pencil sketches and that it is borrowed from one of Raphael’s representations of the Old Testament God. The fact that his back is toward the spectator may echo God’s words to Moses in Exodus xxxiii.20 and 23:

... Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.
... I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

Beneath Urizen, the two sinister horses stretch from side to side of the print, and they and their riders dominate the fallen world below.

The series of prints to which Pity belongs largely concentrates on the horrors of the fallen world, and it can be loosely related to the myth of Fall and Creation which Blake presents in The First Book of Urizen (1794). This poem tells how Urizen’s disastrous ambitions are responsible for his Fall into a material existence, and how Los, his fellow Eternal, voluntarily descends with him to deliver him from “formless, unmeasurable death” (pl.7, l.9; K., p. 226). In his sympathy, Los falls asunder, his female aspect taking on a separate existence as the goddess Enitharmon, since “pity divides the soul” (pl.13, 1.53; K., p. 230). The unfallen Eternals name her Pity, and it may well be that she is the other rider in Blake’s design and that he intends her for the visible instrument through whom the hidden Urizen exercises his power. She fulfils this role in Europe (1794), in which she is portrayed as the female spirit through whom Urizen’s will is imposed on humanity during the Christian era. In the print her misguided tenderness is seen in her face as she reaches down to gather up the baby with the possessiveness which characterises the Enitharmon of Europe. The airstream which blows her hair obliquely upwards but leaves Urizen’s untouched may represent “the winds of Enitharmon,” which Blake also mentions in Europe (pl.1, 1.2; K., p. 238) and later—in The Four Zoas—explains as the agency by which souls are carried into mortal birth in the fallen world.

The series of twelve prints is probably intended to begin with Elohim [i.e. Urizen] creating Adam and Satan exulting over Eve (Figure 2). The robed, prostrate mother in Pity closely resembles the nude, prostrate Eve in the latter: each woman lies rigid on her back with her head on the left and her feet on the right side of the picture, and her abundant hair outspread. The anguished mother in Pity may well be meant for Eve just after she has experienced the fulfilment of the curse “in sorrow thou

4. Blunt, p. 36.
shall bring forth children” (Genesis iii.16). Blake seems to be expressing his horror at the division of the original androgynous man:

Eternity shudder'd when they saw
Man begetting his likeness
On his own divided image.

(The First Book of Urizen, pl.19, ll.14–16; K., p. 232)

In the light of these considerations, it seems probable that Pity, although its starting point is in Shakespeare’s lines, represents the plight of man when he first finds himself a sexual being in a fallen world under the rule of Urizen and his female minister.

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