The Derivation and Meaning of “Ololon”

Donald H. Reiman, Christina Shuttleworth Kraus

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orthrop Frye suggested that the name Ololon in Milton derives from "ululation," a word Blake himself uses in The Four Zoas. In both English and Latin (from which the English words come directly), *ululate* means to howl, wail, or lament, and *ululation* either a howl, wail, or cry of lamentation, or the action of howling or wailing (OED; Lewis & Short, A Latin Dictionary).

Frye's etymology has gone generally unchallenged, though two scholars mention (in passing) what is clearly the single, direct origin of the name. Peter F. Fisher remarks simply that Ololon was "a name probably derived from a Greek word ("ολολούξειν") which signified the crying of women to the gods." Harold Bloom also notes that Ololon is from "ολολούξειν," but he misinterprets the Greek and follows Frye in discussing "the lamentation of women to the gods." Grief and mourning, however, may not be the aspects of ολολούξειν that Blake wished to suggest. As defined in Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon (1961), the verb ολολούξειν, with the related words ολολογύς and ολολογάκος, applies to "women crying aloud to the gods in prayer or thanksgiving," to "the cries of goddesses," and to "women crying to the gods... most in sign of joy." A survey of classical uses of the word from Homer (e.g., Od. 22.411, Il. 6.301) to Aristophanes (e.g., Birds 222, Knights 1327) and the tragedians indicates not only that the word has jubilant connotations, but that it was sometimes used in specific opposition to a cry of lament. This is particularly evident in a scene from Euripides' *Medea,* in which a messenger describes Creusa's death from poison and her handmaiden's reaction to it. The servant initially thinks it a portent from the gods:

"καί τις γεραία προσόλον ὁδόσσα που ἥ Πανὸς ὀργᾶς ἥ τυχὸς θεῶν μολέν
ἀναλούξε..."

An aged woman servant who, I take it, thought This was some seizure of Pan or another god, Cried out, "God bless us"...

But, as she realizes what is happening, she howls in terror:

"Είτι ἀντιμολών ἄρεν ολολογῆς μέγαν
κωκυτόν.

Then she raised a different cry from that "God bless us,"
A huge shriek...

Her second cry, a κωκυτός, εί ον wail of grief (the hellish river Cocytus takes its name therefrom), and Euripides is careful to stress, with his ἀντιμολῶν...ολολογῆς ("sounding different from ululation"), the change in the nature of the outburst.

There is a secondary meaning of ολολούξειν which may have influenced Blake in the choice of a name for his character. Johannes Scapula's sixteenth-century Lexicon Graeco-Latinum, the standard Greek lexicon of Blake's day (used, for example, by Shelley and members of his circle in their Greek studies), gives, along with the earlier meanings of the verb, the Aristotelian definition of ολολογήω: *Ululate:* et peculiarius est quam maris ranae edunt, cum *foeminae ad voitum vocant* (I.1816: "out-cry: and particularly that which male frogs emit when they...")
call the females to coitus").

Although this is a technical term which applies to the male of the species—in contrast to the literary 'ολοθρήσκης, which is an exclusively female activity—it is possible that Blake read Scapula and chose to incorporate sexual connotations into his Ololon, perhaps overlooking the masculine emphasis that appears only in πεντεσις of the Latin definition. 'Ολοθρήσκης, which transliterates as oloxon, is the form of the word closest to the name Blake selects: he need only drop the penultimate syllable to arrive at "Ololon."

Although Blake did not enjoy a formal education, he did study foreign languages and literatures. His library certainly contained books in French and Italian, and Frederick Tatham maintained that Blake also owned Hebrew, Latin, and Greek texts. In 1803, Blake wrote to his brother James that the Greek lessons which he was taking from William Hayley were progressing well: "I go on Merrily with my Greek & Latin; am very sorry that I did not begin..." However, his capacity to learn languages early in life is evident from his letters to his brother James, in which he mentions his understanding of Greek and Latin. His proficiency in these languages is suggested by the close correspondence of the Greek and Latin forms of words, such as "Ololon." When the laments reach the "Family Divine" and the "Cloud of Milton" stretches "over Europe," the Four Zoas unite into the figure of "One Man" weeping over Ololon (21:39). Ololon then begins to "feel Pity" for Milton (21:54) and thereby breaks the unconscious unity of its "shadow" and the Edenic state by incarnating through a series of transformations, beginning with a metamorphosis from river into the "Clouds" which accompany the manifestation of "One Man even Jesus" (21:58-60).

In Book II, this composite group of clouds descends to Beulah, the "place where Contrarieties are equally True" (30:1). Their "descent" is not a qualitative one: as Fox notes, Beulah is not a lesser, but simply a different state from Eden. Unlike the Edenic world of sexual union between contraries, Beulah is incapable of accepting the potential stress of conflict between opposing essences. It is a world of protected, infantile sexuality and maternal love: "Beulah to its inhabitants appears.../As the beloved infant in his mother's bosom round incircled" (30:10-11). As Ololon passes through this place, the inhabitants of Beulah lament, fearing the impending struggle of the final judgment: "As they saw the cloud passing/In the Clouds of Ololon with Power & Great Glory" (31:15-16). As the Clouds of Ololon pass through this moony world, they begin to lament with Beulah. The river of sexual union destabilizes and dissolves as it drifts through the half-realized realm of childish innocence—its contrarieties are separated, and Ololon, now split into distinguishable Sons & Daughters (30:4), laments in a world in which mature sexual love is frustrated: "Men are sick with Love!" (31:62).

As "the Divine Voice was heard in the Songs of Beulah" (33:1 ff.), there comes a change in the quality of union from a "mild and gentle" state to a period of jealousy and strife: "now thou art terrible / in jealousy & unlovely in my sight, because thou hast cruelly / cut off my loves, in fury till I have no love left for thee" (33:5-7). Yet a temporary answer to this pain of division is offered: the "Songs of Beulah in the Lamentations of Ololon" end with a promise of a renewal of self-effacing trust, "When the Sixfold Female" (the Emanations representing Milton's wives and daughters) shall "relent" and "give / Her maidens to her
husband: delighting in his delight" (33:14-18); "then & then alone begins the happy Female joy, / As it is done in Beulah" (33:19-20). In the infantile/maternal state of Beulah, the female's abnegation of self takes the form of nourishing the male by providing him with whatever he desires, "delighting in his delight."

This self-effacement, however, does not solve the problem posed by historic Milton's descent to "Eternal Death." Ololon must continue to journey until the potentialities inherent in the eternal idea of Milton reunite with the figure fixed by history, rejoining Milton's aggressive maleness with the principle of selfless union hitherto possible to maleness only in the Edenic realm of potentiality. To that end, Ololon continues its descent into the generated world of the "Mundane Shell." Reaching "rocky Albion," it takes on a final incarnation in Blake's own garden as "a Virgin of twelve years" (36:17).

Olonon, now embodied as an unthreatening female Emanation, meets her ideal Spectre, "Milton," now embodied in William Blake. After admitting to him that she has fostered false natural religion in her previous incarnations, she hears "Milton" declare the need for mutual annihilation and replies once again "in clouds of despair" (41:29). Then, the virgin "with a shriek" separates into six parts, splits "Away from Ololon" (i.e., the Eden potentiality), and flees "into the depths / of Milton's Shadow" (42:3-6). The explosive chemistry of the union of Spectre and Emanation produces the vision of "One Man Jesus the Saviour," wrapped in a garment "named the Woof of Six Thousand Years" (42:1, 15): in short, the union of the Divine Image of Man, clothed in the matrix of human history. This final action, occurring in the world of generation and yet not fully partaking of it, restores to Ololon the ideal unity of sexuality that had been its original nature in Eden. Now, however, its wholeness results not from complacent, unthinking acceptance of its potentiality but from self-conscious choice in the realm of actuality.

Milton is, among many other things, the story of a journey from a pre-sexual state through childhood/motherhood to the full awareness of adult sexual maturity. The union of male and female in the original river Ololon and the similar union in the final plate of the poem are both manifestations of a perfect fusion of contraries; only the last combination, however, which takes place within the Mundane Shell, redeems William Blake and, through him, mankind, existent within the Mundane Shell.

If "Olonon" means, as we maintain, a cry of joy or a cry to the gods, then the "lamentations" attributed to manifestations of Ololon throughout the poem have a multiple significance. First, they are, even in the depths of despair, cries to the gods--i.e., to the powers of self-knowledge and self-sacrifice that will eventually destroy false natural religion and enable Ololon to recombine with Milton in a mutual redemption. Secondly, on a linguistic plane, Ololon's journey represents a passage from meaning through nonsense to full meaning again. While in her river state, "Olonon" is both a cry to the Divine within humanity and an expression of sexuality. When she at last rediscoverers her true nature, in the garden at Felpham, she is once again this combination of sexuality and joy. Her lamentations of Milton's fate in Eden and in Beulah are, like her incarnation in Beulah in the form of clouds, incomplete. They do not represent Ololon's true nature--until the female potentialities in her can be united with Milton, neither is she whole in any sense, nor has the full significance of her name unfolded. Finally, the fact that those lamentations that begin in Eden are replaced by the rejoicing implicit in Ololon's name only within the Mundane Shell demonstrates again that Blake's ideal state lies within the full human experience--not in some external heaven or realm of forms.

The etymology of "Olonon" reinforces the idea that the names Blake "coins" are neither arbitrary nor merely onomatopoeic, but have traditional historical or linguistic bases. And despite the uncompromising condemnation of the classics in the Preface to Milton (later suppressed), the classical antecedents of "Olonon" indicate that Blake was at least interested enough in ancient secular literature to pursue the implications of a few words therefrom--more, perhaps, than have thus far been identified.


7 G. E. Bentley, Jr., and Martin K. Numí, A Blake Bibliography (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), pp. 195-212. The Tatham letter of 8 June 1864 is printed in Geoffrey Keynes's "Blake's Library" (Femina Library Supplement, 6 November 1959, p. 648).


12 Compare Shelley's Epipsychidion, lines 568-72:

the wells
Which boil under our being's inmost cells,
The fountains of our deepest life, shall be
Confused in passion's golden purity,
As mountain-springs under the morning Sun.

(As the note in the Norton Critical Edition of Shelley's Poetry and Prose (p. 37) points out, the explicit sexual images here are accompanied by an allusion to the myth of Alpheus and Arethusa.) See also Fox, Poetic Form, p. 216, fn. 16.


14 Fox, Poetic Form, pp. 9-10, 128 ff.

15 Compare Shelley's use of the hydrogen cycle in Prometheus Unbound, II.11.70-82.

16 Cf. the trusting cry of the despairing Trojan women in Iliad 6, as they plead with Athena: οἱ δὲ οὐκολογοῦσιν μήκες Ἀθηνᾶισι χειλασανάστοι (6.301: "all the women, in a cry [οὐκολογά] to Athena, lifted up their hands . . . ")