

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

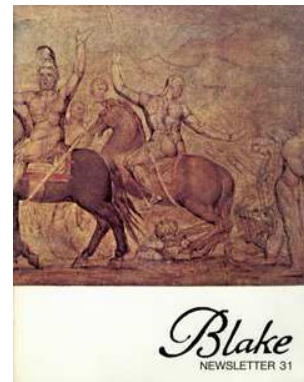
BLAKE

D I S C U S S I O N

Bound Back to Back in Bromion's Cave

E. B. Murray

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 8, Issue 3, Winter 1974-75, p. 94



"Bound Back to Back in Bromion's Cave"

by E. B. Murray

I would like to reason from the designs alone in order to demonstrate that Professor Duerksen's reading of plate 2, line 5 of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* represents a misleading alternative to the usual reading. He argues that the line and the design illustrating it refer to "terror and meekness," not Bromion and Oothoon. I see no reason for excluding either set of alternatives--and compelling reasons for accepting both.

As Professor Duerksen notes, Oothoon appears in plate 4 with "the chain about her ankle . . . loosened." In the full-plate design showing the two figures bound back to back, we cannot see a chain binding the left ankle of the lady because her left calf and foot are hidden by her kneeling right leg. Blake's care in *not* putting the chain in plate 4 around the *right* ankle of a lady who is admittedly Oothoon gives us no excuse for refusing an identification of the two ladies which all other indications support: both ladies are loose-haired, slim, and naked. This plate also represents the characteristic meekness of Oothoon which Duerksen denies her--she is "supplicating" (W. H. Stevenson's word in *Complete Poems*) Theotormon.

The other relevant designs further attest to the fact that we have only one naked lady pictured here, and that in some way she illustrates a characteristic meekness, even though it is very often a meekness forced on her by terror. In the title-plate Oothoon flees terrified over Theotormon's reign while a frosty-fiery Urizen figure huffs and puffs after her in the background; Oothoon kissing the flower sprite in the "Argument" design is a picture of mildly receptive innocence; the half-title plate 1 shows a naked woman supine on a rock;¹ a plate 3 design shows a comparably postured woman on a cloud. Since the eagle plucking at a woman's breast in the latter plate clearly illustrates what is happening to Oothoon, we should assume that both women are the same woman. Meekness afflicted by terror is again the major representational motif in both plates. Furthermore, the use of rock and cloud to back the supine Oothoon is clear symbolic evidence that she is indeed "bound back to back" with a urizenic figure. Blake should not be deprived of the characteristic subtlety of symbolic transference which lets the cloud and rock stand for Bromion in these two designs. Together they suggest the opaque and "lawful" terrors with which Bromion "rapes" spontaneous love. Finally, the design in plate 6 shows a nude Oothoon weeping in the presence of the self-flagellating (so I see it) Theotormon.

The overwhelming evidence of the designs seems to make any question of the frontispiece (or end-plate) lady's identity less than academic.² We are in fact presented in the plates noted with the "meekness" of Oothoon in its extreme forms--

fear, exhaustion, torment, dejection, supplication--all of which suggest that she is in fact oppressed by the terror which initially afflicted her when Bromion raped her.

The design also depicts the very real terror Bromion feels as well as inflicts. The reason for his terror appears in the design as the sun breaking through the urizenic clouds swagging on the deep around it. He is the only one in a position to see it. Theotormon is clearly shutting out vision; Oothoon is dejected and turned away from it. But Bromion is also and perhaps more importantly evidencing horror at something which seems to exist beyond the limits of the design. And I would suggest that the full explanation of his horror lies beyond the limits of the poem as well. Like Urizen elsewhere, Bromion realizes privately that flesh and blood will not abide his law a single minute. He has indeed raped Oothoon by causing Theotormon to take his perspective on man-woman relations--which is the reason why the scene of the plate and text is Bromion's caves. But Oothoon's questioning of the limits of the five senses, rational dispensations of joy--plus her exuberant paean in praise of happy copulation--signifies the ultimate end of his restrictive codes. Like Urizen, he will seek to keep off the "evil" day for as long as possible. Oothoon's morning-sun visions give her the Shelleyan "strength in meekness" to cause and justify his depicted terror. The only question really is--When will Theotormon hear her words without their being filtered through Bromion's ears and subject to his distortions and his answers?

1 A nude man lies near her; both are either exhausted or, in a Blakean sense, "dead." W. H. Stevenson sees a third figure here (*Complete Poems*, Longman, 1971, p. 175n) but only a misseeing of the rather ambiguous Trianon facsimile would seem to warrant that addition. The originals I have seen contain only two figures.

2 A close reading of the text would further confirm this reading from the designs but is beyond the limits of this note and its restricted purpose.

E. B. Murray (Univ. of Missouri, St. Louis) has published a book on Ann Radcliffe and articles and reviews on Shelley and Keats. He was a contributor to the 1974 Blake Seminar at the MLA.