

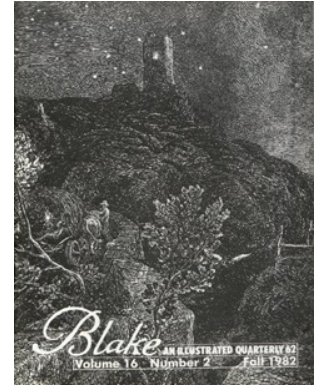
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A R T I C L E

## The Derivation and Meaning of “Ololon”

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# THE DERIVATION AND MEANING OF "OLOLON"

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**N**orthrop Frye suggested that the name Ololon in *Milton* derives from "ululation," a word Blake himself uses in *The Four Zoas*.<sup>1</sup> 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 (ὀλολύζειν) which signified the crying of women to the gods."<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom also notes that Ololon is from ὀλολύζειν, but he misinterprets the Greek and follows Frye in discussing "the lamentation of women to the gods."<sup>3</sup> Grief and mourning, however, may not be the aspects of ὀλολύζειν that Blake wished to suggest. As defined in Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* (1961), the verb ὀλολύζειν, with the related words ὀλολυγῶν and ὀλολυγῆς, applies to "women crying aloud to the gods in prayer or thanksgiving," to "the cries of goddesses," and to "women crying to the gods . . . mostly 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:

καὶ τις γεραιὰ προσπόλων δόξασά που  
'ἦ Πανὸς ὀργῆς ἢ τινὸς θεῶν μολεῖν  
'αὐλωλόυξε . . .

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:

'ἔϊτ' ἀντίμολπον ἤκεν ὀλολυγῆς μέγαν  
κωκυτόν . . .

Then she raised a different cry from that "God  
bless us,"  
A huge shriek . . .<sup>4</sup>

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

There is a secondary meaning of ὀλολύζειν 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 ὀλολυγῶν: *Ululatus: et peculiariter is quem mares canae edunt, cum foeminas ad coitum vocant* (I.1816: "out-cry: and particularly that which male frogs emit when they



call the females to coitus").<sup>5</sup> Although this is a technical term which applies to the male of the species--in contrast to the literary ὀλολύζειν, which is an exclusively female activity<sup>6</sup>--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 *mares* of the Latin definition. ὀλολυγών, which transliterates as *ololugōn*, 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 to learn languages early in life as I find it very Easy . . . I read Greek as fluently as an Oxford scholar & the Testament is my chief master: astonishing indeed is the English Translation, it is almost word for word. . . ."<sup>8</sup> Blake's own estimation of his fluency may be taken with a grain of salt (the two men apparently confined their studies to the New Testament and to collating Cowper's Homer<sup>9</sup>), but one may assume that the poet had a working knowledge of classical Greek and doubtless made use of a Greek lexicon--in all likelihood Scapula's. He could, therefore, have been aware of the range of meaning and the subtle ramifications thereof that the word ὀλολύζειν suggests for the character he creates.

How appropriate, then, is this derivation of "Ololon" for the Blakean character and for *Milton* as a whole? Susan Fox's study of the poem, *Poetic Form in Blake's "Milton"* (Princeton University Press, 1976) provides insight into Ololon's nature and into her relations with the poet-character Milton.<sup>10</sup> Accepting Fox's outline of the structure and action of *Milton*, we suggest that there are additional nuances in the poem when one takes into account the Greek derivation and meanings of the name "Ololon."

When Ololon first appears in Book I (Plate 21),<sup>11</sup> it is as a "sweet River, of milk & liquid pearl" (21:15). At this point, Ololon is the lifegiving river of Eden--unconscious and undifferentiated sexuality--its qualities of "milk and liquid pearl" suggesting a union of the milk of women's breasts and the pearly semen of the male.<sup>12</sup> But a crucial change in the status of Ololon takes place in Plate 21. On the "mild banks" of the river Ololon "dwelt those who Milton drove / Down into Ulro" (both grammar and context demand that we read "those . . . who" as the subject of "drove" and "Milton" as the object, driven "Down into Ulro"). As Ololon will ultimately be revealed to Blake-in-Felpham as human history ("the Woof of Six Thousand Years," 42:15), we can infer from the varied descriptions of Ololon on Plate 21 that the river represents the flow of historical process, while "those" who dwell on its "mild banks" are individual historical figures and societies. In Eden, where

all contraries are united, these embody both the potentialities and the past realizations of the historical process. Among them, therefore, are both the beings and forces who conditioned the historical John Milton in his failure to fulfill his potentiality (hence driving him to Ulro) and all unrealized potentialities in the idea of "Milton" awaiting redemption through incarnation: "they wept" and "The mountains" (identified as "the river's living banks," that is, the limiting parameters of historical necessity) "wail'd!" at the fate of Milton. Each dawn "the Family / Of Eden heard the lamentation" though "the clarions of day" soon "drowned the lamentations / And when night came . . . all refused to lament" (21:23-26). But the lamentation at dawn suffices to begin "Providence," which Blake saw as the ambiguous intrusion of Eternity into Time.<sup>13</sup>

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 self-contained Edenic state, 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 the Second, this composite group of clouds descends to Beulah, the "place where Contraries 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 Lord coming / 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<sup>15</sup>--its contraries 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).

Ololon, 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" (42:11, 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 "Ololon" 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.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, on a linguistic plane, Ololon's journey represents a passage from meaning through nonsense to full meaning again. While in her river state, "Ololon" is both a cry to the Divine within humanity and an expression of sexuality. When she at last rediscovers 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 quotidian world of full human experience--not in some external heaven or realm of forms.

The etymology of "Ololon" 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 "Ololon" 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.



<sup>1</sup> *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 143; cf. *The Four Zoas* 4:62.

<sup>2</sup> *The Valley of Vision: Blake as Prophet and Revolutionary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 248. Northrop Frye in his "Editor's Preface" calls attention to Fisher's great command of languages.

<sup>3</sup> *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 332.

<sup>4</sup> Translation by Rex Warner, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), III, 99.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* 536<sup>a</sup>11, and Aelianus, *De Natura Animalium*, 9.13.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 594-95: καὶ γυναῖκεῖν νόμῳ / ὀλοθυ-  
μὸν ἄλλος ἄλλοθεν κατὰ πτόλιν ἑλάσκον εὐφημοῦντες ("and  
throughout all the quarters of the city, in woman's wont, they  
raised a shout of gladsome praise"; trans. H. Weir-Smith, Loeb  
Classical Library edition of Aeschylus [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard  
University Press, 1963], II, 53).

<sup>7</sup> G. E. Bentley, Jr., and Martin K. Nurmi, *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" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 1959,  
p. 648).

<sup>8</sup> Blake to James Blake, 30 January 1803; in Geoffrey Keynes, ed.,  
*The Letters of William Blake* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univer-  
sity Press, 1968), pp. 65-66.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, ed. Ruthven Todd  
(London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1942), p. 146, quotes a letter  
dated 8 Nov. 1801 from Hayley to the Rev. John Johnson describing

how he and Blake "read every evening that copy of [Cowper's]  
*Iliad* . . . comparing it with the first edition and with the  
Greek as we proceed."

<sup>10</sup> See also John Howard, *Blake's "Milton": A Study in the  
Selfhood* (Rutherford, N. J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University  
Press, 1976), and Kay Parkhurst Easson and Roger R. Easson in  
their Shambhala edition of *Milton* (1978).

<sup>11</sup> Text and plate and line numbers are from *The Poems of William  
Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (Garden  
City, N. J.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1968).

<sup>12</sup> 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. 387) 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.

<sup>13</sup> For a suggestion of some of the complexities, see S. Foster  
Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (Providence: Brown University Press,  
1965), pp. 335-36.

<sup>14</sup> Fox, *Poetic Form*, pp. 9-10, 128 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Compare Shelley's use of the hydrogen cycle in *Prometheus  
Unbound*, II.ii.70-82.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the trusting cry of the despairing Trojan women in *Iliad*  
6, as they plead with Athena: αἱ δ' ὀλολυγῇ πᾶσαι Ἀθῆνῃ  
χεῖρας ἀνέσχον (6.301: "all the women, in a cry [*ololugē*] to  
Athena, lifted up their hands . . .").