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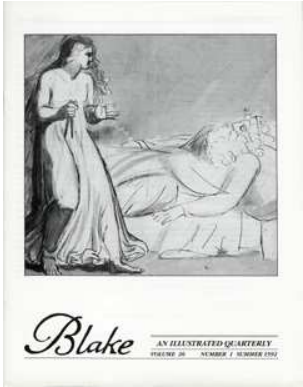

"Empire is no More": Odin and Orc in America

Julia M. Wright

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the deed. Blake shows Lady Macbeth with the daggers standing over the sleeping Duncan, who has gone to bed with his crown on.

On the reverse there is a variant in pencil alone of the same composition, inscribed, again in the lower right-hand corner, "Lady Macbeth/King Duncan" (illus. 6). Also on the reverse, with the paper to be seen as an upright with the left-hand edge at the bottom, is a slightly inclined profile facing right, just possibly a study for the profile of Lady Macbeth. On the reverse she stands on the right, leaning over Duncan in a much more threatening manner than on the recto; he lies as before except that his left arm seems to lie across his chest. Pentimenti on the recto show that Lady Macbeth was originally in the same stooping position as on the verso; Blake also drew her in an intermediary position before finally adopting the present upright stance. The drawings therefore are a particularly interesting example of how Blake improvised his compositions. Some of the forms of the recto have come out on the verso, perhaps because it was drawn with the paper laid on a dirty surface, and some of the brownish wash also appears on the reverse, presumably as the result of an accident.

The drawing, which is listed by William Rossetti as indicated in my entry, seems to be one of the items in lot 165 in the Tatham sale at Sotheby's on 29 April 1862, "Lady Macbeth and Duncan, Angels conducting the Souls of the Just to Paradise, &c. *in indian ink*," four items in all, bought by Palser for thirteen shillings; the lot comes among other drawings that can be identified as pen and wash drawings of the 1780s. The recent history of the drawing is no clearer than was indicated in my entry; all that can be said is that it has recently turned up in the trade. Rossetti's dismissive description, "Not carried far beyond the outline. Ordinary" seems far from the mark. In fact the drawing is one of the most dramatic and boldly drawn of this whole group.

[1] I am indebted to Henry Wemyss of Sotheby's, London, for letting me know of the existence of the drawings in the United States and for letting me have photographs.

[2] Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1981) 38 no. 98, the engraving repr. pl. 103. In the rest of this article references to my catalogue are given in the form "B98."

[3] Robert N. Essick, *The Separate Plates of William Blake* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983) 33 no. 3D.

[4] G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1977) 162.

[5] Martin Butlin, "Six New Early Drawings by William Blake and a Reattribution," *Blake* 23 (1989) 110-11, repr. fig. 6.

[6] For the Cunliffe-Owens see the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

[7] Robert N. Essick, "Blake in the Marketplace 1985," *Blake* 20 (1986) repr. p. 16, fig. 3.

[8] Andrew Wyld of Thos. Agnew & Sons, Ltd, told me about the drawing in London, let me examine it and, again, supplied photographs. I am most grateful to my friends among art dealers and auctioneers in keeping me informed about works by Blake as they turn up.

"Empire is no More": Odin and Orc in *America*

Julia M. Wright

Orc appears in a number of Blake's poems, but his character in *America* (1793) is uniquely drawn. A howling, flaming figure in *Europe* (1794) and a chained infant in *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794), the Orc of *America* is described in a wealth of detail that is matched only by *The Four Zoas* (1797).[1] The details that are provided, however, differ. In both *The Four Zoas* and *America*, for instance, Orc claims that his spirit can leave his chained body, but the Orc of *The Four Zoas* represents his spirit as "A Worm compelld" (80.31), while that of *America* chooses figures of power:

> on high my spirit soars;
> Sometimes an eagle screaming in the sky, sometimes a lion,
> Stalking upon the mountains, & sometimes a whale I lash
> The raging fathomless abyss, anon a serpent . . .
> On the Canadian wilds I fold. (1.12-17)

These figures have been associated with various sets of symbols of power, as Rodney M. Baine suggests that the shapes are all images of regal power over nature (130), while David V. Erdman identifies some of the animals as revolutionary emblems (259). Although the female later claims that Orc courts her in these shapes, they are quite violent in Orc's speech: the shapes are "screaming," "stalking," "lashing," and, by "folding," encircle and bind, like the serpent of Blake's *Laocoön*. The Orc of *America* thus chooses a diversity of shapes that are not only unbound but associated with aggressive power. This characterization of Orc is reinforced and elaborated through allusions to Norse mythology that can be used to explore the complexity of this revolutionary figure as he is constructed in *America*.

In his discussion of the first quarter of the Preludium, Harold Bloom writes that "The mythic world suggested is the Northern one of Odin and Thor, the Eddic literature known to Blake through Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* . . . and the poems and translations of Thomas Gray" (118). Bloom emphasizes the references to iron, and his identification of the female as the daughter of a Thor-like smith (118-19), while Erdman finds in the action of the poem an allusion to Paul Henri Mallet's explanation of human sacrifice "as a harvest rite" (251). Both *America* and Blake's notes for his designs for the 1790 edition of Gray's *Poems* indicate a knowledge of Gray's free translation of an Icelandic lay, *The Descent of Odin*, and a familiarity with Norse mythology that extends beyond

that poem. Blake's notes, for instance, refer to "The Serpent who girds the Earth" (680), which is not mentioned in Gray's poem, as well as "The Serpent & the Wolvish Dog. two terrors in the Northern mythology" (680), which recall Orc's form as a serpent and the "eternal Wolf" (9.2). Orc, moreover, like Lok in Gray's *Descent*, is riveted by a "tenfold chain" (1.12; Gray 65), as has been noted by Mark Schorer (406n) and Erdman (262n).[2] While critics have indicated the Norse background for this poem and others by Blake, however, there are close correspondences between *America*'s Orc and Odin that have not been addressed.

In asserting that he can transform his spirit into the shapes of a whale, a serpent, an eagle, and a lion, Orc evokes a distinguishing feature of Odin. In the *Ynglinga Saga*, Snorre Sturlason writes that Odin "could transform his shape: his body would lie as if dead, or asleep; but then he would be in shape of a fish, a worm, a bird, or beast" (11), the four categories of Orc's avatars.[3] The *Heimskringla*, of which the *Ynglinga Saga* is the first part, was not published in an English translation until 1844, although the closeness of Sturlason's description of Odin's transformative abilities to Orc's description of his metamorphic powers invites speculation that Blake had access to unpublished or as yet unidentified information. Through Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, however, which "is almost certainly Blake's source for Norse mythology" (Bloom 441), Blake would have had access to a more general knowledge of the saga, since it is both discussed and paraphrased in that work. Bishop Percy's translation of Mallet's text was published in 1770, and it notes Odin's ability to transform his shape and to travel widely: "[Odin] persuaded his followers that he could run over the world in the twinkling of an eye, that he had the direction of the air and tempests, that he could transform himself into all sorts of shapes" (83). Like Mallet's Odin, Orc merely claims such abilities; there is no narratorial authority for Orc's transformations in *America*, as there is in *The Four Zoas*. In eighteenth-century antiquarian discourse, Odin is persistently constructed as a confidence-man rather than a god, a human being whose rhetorical and poetic abilities allowed him to convince his followers, through speech alone, that he was a god.[4] *America* is the only poem of the early 1790s in which Orc is articulate, and he not only speaks, but speaks eloquently in a voice that "shook the temple" (5.7) and "In thunders ends" (7.1). In Odin and *America*'s Orc, then, we have two compelling orators who claim to have the ability to change their shape and travel widely. There are, however, even closer correspondences between the language with which Mallet describes Odin and that with which Blake describes Orc in *America*.

Odin is the "God of War" (Mallet 91), and it is as such that he excites "terror" (Mallet 84) and bears the epithet, "The terrible and severe God" (Mallet 91), recalling the persistence with which Orc is associated with forms of the word "terror," and his appearance "like the planet red" (5.2), which is named for the Roman god of war, Mars.[5] Odin, as a martial deity, is called upon by his devotees to embolden them in battle, and Percy's translation of Mallet makes this point in language that appears in *America*, noting that "[Odin] often descended to intermix in the conflict himself, to inflame the fury of the combatants" (92). Orc's inspiration of the American rebels is repeatedly described in terms of flame: "And the flame folded roaring fierce within the pitchy night / Before the Demon red, who burnt towards America . . . gath-'ring thick / In flames as of a furnace on the land from North to South" (12.8-9, 12.11-12). This depiction of Orc as flaming appears elsewhere in Blake's works, but other details regarding Orc's non-inflammatory participation in the revolution do not. In paraphrasing the *Ynglinga Saga*, Mallet writes that Odin was a great warrior who "inspired his enemies with such terror, that they could not describe it better, than by saying he rendered them blind and deaf; that he would appear like a wolf all desperate" (84). Mallet's combination of "terror," battle, a wolf, blindness, and difficulty with hearing, occurs in the reaction of Albion's Angel to Orc's speech: "Loud howls the Eternal Wolf! . . . / America is darkned; and my punishing Demons terrified . . . clouds obscure my aged sight" (9.2-3, 9.12).

In *America*, Blake constructs an Orc that specifically recalls the Norse god: both are associated with the shape of a wolf during war, "inflame" warriors, blind opponents, have remarkable oratorical abilities, and claim to possess extraordinary powers that allow them to change shape and journey extensively. Why, then, does *America* have an Orc who echoes Mallet's Odin in so many specifics while, for instance, the contemporaneous *Europe* does not? The answer, I would argue, lies in the difference between the political situations that are represented. Unlike *Europe* and the other poems in which Orc appears, *America* is concerned specifically with oppression as imperial rule—and so is Mallet's discussion of Odin. Mallet indicates that Odin was considered a nationalist hero in material available to him:

> Several learned men have supposed that a desire of being revenged on the Romans was the ruling principle of his whole conduct. . . . He had no other view, according to them, in running through so many distant kingdoms, and in establishing with so much zeal his sanguinary doctrines, but to spirit up all nations against so formidable and odious a power. This leaven, which he left in the bosoms of the northern people, fermented a long time in secret; but the signal, they add, once given, they all fell as it were by common consent upon this unhappy empire; and after many repeated shocks, entirely overturned it. (82-83)

"Stiff shudderings shook the heav'nly thrones" (16.16): Odin inspires rebels to overthrow the Roman Empire, the "enemies of universal liberty" (Mallet 82), while Orc inspires rebels to overthrow the British Empire, crying, "Empire is no more" (6.15).

A poet who inflamed the rebels that freed Northern Europe from Roman

rule, Odin appears to be an ideal figure with which to affiliate the articulate Orc who inflames the rebels that free the American colonies from British rule. Mallet's Odin, however, is more complex than this. According to eighteenth-century antiquarians, Odin was not a Norse god, nor even a Northern European, but an exile from Asia (Warton xx; Bell 233) who escaped into Northern Europe after participating in a failed Scythian revolt against the Romans (Mallet 79). Mallet maintains that Odin's real name was Sigge, and vilifies him for imposing a violent religious and political system on Northern Europeans through deceit and violence: Sigge assumed the name of the deity Odin, "a title so proper to procure him respect among the people he meant to subject," and "marched towards the north and west of Europe, subduing, we are told, all the people he found in his passage" (80). "[A]mbitious" (80), Mallet's Odin is not only a catalyst for the expulsion of the Roman Empire from Northern Europe, but a conqueror of Northern Europe himself, and Mallet only offers the characterization of Odin as an anti-imperialist hero in order to refute it.

Blake's allusions to Mallet's Odin, an anti-imperial conqueror, can thus provide a schema through which to address two questions raised by *America:* why is the champion of the oppressed in the Prophecy depicted raping the female in the Preludium? And why are indigenous Americans so thoroughly removed from the Prophecy's conflict? (By "Prophecy," I mean the text within *America* that is labelled as such, rather than the whole work.) While critics have legitimated the rape, and so sustained Orc's status as the poem's hero, Blake's language suggests both violence and illicit conquest: "[Orc] siez'd the panting struggling womb" (2.3).[6] While the female is not explicitly identified with Amerindians, she declares herself to be the proprietor of American land (2.10),[7] and Erdman suggests that, in the illustration for plate 1, she "appears in her American Indian form" (259). Viewing this "daughter" (1.1) as a representative of the aboriginal peoples would, moreover, be consistent with the iconography of loyalist engravings, in which, as Stephen C. Behrendt points out, Britannia is represented as a matriarch and her "'daughter' [is] the emblematic American Indian" (32). The evidence linking the female with the Amerindians is tenuous, but it is congruous with a parallel between the female and this elided group to which I wish to draw attention. There exists, I would suggest, a homomorphism between the situations of the American revolutionaries, Orc, and Mallet's Odin, in terms of their relationships to martial power, a homomorphism in which the female occupies the same position as the Amerindians, and the Northern Europeans, in being the object of violence and conquest for a revolutionary figure who fights on behalf of the oppressed. Wars between the colonists and the first nations began before the American Revolution, and continued in the context of the Revolution, since most of the aboriginal peoples of the northeast, including the Iroquois Confederacy and the Delaware, sided with the British. The revolutionaries were thus in the ideologically contradictory position of trying to conquer one group while crying for liberty from another. Orc is placed in a similarly contradictory position, identifying himself with animals engaged in violent activities and seizing another against her will, and then speaking on behalf of the oppressed Americans of European descent.

In *America*, through the figure of Odin, Blake narrows the scope of his rebel to anti-imperial rebellion, a focus that is not especially relevant to the other works in which Orc appears. Like Odin, Orc's colonists liberate a nation from imperial rule, but it is a nation that they have themselves "siez'd." Thus, in his celebration of the American Revolution, Blake, like Mallet, does not elide the investment of the revolutionaries in violence and conquest, the violence and conquest through which they, like Mallet's Odin, gained the ground from which they fought against their own subjugation to imperial rule. Orc's violence does not erode the legitimacy of the rebellion, against Urthona or Albion's Angel, and need not be legitimized as a means to that end, but stands as a reminder that to engage the struggle for power is to be contaminated by the means of that struggle.

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All quotations of Blake's writings are taken from Erdman's edition, and will be from *America* unless otherwise noted; quotations of the poetry will be cited by plate and line number, and references to the prose will be cited by page number.

[1] I cite the dates on Blake's title pages rather than rehearse bibliographical debates regarding the dating of these texts.

[2] See Erdman (262n) and Schorer (405-06n) for other correspondences between Gray's translation and Blake's poetry.

[3] In eighteenth-century terms, these classifications are legitimate: the whale was referred to as a fish well into the nineteenth century.

[4] See, e.g., Lemprière and Mallet. Odin is identified as a poet by Lemprière (417) and Mallet (83), the inventor of poetry by Mallet (83), and the inventor of writing by both Warton (xx) and Mallet (83).

[5] It is the martial Odin that appears in Blake's other works by name (*Song of Los* 3.30; *Milton* 25.52-53; *Jerusalem* 83.19). Sotha, linked to Odin in *The Song of Los* (1795), also appears in a canceled plate for *America* (b.21). This additional connection between Odin and *America* is suspect, however, because of the question of dating, since *The Song of Los* was printed two years after *America*, and the date of the canceled plate is unknown.

[6] The rape has been described as "desire fulfilling itself" (Doskow 176), "patriots . . . making love to good earth" (Erdman 261), and Orc's attempt to "give his voice, and his passion, to silent nature" (Bloom 120). More recently, Michael Ferber has acknowledged the problem of "identifying the actions of the American colonists . . . with a violent act" (95), but resolves it by characterizing the rape as "a reclamation of the usurped land by those who deserve her" (96). This reclaimed "land," however, complains at the end of the Preludium of "eternal death" (2.17), "limb rending pains" (2.15), "howling pains" (2.16), and "torment" (2.17), and the bard of the canceled lines echoes her "cry" (2.6) with "sick & drear lamentings" (2.21). The only reference to joy is limited to the womb—"It joy'd" (2.4), not "she," or "he" for that matter. Even if the rape has positive consequences, as fertilization or as the release of the female's voice, the act itself is one of violence and conquest, and the final lines of the Preludium draw attention to the negative implications of that violence, not a justification of it.

[7] The phrase, "my American plains" (2.10), could be used to identify the female as a personification of those plains (see, e.g., Doskow and Erdman), but the detail that concerns me is the word "my": whether the plains are external to her body or are tropologically equated with it, she asserts that they are hers.