

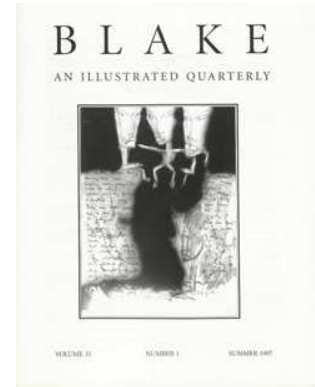
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BY WES CHAPMAN

William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* has long been taken to be a response to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Understanding Blake's attitude towards Wollstonecraft is troublesome, however, because Blake's attitude towards women in general has seemed so contradictory. Although some critics have taken Blake's apparent affirmation of Wollstonecraft in *Visions* as a sign of his support for feminism—Mark Schorer, for example, claims that "the poem is a perfectly direct allegory of [Wollstonecraft's] doctrines" (290)—Susan Fox, in an influential article, has argued that Blake's conception in the prophetic works of "a perfection of humanity defined in part by the complete mutuality of its interdependent genders" is belied by his representation of women as either "inferior and dependent" or as "unnaturally and disastrously dominant" (507), a view that Anne Mellor confirms (*passim*). Alicia Ostriker shows up the problem nicely when she writes that there are in Blake's work not one, but four different sets of attitudes towards gender and sexuality, indeed four Blakes: "the Blake who celebrates sexuality and attacks repression"; the Blake who "depicts sexual life as a complex web of gender complementarities and interdependencies"; the Blake, "apparently incompatible with Blake number one, who sees sexuality as a tender trap rather than a force of liberation"; and the Blake "to whom it was necessary, as it was to his patriarchal predecessor Milton, to see the female principle as subordinate to the male" ("Desire" 156).

Commendably, Ostriker does not try to resolve or reduce these contradictions, and I shall try to follow her example in this respect. But if these contradictions are irresolvable they are nonetheless comprehensible. Blake was sympathetic to Wollstonecraft's condemnation of women's oppression, at least at the time he wrote *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (he was considerably less sympathetic in his later, more Miltonic works), but he was critical of the beliefs which underlay her argument, particularly her faith in reason and her distrust of sexuality. At the same time, Wollstonecraft's critique of male sensualism posed a strong challenge to his own sexual ideologies, a challenge he could neither ignore nor fully reconcile with his own beliefs. Conflicted as he was, Blake anticipated the crucial problems men have had in responding to feminism, constructively or otherwise. In the end, I will argue, Blake

decentered a woman-centered undertaking, appropriating parts of it for his own political purposes and projecting upon it his own reimaginings of female character.

Wollstonecraft's Enlightenment Principles and Sexuality

The opening pages of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* situate Wollstonecraft's polemic squarely in the mainstream of Enlightenment thinking, while emphasizing certain terms above others. She argues that "[in] the present state of society it appears necessary to go back to first principles in search of the most simple truths, and to dispute with some prevailing prejudice every inch of the ground" (81). The return to "first principles" to counter "prevailing prejudice" is characteristic of writings in Wollstonecraft's political tradition—of Rousseau, particularly, who, finding that "our wisdom is slavish prejudice, our customs consist in control, constraint, compulsion" (*Émile* 10), turns back to nature, "which never lies" (*Discourse on Inequality* 10), as the foundation for his political philosophy. Yet Wollstonecraft, in her exposition of "first principles," does not allude explicitly to nature. She has not abandoned the concept of nature as a grounding for the truth of her discourse; references to nature and "natural" states abound in her work. But she de-emphasizes nature as a first principle, placing the emphasis instead on reason, virtue and knowledge. The three are carefully linked together: knowledge with reason, in that reason establishes "man's pre-eminence over the brute creation" while knowledge is "denied to the brutes"; both are enlisted in the struggle with passion (the passions were implanted so that "man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes") and so are aligned with virtue (81). In part, Wollstonecraft, knowing full well that any challenge to conventional gender roles would ensure a counterattack on her sexual morality—and indeed, as Alicia Ostriker points out, the *Anti-Jacobin Review* called the *Rights of Woman* "a scripture, archly fram'd, for propagating whores" (rev. of Todd 130)—is establishing the moral high ground. But more specifically this fiercely impeccable triumvirate of first principles sets her up to attack Rousseau, whose notorious anti-feminism needed to be answered, since he was a major figure in her own radical tradition. In Book V of *Émile* Rousseau had claimed to be arguing from nature when he deduced that "woman is specially made for man's delight" (322); rather than pursue Rousseau onto the same ground, which would lead to an irresolvable dispute over what was "natural," Wollstonecraft argues that Rousseau's conception of the natural leads him to an inconsistent conception of virtue.

In attacking Rousseau, Wollstonecraft aligns herself with conventional sexual morality and against sensual pleasure. Conceding that men have greater physical strength, she warns that men's claims to further superiority are founded not on rational argument but on interested sensuality: "not

content with this natural pre-eminence, men endeavour to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment" (74). She counts upon her audience to condemn such men who succumb to the "influence of the senses" and to the women who are "intoxicated" by their adoration (74). Aligning herself with conventional morality in this way, Wollstonecraft, far from exempting women from her criticism, condemns them too for their own sensual short-sightedness. She likens them repeatedly to courtiers, who accept servility as the price of attendant power and pleasure. "Men have submitted to superior strength to enjoy with impunity the pleasure of the moment," she says, referring to "the courtier, who servilely resigns the birthright of a man"; she continues, "women have only done the same" (106). The remark cuts two ways. On the one hand, she is alluding to the common radical argument that the natural reason of members of the aristocracy was corrupted by power and luxury, and thus implies that women who do not act like rational and morally responsible people do so because they too are corrupted by their upbringing in and treatment by society. On the other hand, her language tends to support the stereotype of women as frivolous and irrational beings. As Cora Kaplan says of a similar passage, the language of her analysis of gender inequality is "more innovatory, less secure, and less connotative than the metaphorical matrix used to point and illustrate it. As a consequence, there is a constant slippage back into a more naturalized and reactionary view of women, and a collapse of the two parts of the metaphors into each other" (43).

Whereas Rousseau had treated the alleged irrationality and frivolity of women as women's natural condition, however, Wollstonecraft attributes these qualities to false education:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty. . . . One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers. . . . (73)

In twentieth-century terms, Wollstonecraft is arguing that gender has been socially constructed;¹ but she does so from a late eighteenth-century standpoint, with eighteenth-century assumptions. She avoids the specifically sexual biological essentialism of Rousseau (although the flower metaphor implies that there is a "healthy" female self,

¹ Cora Kaplan makes this point in her discussion of Wollstonecraft (46).

Wollstonecraft does not imply that we can know what it is),² but in place of sexual essence she posits a human essence and a moral *telos*. The essence of all humanity is reason; that is what establishes humanity's "pre-eminence over the brute creation" (81); and the end of reason, its purpose, is to lead its possessor to virtue. That "the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love" is only partly a political problem, a subordination of women to male desire; it is at the same time, and perhaps for Wollstonecraft more importantly, a moral problem, resting upon the assumption that "they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect" (73)—which is after all perfectly conventional morality; Wollstonecraft's radicalism lies in the fact that she is willing to take that morality seriously as a guideline for the behavior of both men and women. So, in the dedication to Talleyrand-Périgord which prefaces *Rights of Woman*, she writes that in "[c]ontending for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue" (66).

Virtue—not liberty, or equality—is the end of Wollstonecraft's argument, its final cause. Building her argument around virtue allows her to sidestep, at least temporarily, the highly charged and overdetermined problem of the nature of men and women. Having accepted the conventional assessment of female behavior, Wollstonecraft must explain it; she finds an explanation right at hand, in radical arguments about the corruption of human nature in society. But those arguments, particularly in Rousseau, depend upon a conception of a "natural" self, dangerous ground, since the prevailing arguments over what were "natural" gender differences were by no means in her favor. To argue from nature directly, as Rousseau had done, would be to argue from diversity, the plenitude of creation, and thus for a potential validation of double standards; to found her argument on virtue is to argue for a single moral essence, and thus for a repudiation of all double standards. Thus she attacks Rousseau not for his assessment of women, but for his relativism: "If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim" (94-95).

Brilliant as this strategy is, she adopts it at a terrible cost. As Kaplan points out, in defining her position against male

² So, for instance, when she does speculate on the respective positions of the sexes in a society in which women were properly educated, she only does so ambiguously: "when morality shall be settled on a more solid basis, then, without being gifted with a prophetic spirit, I will venture to predict that woman will be either the friend or the slave of man" (104).

sensuality, Wollstonecraft repudiates female sexuality as well (35ff.); in arguing for better education for women, she confirms contemporary prejudices against women that no twentieth-century feminism would find tenable. In sum, she denies sexual difference—"the first object of laudable ambition," she writes, "is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex" (75)—which in effect valorized the value systems of contemporary male-dominated society, even as it tried to apply those value systems consistently. Her valorization of reason and virtue aligned feminism with the successful revolutionary ideologies of the era, but it also led her to assume a male norm, and it affirmed the conventional morality that for a century and a half would be used to condemn her and her work.

It also proved extremely difficult to live by during the years surrounding Wollstonecraft's composition of *Rights of Woman*, as Blake might have seen in Wollstonecraft's relationship with Henry Fuseli.³ William Godwin, in the *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, describes Wollstonecraft's relationship with Fuseli as one which forced Wollstonecraft to come to terms with the potential conflict between reason and sexual desire. As Godwin describes it, Wollstonecraft's pleasure in the relationship conflates intellect with sensation and emotion: "Mary was not of a temper to live upon terms of so much intimacy with a man of merit and genius, without loving him," he writes. "The delight that she enjoyed in his society, she transferred by association to his person" (60), as if the origin of her sexual feelings were, naturally enough, Fuseli's intellect. Thus far, the relationship—at least as Godwin describes it—seems to follow the principle that Wollstonecraft purportedly laid down for herself, "that the imagination should awaken the senses, and not the senses the imagination" (61). As it developed, however, sense and sensibility became harder to reconcile. Although Godwin writes that Wollstonecraft "scorned to suppose, that she could feel a struggle, in conforming to the laws she should lay down to her conduct" (61), clearly she did feel such a struggle. At least, her codes of sexual conduct began to change: presumably in deference to the tastes of Fuseli, who disliked women with the appearance of a "philosophical sloven" (Knowles 164), Wollstonecraft began to dress more fashionably, discarding her old black dress and powdering her hair (Ferguson and Todd 12, Knowles 164-166). "She began to think," writes Godwin,

that she had been too rigid, in the laws of frugality and self-denial with which she set out in her literary career; and now added to the neatness and cleanliness which she had always scrupulously observed, a

certain degree of elegance, and those temperate indulgences in furniture and accommodation, from which a sound and uncorrupted taste never fails to derive pleasure. (62)

"Temperate indulgences" they no doubt were, but Godwin's haste to assure the reader of Wollstonecraft's—and Godwin's own—"sound and uncorrupted taste" shows the effort required to reconcile sensual pleasure of any kind or degree with accepted English Jacobin principles. Such a reconciliation must have been much more difficult for Wollstonecraft, to whom sexual morality was always a more central concern than it was to Godwin, and who, as a woman, was under far more pressure to conform to the conventional sexual code.

Eventually, according to Godwin, the strain of having to reconcile her morality with her feelings became intolerable to Wollstonecraft, and to avoid Fuseli's company she fled to France. What Godwin does not record is the sequence of events leading up to Wollstonecraft's departure. According to John Knowles, Fuseli's biographer, Wollstonecraft—believing that "although Mrs. Fuseli had a right to the person of her husband, she, Mrs. Wollstonecraft might claim, and, for congeniality of sentiments and talents, hold a place in his heart, for 'she hoped,' she said, 'to unite herself to his mind'" (165)—proposed to the Fuselis that she move in with them in a non-sexual ménage à trois (Knowles 167). That Wollstonecraft herself did not see this arrangement as immoral is evident, for when Fuseli warned her of "the impropriety of indulging in a passion that took her out of common life," she replied, "If I thought my passion criminal, I would conquer it, or die in the attempt. For immodesty, in my eyes, is ugliness; my soul turns with disgust from pleasure tricked out in charms which shun the light of heaven" (Knowles 167).

Godwin's reliability as a character witness may be doubted,⁴ and Knowles surely had his friend Fuseli more at heart than Wollstonecraft. But the picture of Wollstonecraft during this era in her life that emerges from their accounts is fairly consistent with the persona of *Rights of Woman*—a picture of a highly principled woman who believed fervently in reason and distrusted sexuality, who either found her exaltation of mind over body unsatisfying in her relationship with Fuseli, according to Godwin, or found her society unwilling to accept her personal fu-

⁴ Godwin frequently uses Wollstonecraft as a foil for his own self-image. For example, he writes that "Mary and myself perhaps each carried farther than to its common extent the characteristic of the sexes to which we belonged" (131), which gives him occasion to describe, at some length, his self-reported "love of intellectual distinction" (131), as opposed to Wollstonecraft's particular strengths, which he takes to be "feeling," a "sensitive and generous spirit . . . left to the spontaneous exercise of its own decisions," and "the warmth of her heart," which "defended her against artificial rules of judgment" (132).

³ For discussion of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* as reference to Wollstonecraft and Fuseli, see Hilton, Ostriker (rev. of Todd), and Wasser.

sion of the intellectual and the sexual (or sublimation of the sexual into the intellectual), according to Knowles; whose Enlightenment belief in reason, that is, failed her when she tried to live by it.

Oothoon's Contradictory Character

The first word of the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, "ENSLAV'D," if read in intertextual juxtaposition with the *Rights of Woman*, calls attention to the problematic position of its feminist protagonist, Oothoon:⁵

ENSLAV'D, the Daughters of Albion weep: a trembling lamentation
Upon their mountains; in their valleys, sighs towards America.

(VDA 1:1-2)⁶

⁵ In calling into question Oothoon's reliability, I am following the general trend of a number of articles of the past decade. As Thomas Vogler has written, until recently Oothoon was taken "as the speaker of a prophetic Truth that would transform the world, if only Theotormon would listen to her and act accordingly" (271). Recent critics, however, have challenged that view. Mark Anderson finds that Oothoon fails to achieve the prophetic stance that Blake was seeking to define, because she "ends by seeing her freedom but failing to know it: she sees through Urizen's morality to the potential eternity in the moment of desire, but cannot realize it while she continues to depend on Theotormon rather than on herself for her liberation" (14). David Aers, while still holding up Oothoon, with "so clear a revolutionary critique of sexual and social exploitation" and "so full an understanding of the psychological effects and perverted indulgences of repressed sexuality," as one who is "able to transcend the consciousness of her fellow women *absolutely*," treats the clarity of her understanding as an undialectical mistake—"the illusion [of] assuming that revolutionary consciousness can ever be as uncontaminated by dominant structures as Oothoon's appears to be" (31). In writing *Visions*, Blake came to see "the need for deepening his sexual dialectic to include the notion of 'female will,' casting out the vestiges of delusions about consciousness as free from all the effects of the system against which it is struggling" (32). Nelson Hilton goes further, arguing that "in suggesting that 'conversing with shadows dire' represents Theotormon's involvement with his own narcissistic projections, the closing lines put forward the depressing possibility that *Oothoon herself is one of those projections*: herself, to repeat, 'a solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity'" (102). Vogler's view is similar; he argues that "[a]s a representation of speaking woman, [Oothoon] serves conveniently as a ventriloquating mirror for acts of narcissistic self-completion on the part of those male readers who like to have their truths of feminine desire come out of the mouths of 'women'" (300). Harriet Kramer Linkin, on the other hand, challenges these negative views of Oothoon, arguing that the narrator's pessimistic view of Oothoon's stasis at the end of the poem is called into question by the illustrations that accompany the poem and that Oothoon's experience throughout the poem is "ultimately progressive rather than degenerative" (185). I agree with Linkin that Oothoon progresses towards prophetic status in the poem, but to me this only shows up the disjunction between her visionary power and her complicity with her oppressors.

⁶ All references to Blake's work are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982). References to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* are cited as MHH, followed by the plate number; references to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* are cited as VDA, followed by plate and line numbers; other references are cited as E followed by the page number.

As Nelson Hilton points out, slavery is "the master trope of the *Vindication*."⁷ Women are slaves, for Wollstonecraft, not only because they have no freedom but because, in their lack of freedom, they come to accept the values of their oppressors. Just as one cannot "expect virtue from a slave, from a being whom the constitution of civil society has rendered weak, if not vicious," so "it will also require some time to convince women that they act contrary to their real interest on an enlarged scale, when they cherish or affect weakness under the name of delicacy" (116). Blake uses the image similarly in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: the "swarthy children of the sun," says Bromion, "are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge: / Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent" (VDA 1:21-23). Bromion's concern in these lines is to establish his control over Oothoon, but his words describe aptly the condition we now call "identification with the oppressor." The opening lines of *Visions*, then, immediately raise the issue of perspective. If one cannot "expect virtue from a slave"—nor expect, presumably, self-knowledge—then how does a slave come to know his or her own position, and speak truthfully about it once it is known? Oothoon is not one of the Daughters of Albion, but she is a woman, and like them is bound by her oppressors; we should expect her analysis of her own bondage to reflect to some extent her oppressors' thinking. Moreover, she is the "soft soul of America," and as such is a figure for imperfect liberation. *Visions* was printed fewer than 20 years after the beginning of the American Revolution, the full effects of which were only beginning to be felt in France. In *America a Prophecy*, printed in the same year as *Visions*, America is the birthplace of Orc, the spirit of Revolution. So the Daughters' "sighs towards America" reflect their desire for liberation, and Oothoon's identification as the "soft soul of America" suggests that Oothoon is a liberator figure; yet in the context of these opening lines, with their reference to slavery, America carries a very different meaning as well, because America was a country in which slavery was thriving. America had thrown off its old English fetters but had not ceased forging new ones.⁸

Oothoon is not strictly a representation of Wollstonecraft; but she is caught, as Blake might have thought Wollstonecraft was caught, in the disjunction between her sexual feelings and her intellectual allegiances. The Argument to the poem shows the quandary Oothoon is in:

⁷ See Hilton for a partial listing of references to slavery in the *Vindication*, with particular emphasis on images of slavery to the senses.

⁸ For discussion of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*'s debt to the abolitionist movement, see Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*. By the time he came to write *Visions*, Blake had engraved the illustrations for John Stedman's *Narrative of an Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, so he was well acquainted with the issue.

I loved Theotormon
And I was not ashamed
I trembled in my virgin fears
And I hid in Leutha's vale!

(VDA iii: 1-4)

This deceptively simple lyric reveals some contradictions in Oothoon's attitude towards sexuality. Although Oothoon alleges that she is "not ashamed" of her love for Theotormon, she "tremble[s] in [her] virgin fears / And [hides] in Leutha's vale." We might recall Wollstonecraft's words to Fuseli: "If I thought my passion criminal, I would conquer it, or die in the attempt. For immodesty, in my eyes, is ugliness; my soul turns with disgust from pleasure tricked out in charms which shun the light of heaven" (Knowles 167)—a declaration, like Oothoon's love, not at all ashamed, yet from the point of view of someone like Blake, a fervent if troubled believer in sexuality, strangely contradictory. Wollstonecraft defends what she explicitly calls her "passion," yet her most ardent language is reserved for her "disgust [with] pleasure tricked out in charms which shun the light of heaven," language not of the passionate lover but of the moralist.

Blake might have found Wollstonecraft's attitude towards modesty in general contradictory, in fact, for in the *Rights of Woman* she at once eulogizes and condemns it. Modesty can be "purity of mind, which is the effect of chastity" (191): "something nobler than innocence, [modesty] is the delicacy of reflection, and not the coyness of ignorance. . . . so far from being incompatible with knowledge, it is its fairest fruit" (192). Yet as it is practiced in society, it can be the opposite of purity: "the modesty of women, characterized as such, will often be only the artful veil of wantonness instead of being the natural reflection of purity" (265). Wollstonecraft does distinguish the two kinds of modesty; the modesty which is purity of mind is a non-sexual virtue, practised for its own sake, while the modesty which is wantonness is a standard of propriety to which only women are subject, practiced solely to protect reputation. But the boundary between the two kinds of modesty sometimes blurs disconcertingly, as in the chapter titled "Modesty.—Comprehensively Considered, and Not as a Sexual Virtue":

Modesty! Sacred offspring of sensibility and reason!—true delicacy of mind!—may I unblamed presume to investigate thy nature, and trace to its covert the mild charm, that mellowing each harsh feature of a character, renders what would otherwise only inspire cold admiration—lovely!—Thou that smoothest the wrinkles of wisdom, and softenest the tone of the sublimest virtues till they all melt into humanity;—thou that spreadest the ethereal cloud that, surrounding love, heightens every beauty, it half shades, breathing those coy sweets that steal into the heart, and charm the senses—modulate for me the language of persuasive reason, till I rouse my sex from the flowery bed, on which they supinely sleep life away! (191)

This eulogy of modesty borders on parody: the language of the passage, with its archaic thou's, and its extravagant—even romantic—metaphors and personifications, align the passage with the "turgid bombast of artificial feelings" and "flowery diction" she condemns in the introduction, the "pretty superlatives" which, "dropping glibly from the tongue, vitiate the taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth" (76). Modesty acts in the passage as a kind of non-specific cosmetic, "smooth[ing] the wrinkles of wisdom," "soften[ing] the tone of the sublimest virtues," "breathing those coy sweets that steal into the heart and charm the senses," more like "the artful veil of wantonness" Wollstonecraft condemns than the "purity of mind" she praises. Nevertheless, one cannot take the passage wholly as parody: "true delicacy of mind," in the passage above, foreshadows "purity of mind, or that genuine delicacy which is the only virtuous support of chastity" and the "delicacy of reflection" which is "nobler than innocence" in her later, serious discussion of modesty as a non-sexual virtue (192). It is not so much that there are two kinds of modesty, as that modesty itself has an ambivalent character. As the "offspring of sensibility and reason," it may live up or down to its parents' respective reputations.

Blake was not one to praise modesty, even ambivalently, nor was he a friend to conventional morality generally. Therefore the Oothoon of the *Argument*, though she is "not ashamed," still "tremble[s] in [her] virgin fears" and hides in Leutha's vale. Leutha's vale is a land of delusion; in a fragment intended for *America*, when "In vain the dreamer grasps the joyful images," the images "fly / Seen in obscured traces in the Vale of Leutha" (E 59). (The possibility that Oothoon has changed is discussed below.) In *Europe*, Leutha is one of Enitharmon's daughters, the "lureing bird of Eden," whose description echoes the language of Wollstonecraft's description of corrupt female sensuality:

Soft soul of flowers Leutha!
Sweet smiling pestilence! I see thy blushing light:
Thy daughters many changing,
Revolve like sweet perfumes ascending O Leutha silken queen!

(E 65)

As in Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*, images and adjectives associated with conventional femininity—"soft soul of flowers," "sweet smiling," "blushing," "sweet perfumes," and "silken"—are linked with corrupt aristocracy, the "queen" who is a "pestilence." Modesty here, represented by Leutha's blushing, is unequivocally an "artful veil of wantonness." For Oothoon to hide in Leutha's vale, then, is for her to indulge in the self-deluding, deceitful sensualism Wollstonecraft condemns in her work. She does so, too, not in spite of her morality but because of it, for it is

her "virgin fears" that drive her to Leutha's vale in the first place.⁹

Although Oothoon brings an ambivalent attitude towards sexuality with her to the sexual act, she is not the source of that ambivalence: the source is the "terrible thunders" that tear her "virgin mantle in twain." The tearing of the mantle is a figure for rape, but it is also a figure for doubleness; the problem all along has been that the "virgin mantle" is torn "in twain," i.e., that sexual morality is ambivalent, paradoxical: modesty is wantonness; "virgin fears" lead to Leutha's vale, home of the "lureing bird of Eden." But the "virgin mantle" is torn "in twain" *after* Oothoon plucks the flower and "[rises] up from the vale"; the contradictory assumptions Oothoon brings to the sexual act are caused by or at least confirmed by the aftermath of that act, a temporal incongruity that points out the destructive circularity of sexual codes. Conventional morality's condemnation of sexuality is internalized by the individual, for whom sexuality is inevitably compromised; sexuality then becomes the destructive force it is assumed to be, and the cycle starts all over again. As Blake writes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion" (MHH 8).

The "terrible thunders" that tear the mantle are the acts and ideologies of Bromion and Theotormon. Bromion is the most obvious oppressor, if not finally the most dangerous. He is a rapist, who after raping Oothoon, brands his victim as "Bromions harlot" (VDA 2:1). He is a slave owner and an imperialist, who will reproduce in the new lands he seeks to conquer the evils of his own civilization, because he forces the multiplicity of existence to match up with his own narrow set of assumptions; he enforces "one law for both the lion and the ox" (VDA 4:22), and, as we know from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (MHH 24). But Theotormon, whom Oothoon loves, is at least as much her oppressor as Bromion. Theotormon is a moralist whose sense of shame and sin torments him, and spuriously justifies his torment of others. Whereas Bromion takes pleasure directly from the exercise of power and the acquisition of "riches and ease," Theotormon takes pleasure from his self-righteous sorrow over sin and suffering, suffering which his religiosity only increases. Indeed, the text suggests that his religious sufferings are really a corrupt form of sexual enjoy-

ment. After Theotormon rolls his waves around Bromion and Oothoon in Bromion's cave, he weeps at the cave's mouth; beneath him sound the "voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money" who "shiver in religious caves beneath the burning fires / Of lust, that belch incessant from the summits of the earth" (VDA 2:8-10). The slaves and children are "beneath" Theotormon; they are also "beneath" the fires of lust, implying that Theotormon, although he condemns and spurns Oothoon, is within those fires. His repressed desires "belch incessant from the summits of the earth," taking the form of what Oothoon will call, by the end of the poem, the "self enjoyings of self denial":

the youth shut up from
The lustful joy, shall forget to generate, & create an amorous image
In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow.
Are not these the places of religion? the rewards of continence?
The self enjoyings of self denial?

(VDA 7:3-9)

Theotormon's weeping is, in effect, a form of masturbation, a way of creating an "amorous image" in the secret "places of religion," and a particularly sado-masochistic form of masturbation at that; it feeds off suffering, both the "self denial" of the masturbator and the more genuine sufferings of those it condemns.

Oothoon at least has the decency not to weep, and is in general more honest and less corrupt than Theotormon; but her love for Theotormon drives her to a similar kind of behavior.

Oothoon weeps not: she cannot weep! her tears are locked up;
But she can howl incessant writhing her soft snowy limbs.
(VDA 2:12-13)

Bloom argues that Oothoon's writhing is not a form of suffering, but of sexual arousal (Bloom 106, E 901). The context of the line confirms this; this description immediately follows the passage describing Theotormon's masturbatory weeping in the fires of lust, and the image of Oothoon, with her "soft snowy limbs," is itself sexualized. Her own "self enjoyings," however, take the form not of solipsistic weeping, but of a masochistic desire for purification at the hands of "Theotormons Eagles."

I call with holy voice! kings of the sounding air,
Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect.
The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast.
(VDA 5:14-16)

⁹ That for Blake this kind of sensualism is compatible with conventional morality is made clear in *Europe* by the figure of Enitharmon herself, who, desiring that "Woman, lovely Woman! may have dominion" (E 62), is the archetype of feminized aristocracy, or, since the images work two ways, female tyranny. She tyrannizes by encouraging moralistic judgments upon sexuality: she asks Rintrah to "... tell the human race that Womans love is Sin! . . . / Forbid all Joy, & from her childhood shall the little female / Spread nets in every secret path" (E 62).

Blake's punctuation, though frequently baffling to me, sometimes tells; here, the full stop after "reflect" makes one read that word in two ways.¹⁰ Read as the end of a sentence consisting of the first two lines, "reflect" means something like "cogitate." Wollstonecraft uses the word "reflect" often in this sense, most tellingly when she writes about modesty: modesty "is the delicacy of reflection, and not the coyness of ignorance. . . . so far from being incompatible with knowledge, it is its fairest fruit" (192); or later, "modesty, being the child of reason, cannot long exist with the sensibility which is not tempered by reflection" (200). In these passages, as indeed throughout the *Rights of Woman*, reflection is the exercise of reason. If "reflect" is read in this way, the first two lines of the passage quoted above summarize Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*: Wollstonecraft calls for an end to the corruption of women by a partial education in a partial society, in order that women may take their place as reasoning creatures ("rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect," says Oothoon). Likening Oothoon to Prometheus (a likeness reinforced by Blake's illustration in plate 6, in which Oothoon's arms are thrown back, as if bound, while an eagle tears at her abdomen), the lines imply that such a call requires courage and imagination. But the Promethean sacrifice seems somehow less noble if it is self-inflicted; in context, following immediately upon the image of Theotormon's masturbatory sorrow, Oothoon's call to the eagles looks suspiciously like another form of the "self enjoyings of self denial." In other words, "to reflect," in the sense of "to reason," is also to "reflect," in the sense of "to mirror," and specifically to mirror Theotormon's image: to "reflect. / The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast." Oothoon's struggle with her oppressors is a noble one, and is depicted as such, but it is doomed to fail so long as she desires to "reflect," and above all to reflect the image of Theotormon, i.e., so long as she valorizes reason and internalizes conventional morality's sado-masochistic standards of purity. Loving Theotormon, Oothoon has internalized the values of her oppressors, and is bound to them. Thus Theotormon binds Oothoon to her more obvious oppressor Bromion: after the rape, and after Bromion calls Oothoon "Bromions harlot," Theotormon "fold[s] his black jealous waters round the adulterate pair / Bound back to back in Bromions cave terror & meekness dwell" (VDA 2:4-5).

I have dwelt long upon the complicity of Oothoon with her oppressors, because I want to emphasize what seems to me a fundamental disjunction in the poem between the position from which Oothoon speaks and what she actually says. The body of the poem has three parts, each ending with the line, "The Daughters of Albion hear her woes,

¹⁰ The edition of *Visions* (copy G) in *The Early Illuminated Books* has a comma after "reflect" (250) rather than a full stop; my argument remains the same for both versions.

and echo back her sighs." The first part tells the action of the story: Bromion rapes Oothoon and Oothoon calls Theotormon's Eagles to her. In the second part, Oothoon, Theotormon and Bromion each speak; in the third, Oothoon alone speaks. Counting the Argument, then, there are four parts. The first two, the Argument and the narration of events, call into question the political reliability of Oothoon in a number of ways: she is "enslav'd," her attitudes towards sexuality are contradictory (so that, despite Oothoon's morality, she hides in the immorality of Leutha's vale), and she desires to reflect the image of Theotormon, of sexuality repressed into sado-masochistic religiosity. We would expect, then, that in the last two sections of the poem, in which Oothoon analyzes and protests her oppression, her analysis would be flawed in some way recognizably traceable to the thinking of her two oppressors. For the most part, however, Oothoon's response to her oppressors is eloquent, more eloquent than it would seem possible to be, and—this is important—only intermittently consistent with Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*.¹¹

Oothoon's analysis of modesty shows the contradictions in her character. As—sometimes—for Wollstonecraft, who writes that "the modesty of women, characterized as such, will often be only the artful veil of wantonness instead of being the natural reflection of purity" (265), for Oothoon modesty is not a reflection of innocence but a corruption of it: "subtil modesty" teaches Innocence to "dissemble all [its] secret joys" (VDA 6:7-8). This corrupted sexuality then becomes bound into a system of economics, "nets . . . to catch virgin joy" and "sell it in the night" (VDA 6:11-12). As such it is a means of gaining illicit power, at the cost of losing freedom. The "virgin joy" the "modest virgin" spreads her nets for is not attributed to any one person or gender, for it is applicable to all the victims of conventional marriage: to the wife, who by using her sexuality to, as it were, "net" a husband, becomes a commodity; to the husband, who is trapped in marriage; to the prostitute, the necessary other of sexual repression, who is, like the wife, a commodity but, unlike her, is "brand[ed] . . . with the name of whore" (VDA 6:12).

In *Rights of Woman*, too, degraded sexuality is characterized as a costly means of attaining illicit power, although Wollstonecraft's metaphors are of monarchy rather than economy; she argues that women, for whom "[p]leasure is the business of . . . life," choose the "sovereignty of beauty," and thus choose "rather to be shortlived queens than labour

¹¹ Goslee describes the differences between Oothoon and Wollstonecraft in terms similar to those I am using in this article: "Both her attack upon a patriarchal God and her attack upon a unitary, consistent, and rational image of God in the human signal that Oothoon's vindication of women will follow a very different route from Mary Wollstonecraft's, because a careful presentation of the latter and an unexamined acceptance of the former are Wollstonecraft's most basic premises for deducing equality between the sexes . . ." (120).

to obtain the sober pleasures that arise from equality" (124). Unlike Wollstonecraft, however, for whom the "artful veil of modesty" is necessitated by male tyranny over women, Oothoon implicates religion in this corruption of innocence. Addressing first the "modest virgin knowing to dissemble," and then Theotormon, she says,

Religious dreams and holy vespers, light thy smoky fires:
Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest morn
And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty!
This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling
hypocrite.

Then is Oothoon a whore indeed! and all the virgin joys
Of life are harlots: and Theotormon is a sick mans dream
And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness.

(VDA 6:14-20)

Oothoon is slave, not to male sensuality, but to "selfish holiness," to the kind of hypocritical religiosity that we have seen in Theotormon. Religion is the corrupter of innocence, lighting the "smoky fires" of the modest virgin's sexuality, once lit by the "eyes of honest morn." As Oothoon says later, the "places of religion" are the "shadows of . . . curtains" and the "folds of [the] silent pillow" where "the youth shut up from / Lustful joy, shall forget to generate. & create an amorous image" (VDA 7:5-7); religion is no guardian of the soul against the corruption of sexuality, but rather a corrupted, solipsistic form of sexuality.

Oothoon's analysis of sexuality and religion is standard Blakean fare. But what is surprising about it is that Oothoon should be able to offer it. For she has been described from the very beginning of the poem as exactly the "modest virgin" whose duplicity she deplores, who "tremble[s] in [her] virgin fears / And . . . hid[es] in Leutha's vale," and whose masochistic quest for purity reflects Theotormon's "self enjoyings of self denial." Conceivably she has changed, and become enlightened to her condition; the poem is often read this way, the change usually ascribed to her openness to sexuality.¹² But there are at least three problems with this reading. First, the flower that Oothoon picks—the symbol of her sexual openness—is *in* Leutha's vale; that is, her sexual experience is corrupted from the very beginning. Second, Oothoon calls to Theotormon's Eagles after she plucks the flower; if her enlightened perspective is due to her sexual openness, then we would expect her to see through her quest for purity long before she does. Third—and most tellingly, I think—her new perspective too shows

¹² Bloom, for instance, after his discussion of the scene in which Oothoon calls to Theotormon's Eagles to rend her, writes, "This is Oothoon's most exploited and deceived moment, but her liberated passion does not permit her, or us, to abide in it. . . . By her increase in sensual enjoyment Oothoon has done what Thel failed to do—broken through the philosophy of the five senses, not by ascetic avoidance, but by expanding the crucial sense towards an infinite of desire" (110).

symptoms of Leuthan corruption. After decrying the modesty that would make her "a whore indeed," Oothoon offers her own vision of sexuality, free of Theotormon's jealousy and rigid morality:

silken nets and traps of adamant will Oothoon spread,
And catch for thee girls of mild silver, or of furious gold;
I'll lie beside thee on a bank & view their wanton play
In lovely copulation bliss on bliss with Theotormon:
Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born beam,
Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e'er with jealous
cloud
Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish blightings
bring.

(VDA 7:23-29)

Oothoon's idea of non-jealous love here—essentially to act as procurer for and voyeur within a private brothel for Theotormon—seems very different from her earlier desire for "purity," but the language of the passage makes clear that it amounts to much the same thing. Just as the "modest virgin" uses nets "to catch virgin joy," so too Oothoon will spread "silken nets and traps of adamant" to catch for Theotormon "girls of mild silver, or of furious gold." That the nets are "silken" also suggests that Oothoon's offer to Theotormon follows the same pattern of sexual entrapment, for in *Europe*, Leutha is described as the "silken queen." In short, there is little to choose between branding "virgin joy . . . with the name of whore" and procuring whores oneself; they are simply opposite aspects of the same thing. Put another way, since brothels are made of the bricks of religion, freedom lies, not in the brothel that Oothoon would offer Theotormon, but in some new way of thinking that can stay out of church and brothel both.

If one wishes to argue that Oothoon has changed, then, one must argue that she has changed at least twice—from the "modest virgin" enslaved by her assumptions about sexuality, to the clear-eyed analyst of her oppression, to the procurer again enslaved—and enslaving. The causes of these changes are not clear; the only plausible cause, the plucking of the flower itself, comes at the wrong point in the poem to explain anything. At some point it seems less confusing simply to accept that Oothoon is not a consistent character; what she is described to be and do, and what she says, are at odds.

Oothoon's vision of a brothel for Theotormon also shows that, although in many ways she is very much like Wollstonecraft, she is in other ways completely unlike Wollstonecraft as well. Oothoon's depiction of "subtil modesty" and Wollstonecraft's analysis of the kind of modesty that is "the artful veil of wantonness" are similar, but Wollstonecraft would hardly have found Oothoon's vision of the brothel a satisfactory alternative. In fact, Wollstonecraft uses a similar image, the image of the seraglio, as a metaphor for the lives of women corrupted by an

education designed only to make them pleasing to men: she writes that the "weak beings" whose "strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty" "are only fit for a seraglio" (76). For Wollstonecraft, brothels are not built with the bricks of religion, but with the bricks of female education designed and controlled by male desire. The harem, then, far from being a figure for a kind of sexuality which is liberated because it is not possessive, is a figure for marriage in corrupt contemporary society, in which women's freedom and potential are sacrificed to "libertine notions of beauty."

Moreover, the central tenets of Wollstonecraft's political philosophy in *Right of Woman* are directly opposed to the philosophy Oothoon espouses in her lament. Whereas Oothoon protests the "one law for the lion & the ox" which treats everyone the same, Wollstonecraft argues against treating them differently: "If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim" (58). Emphasizing virtue as she does, Wollstonecraft argues up the Chain of Being to God, the single unitary point on the chain; Oothoon argues down the chain, to the diversity of living creatures. To argue upwards, according to Blake, is to be both complicit with oppression and utterly self-deluding, for the "Creator of men" is a "mistaken Demon of heaven." "Thy joys are tears!" says Oothoon to Urizen, "thy labour vain, to form men to thine image" (VDA 5:3-4)—vain too, presumably, to emulate that image, or any image which tries to enforce conformity.

The contradictions in Oothoon's character lie along the fault lines of these two conflicting sets of ideologies. The Oothoon of the Argument and the first section of *Visions*, who, by "reflecting" Theotormon's religiosity, and seeking masochistically for purity, is bound back to back with the oppressor Bromion and his "one law for the lion & the ox," is like Wollstonecraft in that she accepts conventional standards of sexual morality and is committed to a single standard of conduct for all. The Oothoon who speaks in the second and third parts of *Visions*, on the other hand, condemns single standards, arguing instead for the value of diversity and individuality, and is much more like the Devil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* than Wollstonecraft. Along the fault lines between these two positions, too, lies—most uncomfortably—the issue of sexuality. Accepting conventional morality leads to Leutha's vale, and the sexual corruption implied thereby; but so too do Oothoon's politics of diversity—the "silken nets and traps of adamant" that Oothoon spreads in an attempt to defy the law of the Jealous god Urizen are indistinguishable from the nets the "modest virgin" finds to "catch virgin joy."

These contradictions are not, in my opinion, resolvable. Indeed, it is important not to attempt to reduce or dissolve them, for, as more than one critic has noted, Oothoon's advocacy of multiplicity—of the revolutionary force of

contradiction, one might say—is an important part of her power as a character.¹³ These contradictions do require some explaining, however, especially since Oothoon's advocacy of multiplicity is itself a surprising feature in a character who desires to "reflect" the "image of Theotormon" (VDA 2:15-16). To understand these contradictions, we need to consider one more difference between Oothoon and Wollstonecraft. Although, by the standards of twentieth-century feminisms, much of what Wollstonecraft has to say about women in *Rights of Woman* is enmeshed in reactionary discourse, Wollstonecraft never wanders in that text too far from her main aim, which is the improvement of women's position. The same cannot be said of Oothoon. Her political targets are many—slavery, imperialism, jealousy, forced conformity, modesty, single-mindedness, etc.—but very little of her political critique can be said to be aimed specifically at improving the lot of women. Wollstonecraft was concerned with a broad spectrum of political issues also, of course, in *Rights of Woman* and even more evidently in other works such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. But as a topic, the oppression of women has a specificity and woman-centeredness in Wollstonecraft's work that it simply does not have in Blake's, even in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, with its female and sometimes feminist protagonist. In taking up Wollstonecraft's cause, Blake changed its object; he tried to trace women's oppression to the same masters he traced all other oppressions to, rationality and religion, abstraction, etc.—to Urizen, in a word—and in doing so, he lost sight of anything specific to the oppression of women. In fact, as I shall try to show, it clarifies many of the contradictions in the poem simply to say outright that the poem is not about women at all, but about men.

Appropriations

In his annotations to Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man*, Blake writes: "let the men do their duty & the women will be such wonders, the female life lives from the life of the male. see a mans female dependants you know the man" (E 596). Fox writes of this passage that its "condescension disguised . . . as appreciation marks an ambivalence towards women

¹³ In "Blake's Oothoon: The Dilemmas of Marginality," James A. W. Heffernan argues that Oothoon's contradictions are a central aspect of her character as a marginal (and therefore a revolutionary if disempowered) figure: "What makes her marginal is precisely her resistance to classification, her refusal to be polarized. Straddling the line between defiant assertion and helpless submission, Oothoon challenges all binary oppositions" (6). As the Introduction to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* in *The Early Illuminated Books* points out, Oothoon's embrace of multiplicity ought to encourage a non-reductive reading of her character: "perhaps we should not try to answer these questions [of interpretation raised by Oothoon's complicity] on their own either/or terms when confronted by a poem that announces a plurality of 'Visions' in its title and presents a character who rejects unitary reduction and embraces multiplicity" (234).

which is a significant feature of all Blake's poetry. He admired women, but not enough to imagine them as autonomous human beings" (508). I agree with this assessment, but I think that part of the ambivalence in Blake's remark arises not so much from a contradiction within Blake's work—although, as I have tried to show, contradictions abound in Blake—but from differences between twentieth-century feminism and late eighteenth-century feminism. For what Blake argues in his annotation to Lavater is in important respects more closely aligned with the feminism of his time than with its misogyny.

The aphorism to which Blake responds consists of a series of misogynist clichés: "A great woman not imperious, a fair woman not vain, a woman of common talents not jealous, an accomplished woman, who scorns to shine—are four wonders, just great enough to be divided among the four quarters of the globe" (E 596). Blake's response to this depiction of female vices resembles, to a point, Wollstonecraft's response to Rousseau. Whereas Lavater implies that imperiousness, vanity, etc., are characteristics inherent to women, Blake argues that their ultimate cause is men: "let the men do their duty & the women will be such wonders." So too argues Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft accepts contemporary prejudices about female behavior, but attributes that behavior to deficiencies in education, deficiencies which, she makes quite clear, are designed to fit women to male desires. Women's "infantile airs," their "cunning" and "propensity to tyrannize," Wollstonecraft attributes to "false notions of female excellence"—excellence the primary criterion of which is the ability to "excite desire," for in a system in which women are wholly dependent on men for subsistence and status, "all the power [women] obtain, must be obtained by their charms and weakness" (77, 131). Like Blake, then, Wollstonecraft would remedy the weaknesses of women by correcting the deficiencies in men: "let men grow more chaste and modest," and women should "grow wiser in the same ratio" (77).

Both Blake's and Wollstonecraft's arguments here are derivatives of the "natural man" argument, in that they presuppose that the corrupted self, if freed from the constrictions and falsehoods which corrupt it, will naturally grow wiser and more virtuous. As this argument is applied to gender relations, however, it takes on new characteristics: it targets as corrupting influences not society in general but a specific group within society, namely men; and it takes up new issues of inherent worth. In the traditional "natural man" argument, what merits or deficiencies members of the aristocracy would have in an uncorrupted society is not important; as the argument is applied to issues of gender, heavily overdetermined by traditional assumptions about men and women, the respective natures of the "natural man" and the "natural woman" are unavoidably at issue.

This question of the natural—as opposed to conventional—qualities of men and women can be taken up in a

number of ways, which is why Blake's annotation can be at once feminist in its contemporary context and thoroughly sexist in our own. Wollstonecraft tries to leave the question open as much as possible; so, in the passage above, she does not claim positively that in an uncorrupted society women's understandings would be the equal of men's, but leaves that judgment to those whose understandings are not themselves corrupted by contemporary society: "if women do not grow wiser in the same ratio" that "men become more chaste and modest," *then and only then* "it will be clear that they have weaker understandings" (77). Blake, on the other hand, less philosophically consistent than Wollstonecraft, seems to have decided the issue already: "the female life lives from the light of the male," he writes, assuming male precedence. This assumption of male precedence is confirmed by his annotation to the Lavater aphorism. At the same time that he attributes women's supposed imperiousness, vanity, etc., to men, he covertly affirms Lavater's implied conception of female virtues. In the sentence "let the men do their duty & the women will be such wonders," "such" is not an intensifier but a demonstrative adjective; i.e., women will be not any wonders, but the "four wonders" Lavater describes—"a great woman not imperious, a fair woman not vain, a woman of common talents not jealous, an accomplished woman, who scorns to shine." By implication, then, this "natural" woman, not imperious, not vain, not jealous, who scorns to shine, will be humble, whatever else she may be, and in all likelihood quite content to live "from the light of the male." Blake is consistent with the letter of Wollstonecraft's philosophy, but utterly at odds with its spirit.¹⁴

Much the same thing occurs in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. *Visions* shares a number of images and arguments with the *Rights of Woman*: the tropes of slavery and flowers (and with them assumptions about the corrupting effect of social conditioning on individual consciousness), an analysis of "subtil modesty" as the "artful veil of wantonness," and the assumption that undesirable female thought and behavior is caused by men. Yet, as I have said, Blake redirects this material to ends very different from Wollstonecraft's: Wollstonecraft is concerned with the political and moral advancement of women, the primary obstacle to which is male sensualism; Blake is concerned most of all with the freedom of individual propensities, the greatest obstacle to which is Urizen, the jealous god primarily

¹⁴ Blake probably annotated Lavater's *Aphorisms* in 1788 (E 583), four years before the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, so his remarks cannot be considered to have been influenced by Wollstonecraft's feminism (he and Wollstonecraft may well have met by this time, but how clearly formulated Wollstonecraft's political principles were at this point, and how much if at all she and Blake would have discussed them, cannot be reliably assessed). I juxtapose these texts only to show that while Blake and Wollstonecraft shared much in the way of political assumptions and strategies, their political goals were at odds.

associated with reason. In short, Blake appropriates Wollstonecraft's critique for his own purposes.

Indeed, although I do think that Blake was sympathetic to women at the time he wrote *Visions*, his entrance upon the terrain of female oppression might well have been motivated not so much by sympathy as by philosophical necessity. In his last annotation to Lavater's *Aphorisms*, Blake posits an essential link between denial of individuality and men's opinions of women. Whereas Lavater, and those like him who knowingly or unknowingly inherit the doctrine of original sin, believe that "the vicious propensity" is "a leading feature of the man," and that vice is not only inherent but active, Blake redefines vice as accidental and negative: it is the "omission of act in self & the hindering of act in another." Just as the "natural man," until corrupted by civilization, is inherently good, so too the "leading propensity" of every person, "his leading Virtue & his good Angel," must be good also. But whereas the traditional "natural man" argument, by focusing on the condition of the species in nature, effaces the differences between individuals, Blake emphasizes individual character above all else: each person has a unique "leading propensity," which it would be oppression to hold to a single standard (what "laws of Kings & Priests" do in calling "the Staminal Virtues of Humanity" by the name of Vice). Blake's defense of diversity requires him to address the issue of female nature, for "the origin of this mistake [making the "vicious propensity . . . a leading feature of the man"] in Lavater & his cotemporaries is, They suppose that Womans love is Sin" (E 601). For Blake this equation of women with sin matters a great deal politically, for it taps into the mythological origins of Lavater's "mistake." According to the doctrine of original sin, the guilt for Eve's disobedience is transmitted to all future generations, so that sin is an inherent feature of human beings—so that, in other words, the "vicious propensity" is a "leading feature of the man." The stereotypical image of woman as vain, jealous, sensual is thus intricately connected with the Urizenic denial of individuality and diversity which Blake protests vehemently in *Visions* and elsewhere. For Blake to affirm the sacredness of individual character, then, he needed to nullify the equation of "Womans love" with sin, and therefore to reimagine female character.

Blake's quarrel with the doctrine of original sin explains why, in a poem of which the primary political claim is that individual character is sacred, Blake found it congenial to appropriate parts of Wollstonecraft's feminism; he required what she had to offer, a new Vision of the Daughters of Albion, to break the equation of Woman's love with sin which he felt led his contemporaries to make the "vicious propensity . . . a leading feature of the man." But his quarrel with the doctrine of original sin does not in itself explain why, given that Blake took exception to many of the fundamental principles of Wollstonecraft's work, the vision of women that he promotes should also be a woman's

vision (Oothoon's)—why, in other words, the "of" in the title *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* indicates the genitive case as well as the objective. For that we need to return to the final sentence of the first Lavater annotation discussed above: "see a mans female dependants you know the man." In some ways this sentence is the most interesting part of the annotation, personalizing and bringing into the present the necessary abstraction of arguments about a "natural" self. Whereas the first part of the annotation, "let the men do their duty & the women will be such wonders," projects a future utopia, and the second part, "the female life lives from the light of the male," claims to state a universal truth, the third part argues about concrete conditions in the present: "see a mans female dependants" *under current conditions*, and "you know the man." Although this sentence, like the one before it, shows little respect for women's autonomy, nevertheless in a small way it shows an internalization of responsibility for women's oppression. For a male to take seriously Wollstonecraft's argument that female weakness is caused by male sensuality would mean more than simply supporting education for women, because Wollstonecraft attributes the corruption of female character not merely to the system in which men are dominant but to the personal characteristics of men themselves; to take her argument seriously, a male would have to come to terms somehow with the part of male identity which is implicated in that corruption.

One would expect, then, that in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, a work which explores the limits of change in female identity, Blake would betray some anxiety about male identity as well. In fact, patterns of male sexual identity in the poem are as limited as patterns of female sexual identity: the only models are Bromion, the sensualist and imperialist, and Theotormon, the solipsist and religious hypocrite.¹⁵ Both are corrupt; both are oppressors. If we consider these options as responses to Wollstonecraft, we can see what a quandary Blake was in. According to the narrator of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the moment when "the whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite, and holy whereas it now appears finite & corrupt" will "come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment" (MHH 14). Sensual pleasure, then, and especially sexual pleasure, is for Blake politically crucial. But Wollstonecraft had argued that the underlying cause of female oppression was male sensualism; and while he could and did fault Wollstonecraft for her alliance with conventional morality, Blake could not avoid her challenge to his political program, and her challenge to male sexual desire.

¹⁵ Ostriker also notes the limitations of male sexual identity in the poem: Bromion "represents the social and psychological pathology of sexual violence" while "Theotormon represents its pitiable underside, sexual impotence" ("Desire" 157). In the Introduction to *Visions in The Early Illuminated Books*, these two patterns of sexual identity are traced, as I have traced them here, to the "mistake" identified by Blake in his annotations of Lavater of "suppos[ing] Womans love is sin" (232).

To put this in other terms: just as Blake could see no sexual alternative for women, in contemporary conditions, to the delusive coquetry of Leutha's vale, so too he could see no sexual alternative for men, in contemporary conditions, to the rape-mentality of Bromion. To restrain male desire, as Wollstonecraft proposes, is merely to be Theotormon, an oppressor at one higher level of abstraction. This is why "none but Bromion can hear [Oothoon's] lamentations" (VDA 3:1); Bromion's perceptions are limited, but Theotormon, by repressing sexuality, has closed off perception entirely.¹⁶

The limitations of male sexual identity explain the contradiction between the compromised position Oothoon speaks from and her astute political critique, and brings us to Blake's second strategy of responding to feminism: utopianizing, a form of projection. Blake's assessment of male character was similar to Wollstonecraft's, in that he too attributed what he took to be the limitations of female character to the limitations of male character. When he tried to imagine a male character which could break free from the oppressive roles which men are raised to play, he found that the political strategies he had employed in earlier works were already claimed by the enemy. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake tries to break free from the oppressive abstractions of "Good," defined as "the passive that obeys reason," by countering them with "Evil," defined as the "active springing from Energy" (MHH 3). In short, he counters Heaven with Hell, one supernatural force with another. The supernatural aspect is important, because it allows a perspective from which to speak; Blake can attribute his critique of contemporary patterns of thought to the Devil, or whoever speaks the "Proverbs of Hell." This strategy ensures Blake a position from which successful critique is possible; attributing his critique to a supernatural source allows him to bypass the problem of imagining a human character immune to the corruptions of society, while emphasizing the partiality of that critique (Heaven must be countered with Hell and vice versa) postpones the impossible project of putting that critique into practice. Thus he can, for instance, advocate acting on sexual desires—"Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (MHH 10), without having to imagine too specifically what form "an improvement in sensual enjoyment" might take in mere humans.

When, in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake does try to apply his political agenda of sexual release to men and women, these strategies are no longer available. At the level of Heaven and Hell—i.e., at a high level of abstraction—it is possible to consider sexuality as an abstract force,

¹⁶ It is for this reason, I believe, that *America a Prophecy* begins with a rape, and that the "nameless shadowy female" he rapes is revealed in *Europe a Prophecy* to be the daughter of Enitharmon. Blake requires new patterns for both male and female sexuality, but these patterns must arise from conditions as they are; any child born of Orc, the revolutionary spirit, must be born of the male rapist (Orc) and the female coquette (of the lineage of Enitharmon).

as Energy with a capital E. At a more human level, however, sexuality has already been coded by gender and corrupted by social conditioning. Male sexuality is torn by contraries, what we might call the sexuality of the church and the sexuality of the brothel: the sexuality of the solipsist and passive oppressor Theotormon or the sexuality of the rapist and active oppressor Bromion. For an effective critique, then, Blake needed a third party upon whom he might project his political vision. He found that third party in Oothoon, who as a woman was not subject to the contradictions of male sexuality.

Projecting upon Oothoon a political vision may at first appear absurd, since, as discussed above, female sexuality too is subject to contraries of church and brothel, of the "modest virgin" or "Leutha's vale." But men and women hold unequal positions within Blake's ideological economy, making it absolutely necessary—if hopeless—to at least attempt to reimagine female character. Because, according to Blake, "the female life lives from the light of the male," women hold ideological value; men project ideological value. The two Lavater annotations show this inequality clearly. Lavater's mistake of making "the vicious propensity . . . the leading feature of the man," a mistake which, because it denies individual character, underlies a host of inequalities, originates in the supposition that "Womans love is Sin"; that is, Lavater has projected onto women a negative value. This is a "mistake" for Blake only because it leads to other mistakes, i.e., false conceptions of virtue and vice; whether this value accords with women's actual character hardly seems to matter. In fact Lavater's assessment of women may even be true: because women "live from the light of the male," they hold the value that men place upon them. Hence the future tense in "let the men do their duty & the women will be such wonders"—clearly women are not such wonders now, and will not be until men make them so. The verbs themselves are telling: men do; women are.

What men do, besides rape, colonize, abstract and weep, is project: Bromion brands Oothoon as "Bromions harlot," while Theotormon "severely smiles" and Oothoon's "soul reflects the smile" (VDA 2:18). Until the men cease to project upon Oothoon the particular image they do project upon her, they will continue to be trapped by the limitations of their perceptions, limitations the poem takes care to describe. Bromion can see nothing but the wars, poverty, and riches that he himself has brought into being, while Theotormon can see nothing but his own thoughts: "Tell me what is a thought? & of what substance is it made?" (VDA 3:23). What must change in this economy of projection, limited perception, and oppression is the ideological value of women; Oothoon must become something different from what she has been made out—or simply made—to be.

Blake, writing self-consciously from within the ideological boundaries of his time, tries to show as much of this

transformation as possible, which explains many of the contradictions in the poem. He shows the limited perceptions of men, and the corresponding limitations in women, who "live their life from the light of the male." He shows the transformation in Oothoon, not so much in her repeated assertions of purity, which are undercut by her relationship with hopelessly corrupt Theotormon ("How can I be defiled," she asks him, "when I reflect thy image pure?"), but in her acquisition of a voice which tells more than either Bromion or Theotormon knows, and a vision which sees more than they can see. And finally, he shows the consequences of such a transformation, in the content of her vision: however compromised Oothoon is by her love of Theotormon, she has at least ceased to assume that "Womans love is Sin," and can therefore see that all manner of living creatures are different, and that "every thing that lives is holy." What Blake does not attempt to show, what I think he simply could not imagine and realized he could not imagine, is the nature of gender uncorrupted by false assumptions about gender. However bold Oothoon's vision is, it still includes Leuthan nets and traps, and neither Theotormon nor Bromion changes at all. The poem ends, therefore, with the promise of political renewal frustrated and Oothoon's protest unheard: "Thus every morning wails Oothoon. but Theotormon sits/ Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire" (VDA 8:11-12).

In describing Blake's strategies for dealing with feminism, I have used terms familiar in political arguments: appropriation and projection. Customarily, both terms are used negatively, the first signifying a strategy by which a dominant class nullifies a potential political threat, the second signifying a strategy by which a dominant class can speak for an oppressed other and avoid listening to what the other might have to say. Both of these negative meanings are applicable to Blake's strategies, which is why I retain these terms. Nevertheless I believe that in practice these strategies have ambivalent political values. Just as women cannot hold as subjects the place that male ideology has defined for them as objects, so too men cannot hold as subjects the place that feminism has defined for them as objects. But both men and women do respond as subjects to discourse in which they are defined as objects, and thus take up that discourse with a difference. For women this has meant, among other things, that throughout the works of women who were on the surface far from rebellious—Christina Rossetti or Emily Dickinson, for instance—one can trace substantial undercurrents of rebellion. For men responding to feminism, I think this has meant and will continue to mean that assimilation of feminism is always in part appropriation of feminism. To put this at the crudest—and perhaps the least useful—level, let me ask, was Blake feminist? In my opinion, if by feminism we mean any twentieth-century feminism that I know of, then the answer must be a resounding no. If by feminism we mean

the feminism of Wollstonecraft, then the answer is much less clear; he was true to many of the fundamental principles of Wollstonecraft's feminism, but, because he prejudged the ultimate nature of gender, he was already moving in a direction directly counter to the spirit of Wollstonecraft's feminism, even in *Visions*, the work of his most sympathetic to feminism. In some ways, the most admirable thing Blake did was the most questionable: he gave Oothoon a voice, which meant that he dared to dream of female autonomy, and at the same time denied that autonomy by trying to project his own voice onto the woman whose autonomy he imagined.

For men sympathetic to feminism now—and they are my main concern here, since it is hardly my place to speak for feminism, or try to define its direction—I believe that it is impossible to avoid appropriation of feminism, or projection onto it, and probably impossible to avoid responses which are inimical to feminism. We believe what we believe, and concealment, rooted in defensiveness, can only make matters worse. But we can at least try to see clearly how we are responding to feminism, and why. Nearly two hundred years have passed since Blake wrote *Visions*, and the manner of his appropriation and projection look uncomfortably familiar; and he was neither the first nor the last male whose response to feminism might teach us about our own. "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows," runs the motto of *Visions*, an appropriate motto for a poem which tries to see beyond the limits of the self. Male critics who wish to be useful to feminism, and who wish to avoid the charge or the act of trying to conquer feminism as a new terrain, might start by examining how men have responded historically to feminism—might try, that is, to see how our eyes have seen, in hopes of seeing a little more.

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Not from Troy, But Jerusalem: Blake's Canon Revision

BY R. PAUL YODER

In chapter 2 of Blake's *Jerusalem* Los undertakes an investigative quest that I have come to see as emblematic of Blake's own quest in relation to England:

Fearing that Albion should turn his back against the Divine Vision

Los took the globe of fire to search the interiors of Albions Bosom, in all the terrors of friendship, entering the caves Of despair & death, to search the tempter out, walking among

Albions rocks & precipices! Caves of solitude & dark despair,

And saw every Minute Particular of Albion degraded & murdered

But saw not by whom.

(*Jerusalem* 45: 2-8, E 194)

Los's search provides a good way to think about the Blake who emerges from a roughly chronological reading of the illuminated books. From the initial assertion by the "Voice of one Crying in the Wilderness" that "All Religions are One" to *The Ghost of Abel*, addressed to Byron in the Wilderness, Blake sets forth principles ("All Religions are One" "There is No Natural Religion"), identifies social and moral problems (*Songs*), provides admonitory exempla (*Thel*, *Visions*), satirizes his adversary (*Marriage*), mythologizes history (*America*, *Europe*), and then begins a series of books (the "minor" prophecies) that seeks to get at the genesis of the wilderness of England. By the time he etched *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, Blake had discovered what he took to be the source of England's problems; he had discovered the error that had led to Albion's continuing fall and fragmentation: the acceptance of the classical epic tradition, as embodied in the myth of Trojan Brutus as the founder of the British nation. In order to correct England's error, Blake recognized that, like Milton, he had to write an English myth of origin.

Milton, of course, set the stage for such a rewriting of English mythic history, and not only in *Paradise Lost*. In *Paradise Regained* the Savior himself authorizes a dismantling of the classical tradition, saying,

Who therefore seeks in these
True wisdom, finds her not, or by delusion
Far worse, her false resemblance only meets,
An empty cloud.

(*Paradise Regained* 4.318-21)

More important to my discussion is Milton's recognition of this falsity at the outset of his *History of Britain*.