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*Brno studies in English*. 2004, vol. 30, iss. 1, pp. [159]-177

ISBN 80-210-3631-1

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104313>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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MARTINA NOSKOVÁ

**THE ETERNAL FEMALE  
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE GENDERED READINGS  
OF WILLIAM BLAKE'S THEL AND OOTHOON.**

The mode in which William Blake depicted women, their social position and gender relations, has provoked many discussions over his supposed feminist or misogynist inclination.<sup>1</sup> Important arguments may be revealed by closer look at two of his earliest prophetic writings, *The Book of Thel* (1789) and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). In numerous books of British literary history or anthologies of poetry, the reader will find that *The Book of Thel* is about a girl's struggle with uncertainties that accompany her process of maturing, while *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* broadens the topic in the sense of protest against maltreatment of women and sexual slavery (Mánek 132). This seemingly simple message may carry very different meanings. Comprehension of these two early literary works by William Blake and the stories of their heroines, Thel<sup>2</sup> and Oothoon, is vital for understanding his later texts. Blake employed many more female characters throughout his work. Yet, Thel and Oothoon, as the earliest elaborated female figures of his prophetic writings, reveal important moments in the development of Blake's attitude towards the role of women and their sexuality. This article tries to indicate the turning point in these two early works and to liberate William Blake from simplified feminist/misogynist labels.

\* \* \*

*The Book of Thel* is usually taken to be the most lucid of Blake's prophecies. Yet, it stirs the interest of recent feminist Blakists who point to the fact that this poem, which is so centred upon a woman and her experience, has so far been treated in a stupendously patriarchal manner. Even nowadays, most enlightened authors who write on Blake's portrayal of women usually start with Oothoon of *Visions* and proceed to the Emanations – Enitharmon, Enion, Vala and Ahanian of *Vala, or The Four Zoas* (1797), and to the complicated concept of Female Will. Thel has until recently been given only marginal treatment.

Towards the end of the 1950s, attitudes that might be called “moralistic” emerged. These “Thel hunters” (Gleckner, Ferber, Behrend) assumed that “in Blake's eyes Thel is obviously a sinner” and “a bitter old maid... wallow(ing) in

self-pity and cynicism” (Bruder 40). Helen Bruder argues that these moralist attitudes are reminiscent of conduct books of Blake’s time that ordered women to pursue “the virtues of self-denying modesty and altruistic submissiveness” (41), and, what is more of relevance to the treatment of *Thel*, these guidelines restricted or virtually denied women the right for free thought.

Works that do not portray *Thel* as an unreasonably revolutionary young woman mostly tend to be gender-blind, interpreting *Thel* as a genderless character representing everyone’s universal dilemmas.<sup>3</sup> An example of this might be *Thel* seen as an innocent, unborn human soul, grieved by the transience of life, confronted by experience of its difficulties and fleeing back to the spiritual world, refusing to give herself as infant, bride, mother or corpse (Davis 45).

Yet there seem to be glimmers of hope on the horizon of modern Blakean studies; a refreshing doctoral thesis by Dee Drake brings a list of works that offer various new orientations in evaluating *Thel*’s achievement (112).

The key events of the story reveal *Thel* as a woman who refuses to follow the path ascribed to her. Her way begins as she separates from the majority of common women: “The daughters of Mne Seraphim led round their sunny flocks, / All but the youngest: she in paleness sought the secret air, / To fade like morning beauty from her mortal day.” (*Thel* I: 1–3).<sup>4</sup> A logical question emerges, what the realm of the Seraphim is and why *Thel* chooses to leave it (Bruder 44). The most appropriate reason for *Thel*’s discontent is the cloudy rather than the sunny image of the lot of the daughters of Seraphim. The ideas of Gleckner and Ferber that the place is a kingdom of innocent souls circling in joy round God are erroneous: why would *Thel* wish to leave such happiness? A more probable setting for these women leading round their flocks is suggested by Mary Hays who described eighteenth-century women as “enclosed in a kind of *magic circle*, out of which they cannot move, but to contempt or destruction” (my emphasis).<sup>5</sup> *Thel* rather wants “to fade... from her mortal day”. Bruder assumes that what follows are *Thel*’s laments: she does not know what to do once she reaches the “secret air” (45). Though the initial sigh “O life of this our spring! why fades the lotus of the water? / Why fade these children of the spring, born but to smile & fall?” (I: 6–7) might signal *Thel*’s worries over mortality, the following flow of self-representations leads to different conclusions:

‘Ah! *Thel* is like a wat’ry bow, and like a parting cloud,  
Like a reflection in a glass, like shadows in the water,  
Like dreams of infants, like a smile upon an infant’s face,  
Like the dove’s voice, like *transient* day, like music in the air.’

(I: 8–11; my emphasis)

Bruder’s notion of opening the new existence by parodying traditional concepts of female beauty is a little awkward. The key word here is “transient”. All the likenesses are transitory, “evanescent” (Drake 113). *Thel*’s liminal quality is closer to Drake’s alchemy-inspired view. Dee Drake builds upon Hillman’s psychological analysis of the alchemical albedo stage.<sup>6</sup> The albedo is “a stage be-

tween the *nigredo* and the *rubedo*, between despair and passion, emptiness and fullness, abandonment and kingdom" (Drake 112). Hillman explores the process of "whitening" which leads to understanding the intermingling of reality and psyche. The "whitening" proceeds from primary white to secondary white:

While "primary white is pre-black," the second whiteness has endured the *nigredo* and "emerge[d] from that black [...]. These two whites correspond to two basically different manifestations of virginity: the first is the pristine naiveté of the virgin without knowledge of or grounding in the world and its ways; the second is the silvered wisdom of the virgin who having dwelt in "lunar darkness or blackened silver" has recovered a middle or intermediary ground known alchemically as the *terra alba*. (Drake 115)<sup>7</sup>

Through the "whitening" dialogues with the Lilly, the Cloud and the Clod Thel gains insight and enters the stage of "second virginity". These dialogical meetings seem to represent several perspectives from which the problem of woman's role is seen. They are not Thel's self-projections.<sup>8</sup> Yet, *after* she undergoes her transformation, she is able to view reality through the eyes of various individual (and general) beings.

When Thel speaks about her transitory forms, the Lilly hears her and reacts:  
 [...] 'I am a wat'ry weed,  
 And I am very *small*, and love to dwell in *lowly* vales;  
 So *weak* [...]  
 Yet I am visited from heaven, and he that smiles on all  
 [...] each morn over me spreads his hand,  
 Saying: "Rejoice, thou *humble* grass [...]  
 Thou *gentle* maid of silent valleys and of *modest* brooks;  
 For thou shalt be clothed in light [...]  
 Till summer's heat melt thee beside the fountains and the springs  
 To flourish in eternal vales:" then why should Thel complain?  
 (I: 16–25; 271; emphasis)

The Lilly represents those qualities that Blake's contemporary society demands of women: weakness, humbleness, and modesty. When gently staying in lowly places, the Lilly/woman will come to flourishing eternal vales. But Thel sees Lilly's lot as a masochistic sacrifice rather than happiness:

Thel answer'd: [...]  
 'Thy breath doth nourish the innocent lamb [...]  
 He crops thy flowers while thou sittest smiling in his face,  
 Wiping his mild and meekin mouth from all contagious taints.  
 [...] thy perfume,

which thou dost scatter on every little blade of grass that springs,  
revives the milked cow & tames the fire-breathing steed.’

(I: 28–35)

Thel at first thinks that she might be of similar nature to the Cloud: “Thel is like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun” (I: 36). But when she actually sees the Cloud and hears his speech, she realizes that he, as the only adult male she meets, belongs to a different place:

The Cloud then shew’d his golden head & his bright form emerg’d  
[...]

‘O virgin, knowst thou not our steeds drink of the golden springs  
Where Luvah<sup>9</sup> doth renew his horses? look’st thou on my youth,  
And fearest thou because I vanish and am seen more?

[...] O maid, I tell thee, when I pass away,

It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace and raptures holy.

Unseen descending weigh my light wings upon balmy flowers,

And court the fair eyed dew to take me to her shining tent.

The weeping virgin trembling kneels before the risen sun,

Till we arise link’d in a golden band and never part,

But walk united, bearing food to all our tender flowers.’

(II: 5–16)

**Illustration 1** Thel, the Cloud, and the Worm.



There are no traces of humbleness in the Cloud's behaviour; neither does he reside in low places (he descends to Thel, at I: 42; and later reclines his airy throne, at II: 24). His prospects of an eternal life "of happy copulation" (Bruder 48) are much more colourful than those of the Lilly. The depiction of his aggressive male sexuality ("virgin trembling kneels" II: 14) resulting in making his lover pregnant does not attract Thel: "I fear I am not like thee, / For I [...] smell the sweetest flowers. / But I feed not the little flowers" (II: 17–19). Motherhood in the patriarchal society means self-sacrifice. In such conditions, being mother is the same as dying and becoming the food of worms, though she knows that "all shall say: 'without a use this shining woman liv'd'" (II: 22). The Cloud patronizingly preaches about the greatest woman's blessing of being useful: "Then if thou art the food of worms, O virgin of the skies, / How great thy use, how great thy blessing! every thing that lives / Lives not alone nor for itself [...]" (II: 25–27). Calling the Worm to be the next counsellor for Thel, the Cloud leaves to find a partner for his eternal joys (II: 27–30).

The character of the Worm (Illustration 1) is interesting for its double-nature. It represents an infant and is a phallic symbol at the same time. As such it should be the most convincing persuader attacking the (supposedly) essential female sore points: maternal instincts and the ambivalent libido; and it approaches Thel nonverbally. Moreover, it sits upon the Lilly's leaf, evoking thus a kind of a heterosexual encounter.

As for the phallic connotation of the Worm, I do not fully agree with Bruder's sharp conviction about Thel's "smirky" contempt for the penis (50). Thel might, on the other hand, be astonished at its "unimpressiveness" (Bruder 50): "'Art thou a Worm, image of weakness, art thou but a Worm?'" (III: 2). Yet I do not think that her whitening/wisening process would proceed through scorn for other beings. Thel's astonishment probably was probably meant to show that women, as well as men, also have the right to speak about and challenge their counterparts. It is an artless virginal curiosity. But in Thel's inquisitive look "'Art thou a Worm, image of weakness [...] I see thee lay helpless & naked [...]" (III: 2, 5), there is another hint.

Thel watches closely all her companions but watching the phallic worm is an important moment. Since women in the eighteenth century were usually not allowed to see naked male bodies, Thel's behaviour is an important message of possible reform, though it later fades in *Visions*. Her clear awareness of the phallic aspect of the Worm's nature is a vital element of the story, which nevertheless remains hidden to the Worm's motherly nurse, the Clod of Clay, seeing only an infant.

When seeing the worm as a baby, Thel feels compassion for its naked helplessness but she refuses to behave motherly: "'[...] I see thee lay helpless & naked, weeping, / And none to answer, none to cherish thee with mother's smile'" (III: 5–6). When Thel does not actively react to the Worm's voice, the Clod hurries to serve it: "The Clod of Clay [...] rais'd her pitying head; / She bow'd over the weeping infant, and her life exhal'd / In milky fondness [...]" (III: 7–9). The Clod literally denies herself for the Worm, as she says to Thel: "'[...] we live not

for ourselves. / Thou seest me the meanest thing, and so I am indeed / My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark” (III: 10–12). The Clod believes that only through sacrifice for others’ benefit the woman gains her identity and significance. The Clod also plainly declares her ignorance; doubts about her condition never crossing her mind, she takes for granted everything that was loaded upon her: ““But how this is [...] I know not, and I cannot know. / I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love.”” (III: 17–18; my emphasis). The Clod believes that she has no capacity for thought; everything must be pre-thought for her, and she just performs her role and duties. Yet her unlimited capacity for love deeply moves Thel. The ignorant yet somehow powerful Clod invites Thel to the final step of the passage to a new state of consciousness – the descent to the underworld.

This darkest part of the poem presents Thel as a very brave woman who for the sake of knowledge and wisdom walks past a “terrific porter”, enters the “eternal gates” and sees the “land unknown” (IV: 1–2):

She saw the couches of the dead, & where the fibrous roots  
Of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists,  
A land of sorrows & of tears where never smile was seen.  
She wander’d in the land of clouds thro’ valleys dark list’ning  
Dolours and lamentations; waiting oft beside a dewy grave  
She stood in silence, list’ning to the voices of the ground,  
Till to her own grave plot she came, & there she sat down [...]  
(IV: 3–9)

Thel’s gloomy passage strongly recalls descent myths of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria or Greece.<sup>10</sup> Most descent myths were performed in rituals of regeneration, or as rites of passage, of gaining a new life status. These rites usually consist of three stages. The first excludes the individual from the existing status in the social structure. The old existence is erased and the new one is being prepared. In the middle phase the person, deprived of all the signs of the previous existence, enters the dormant or *liminal* state between the past and future identities, defying all usual cultural categories. This phase is often likened to death or to a stay in the darkness of the womb and waiting for rebirth. Eligibility for the new role is frequently tested in severe tests. In the final phase, the person crosses the threshold and is reintegrated into society in the new social or religious role.<sup>11</sup>

Thel undergoes a similar transition. She endures the frightening journey through the underworld. This was the test she managed to pass. The “voice of sorrow” from the “hollow pit” (IV: 10) which she hears at the end of her underground passage is a kind of oracle’s summary of problems in ordinary human society. The insight Thel gets through this overview is the answer to her questions:

‘Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction,  
Or the glist’ning Eye to the poison of a smile?  
Why are Eyelids stor’d with arrows ready drawn,

Where a thousand fighting men in ambush lie;  
 Or an Eye of gifts & graces show'ring fruits & coined gold?  
 Why a Tongue impress'd with honey from every wind?  
 Why an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?  
 Why a Nostril wide inhaling terror, trembling & affright?  
 Why a tender curb upon the youthful, burning boy?  
 Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?

(IV: 11–20)

As Bruder says, the voice is speaking of what Thel's life will be like in a "world full of deceit and falsehood, where few persons or things appear in their true character" (52).<sup>12</sup> Drake's interpretation is more sexually-connotated, as he reads it as "[c]ataloging the defensive maneuverings used by the senses [...] to stifle any improvement of sexual enjoyment" (135), and in the two finite exclamations – "Why a tender curb upon the youthful, burning boy? / Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?" (IV: 19–20), Thel fully realizes the serpent/sexual nature of the Worm and thus gains her secondary virginal wisdom. With this realization, "The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek / Fled back unhinder'd till she came into the vales of Har" (IV: 21–22).

Thel's final action provokes very different readings. Some critics interpret her escape as proof of Thel's personal inadequacy and sexual immaturity. The opponents of this view claim that Thel violently condemns the existing sexual politics and flees to reanimate her laments that were momentarily calmed by the Clod (Bruder 53). Thel is even presented as a potential initiator of a protest movement, usually in light of the accompanying plate (Illustration 2) on which a young woman confidently rides the snake while a manly figure cares about a child. Yet Bruder points out the fact that *Thel*

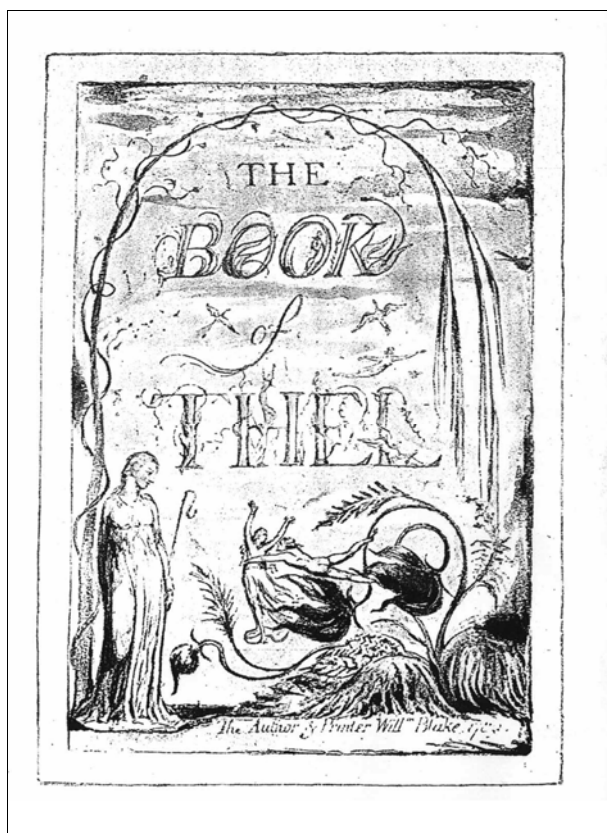
[...] offers no alternative to the conventional and stereotypical feminine roles [...] Thel [...] rejects heterosexual culture's romantic and maternal myths, but she is not able to construct any kind of workable alternative identity. The only possible escape route hinted at in the poem is the road of libidinal rebellion. (53–54)



**Illustration 2** Thel riding a serpent.

I do not see Thel's rebellion in purely libidinal terms but rather in more general ones, overcoming more than just sexual and gender oppression. A similar broader perspective of *Thel* is that of Marie-Louise von Franz. Interpreting Thel's shriek as a cry of satisfaction, Franz sees her mounting the serpent of sexuality together with her son and lover – these two being two aspects of one universal male, and representing thus a triple totality and unity, they all ride the alchemical Ouroboros – the Hermetic World Serpent that eats its tail, symbolizing the constant flux of life (Drake 136).<sup>13</sup> Drake applies this alchemical view to the idea that Thel's gained wisdom overcomes the opposition between the living and the dead as she "personifies the crowd of emotions milling in her heart. She melts away apparent surfaces with the corrosives of her enlarged senses" (136).

I incline to this way of reading Thel; in my view she refuses the inscribed woman's role and overcomes its restrictions by her own widened vision. With her quest completed, the meaning of the title illustration (Illustration 3) doubles: when seeing it at the beginning of the story, we see Thel looking at the little creatures in the same way that she looks at her companions during her journey; their experience and feelings are only mediated. When gaining her wisdom, she looks through their eyes, being both the young passionate boy and the reluctant girl, and also the flowers with all meanings they may carry. Her staff may be the supporting staff of a pilgrim on a hard journey, but also the shepherd's staff of the sage who shows the way to those searching for the answers.

**Illustration 3** The title plate.

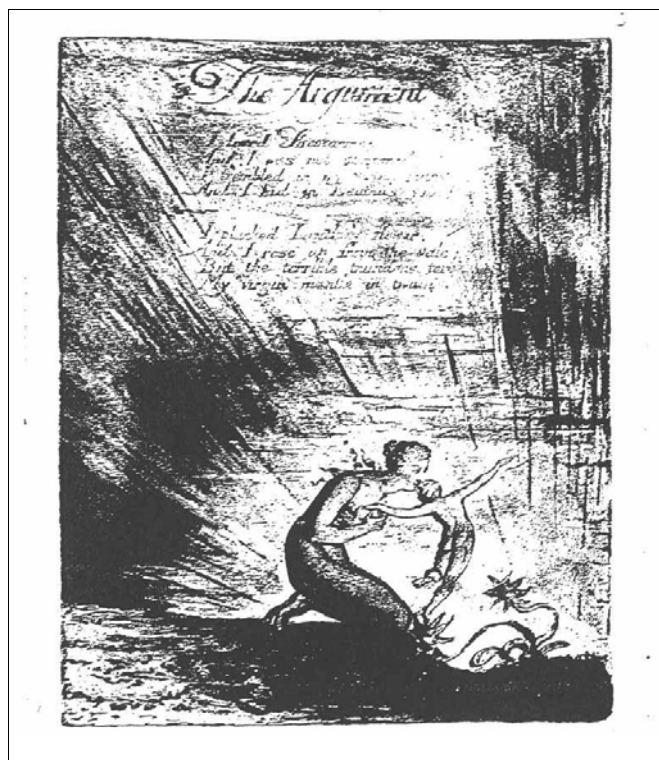
\* \* \*

Oothoon of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* seems to have been considered more noteworthy by commentators than Thel. She carries the kind of elaborate and complicated message a Blakean figure is known and expected to. Yet the scholars examining the causes and results of Oothoon's situation have found flaws in this female figure.

The critics usually do not question Oothoon's dismal state got into. The issue in dispute is whether Oothoon's prophecy was carried on or whether it failed, and whether Oothoon's alleged prophetic failure is caused by the situation or Oothoon herself (Linkin 184).<sup>14</sup> Let us briefly summarize the plot of the poem. Oothoon plucks a flower in a vale and runs to her lover Theotormon. On her way she is raped by Bromion and consequently rejected by Theotormon who chains her and her rapist together. The major part of the poem is Oothoon's lamentation and debate over her situation and Theotormon's attitude. Now, as with Thel, I will proceed chronologically according to the course of the story.

Oothoon wanders through the valley, looking for some flowers to comfort her sorrow. Conversing with the Marygold provides solace and a resolve. This is the starting point of Oothoon's fate. Oothoon picks the Marygold and sets out for the journey to Theotormon. This joyful decision is preceded by Oothoon's uncertainties about the appropriateness of her desire: "Are thou a flower? Are thou a nymph? I see thee now a flower, / now a nymph! I dare not pluck thee from thy dewy bed!" (1: 6–7). The Marygold seems to represent the sexual desire that Oothoon feels and is unsure of being allowed to feel and gratify. The flower/Oothoon's desire encourages her to follow her urge and Oothoon then sets out for the journey to her lover. Bruder disagrees with the interpretation that "she is about to offer her virgin flower to her lover." While stressing the fact that Oothoon sought "flowers to comfort *her*" (1: 4; Bruder's emphasis), Bruder is persuaded that by plucking the flower Oothoon literally deflowers herself, advocating thus her right to sexual pleasures of masturbation. In Bruder's words, "this is the 'soul of sweet delight' that 'Can never pass away' (1: 9–10), although it can – as she soon discovers – be defiled" (75). Bruder continues with the analysis of the word "nymph": its late eighteenth-century connotations stood either for a "much reviled clitoris" or a prostitute. Bruder supposes that by using this image Blake expressed his "validation of a woman's right to pleasure herself" but also the following consequences this self-love brought to a woman in his own times (75–78).

Oothoon's double vision of the Marygold (a flower and a nymph) is crucial for many critics as evidence to support their conclusions about the meaning of the poem. Bruder's rather provocative reading of this flower/nymph ambiguity shows Oothoon, at least at this point, as a strong individual aware of her own priorities although she almost certainly expected the social consequences. The concern of how her self-gratifying gesture will be received is in Bruder's view expressed in Oothoon's "virgin fears" (*Arg*: 3) of the Argument of the poem. Harriet Linkin supports her double reading by Blake's accompanying plate on which a woman (Oothoon) gives a fleeting touch to a child figure emerging from a flower (Illustration 4).

**Illustration 4** Oothoon plucking the flower.

Oothoon thus sees the Marygold as a flower and as a nymph but “also demonstrates her prophetic response in kissing ‘the joy as it flies’”, which reveals the final resulting double vision and two possible readings of the poem’s ending (Linkin 192). But this is jumping ahead. Brenda Webster comments on this plate by stressing the image of a woman “lifting full breasts and kissing a small male figure leaping from a flower”, seeing in it “both the maternal nature and the special nonpossessive quality of Oothoon’s love, which combines generosity and lack of restraint” (213).

Oothoon’s spontaneous journey to Theotormon is interrupted by Bromion’s violent intervention. Bruder rightly sees the rape as “a punishment for Oothoon’s usurpation of male sexual prerogatives” (77). Bromion’s exclamation “ [...] ‘behold this harlot here on Bromion’s bed’ (*VDA* 1: 18) points to the notion widely accepted in Blake’s times that women themselves are the initiators of rapes.<sup>15</sup> This is further supported by the idea that women are somehow masochistic: “They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge; / Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent.” (1: 22–23). Bruder refers to the plate where “the flowery bright Marygold of Leutha’s vale visually transmutes into the whipheads of Theotormon’s cat-o’-nine-tails” (76). Thus we see that not only the rapist Bromion defiles Oothoon’s pure joy, but also, and maybe in a worse manner, her lover Theotormon.

Bromion “passes” the humiliated Oothoon to Theotormon as a “harlot”. The only reaction Theotormon is capable of is jealousy. Not only does he see Oothoon as guilty of the rape but also of her sexual desire. He makes her share imprisoning bondage with her rapist, not reacting to her desperate calling. What comes with these events is the first major interpretative problem of the poem: how in fact does Oothoon respond to the rape?

A disturbing moment of the work is the absence of Oothoon’s explicit lamenting of the intercourse itself. The reader supposes and almost wishes to find Oothoon shattered by the violent physical act. And so does Theotormon. Nowhere in the poem does she mention her pitiful bodily state or pain resulting directly from the rape. She undoubtedly *is* devastated but rather by Theotormon’s reaction and attitude towards her. Her real suffering is Theotormon’s paralysis. Blake’s intention is criticism of the social lookout of abused women of his time rather than concentrating on the act of rape itself. Oothoon’s wailing reflects the impact of the situation and her “self-betrayal” – to use Bruder’s term. Let us now have a closer look at the participating trinity.

Bromion’s action might have stemmed from his (generally held) abnegation of female masturbation as well as of female sexual activity, since it is Oothoon who approaches Theotormon, not vice versa. It might have been mere lust, or a mischievous attempt to be the first conqueror and to devalue totally the already defective (because sexually active) “goods” for Theotormon. Theotormon then fulfils his role of a man horrified by the “adultery” of his lover, undistinguishing between a deliberate affair and rape. Oothoon remains the guilty one to both men, and gradually even to herself. So far it appears to be a story rather common in past centuries. Webster sheds a different light upon the matter. She comes up with a Freudian reading of the trinity. Oothoon, Bromion and Theotormon represent to Webster a circle of mother, father and son. In her view, the copulation of Oothoon and Bromion looks like a sadistic and unfaithful act *to their son Theotormon*. The plate mentioned above (Illustration 4) depicts the untroubled times of a mother-son relationship undisturbed by any uninvited rival. Sexual intercourse seen through the eyes of the son seems like the father’s violent act against the mother. The main feeling of betrayal comes when the son sees the mother aroused by the intercourse. This is proof of the mother’s disloyalty and unfaithfulness to the son. I agree that this may be a good explanation of the Oothoon’s not-regretting-the-rape ambiguity throughout the poem, since in fact it is just marital lovemaking.<sup>16</sup> To support her theory Webster refers to the plot of *Vala, or the Four Zoas*. There we read of Los, the father, who is so jealous of his son Orc’s closeness to his mother, Enitharmon, that he chains the boy to a rock.

From the moment of Theotormon’s jealous reaction, Oothoon seems to “slip and slide away” (Bruder’s term) from her original free thought, and finally to submit to social pressure. As Bruder puts it, “she entirely loses her sexual vision as a result of Bromion’s rape, and consequently capitulates to the value system of her oppressors” (78). Her language now seems to be full of contradictions. Oothoon, in her endeavour to move Theotormon, is willing to plead guilty, to admit that

her body has been fouled. In the act of calling the Eagles to rend her flesh she makes a terrible offering and becomes the object of Theotormon's sadistic wish for vengeance, which is confirmed as he "severely smiles" (2: 41). Claire Colebrook states that in Oothoon's effort to reflect Theotormon's image, Blake points to the hypocritical doctrine of the woman being a reflection of masculine glory: "[w]hen woman serves merely as an external reflection of male selfhood, solipsism as well as alienation occurs" (8). Oothoon again speaks self-accusatorily, as she perceives herself as an imperfect reflection of Theotormon:

'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! '  
The Eagles at her call descend & rend their bleeding prey.  
Theotormon severely smiles: her soul reflects the smile,  
As the clear spring, mudded with feet of beasts, grows pure & smiles.  
(2: 37–42)

Oothoon's consequent declamation "How can I be defil'd when I reflect thy image pure?" (3: 77; 34) may either be an ironic note on the illogicality of Theotormon's moping, or rather a careworn sigh over the vanity of her explanation. Oothoon aims her speech solely at Theotormon, though "none but Bromion can hear [her] lamentation" (3: 62; 33). Despite this fact she does not confront Bromion with her feelings about the assault, and continues in her desperate defence, admitting Theotormon's right to feel upset but denying the importance of the deed:

'[...] the nightingale has done lamenting;  
The lark does rustle in the ripe corn, and the Eagle returns  
From nightly prey, and lifts his golden beak to the pure east,  
Shaking the dust from his immortal pinions to awake  
The sun that sleeps too long. Arise, my Theotormon! I am pure,  
Because the night is gone that clos'd me in its deadly black.'  
(2: 47–52)

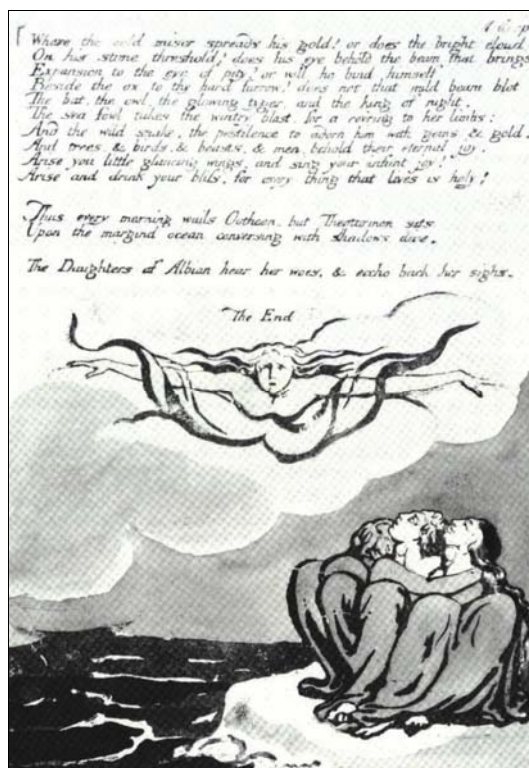
This development begs the question: Why does Oothoon still long for Theotormon's love? Apart from labelling it a sign of an ordinary romance, it is above all the key reason it is impossible for her to live out her original strong belief in her individual rights. It seems that Oothoon turns away from Thel's free and independent choice *not* to be consumed by the role assigned to women, and that she starts to side with the oppressor.

As Bruder aptly emphasizes, Oothoon is probably "trapped by the patriarchal binary opposition of virgin/whore" when defending her desires (81). Submitting to these categories and denying her own will she "unknowingly gives up her [...] relationship to the imaginary" (Moi 136).<sup>17</sup> Her vision of desire gets more and more corrupted, and her wish to win Theotormon's favour more and more unrestricted until it reaches the next crucial point of the poem:

‘[...] 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! [...]’  
 Oothoon shall view his dear delight; nor e’er with jealous cloud  
 Come in the heaven of generous love, nor selfish blightings bring.’  
 (7: 198–204)

Oothoon is reduced to the idea of supplying her Theotormon with fresh young odalisques, responding thus to his male dream but consenting to humiliate women. She intends to catch other women in the same trap that ensnared her. Though shortly before this moment she names and criticizes Urizen, the creator of men, for creating restrictive bonds to love (5: 114–117), in her activities of gathering women for sex against their will she becomes a urizenic procuress. Moreover, she intends to become a voyeur of their enslavement and abuse, whose “lamplike eyes” she rejected before (7: 197). Her humble surrender to the Male will is almost completed. The final hopeful outcry that “everything that lives is holy” (8: 215) is cut off by the bitter ending: “Thus every morning wails Oothoon; but Theotormon sits / Upon the margin’d ocean, conversing with shadows dire. / The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & echo back her sighs” (8: 216–218). The only thing that ordinary women could do about their sad position at that historical moment was to repeat the same *sighs*, not revolutionary roars, which Oothoon’s oratory appeared to be.

On the other hand, there are also more optimistic readings of the poem. Linkin’s theory of double vision and of two possible readings of the poem’s ending was already mentioned in the analysis of the Marygold flower/nymph swapping. In her words, “by framing the narrator’s despair with two positive instances in the text – Oothoon’s triumphant call for freedom and the illumination depicting her in flight – Blake enables alternate viewings of the conclusion” (192) (Illustration 5).

**Illustration 5** Oothoon in flight and the Daughters of Albion.

Linkin further develops Blake's opacities about the title of the poem: do *the daughters of Albion* see the visions, or does *the narrator* have visions of the daughters? Does the plurality of the visions refer to the three participants? Is the narrator also the illuminator or are these two separate visions equally subjective? (186) These questions may as well be answered that the reader/viewer is offered more ways of seeing Oothoon's experience, and that there is no single correct conclusion. It is precisely that both in Blake's text and illustrations "the eye sees more than the heart knows" (*VDA motto*).

### A Feminist or a Misogynist?

Alicia Ostriker sketches "four sets of Blakean attitudes towards sexual experience and gender relations," which she calls four Blakes:

First, the Blake who celebrates sexuality and attacks repression, whom we may associate with Freud [...]. Second, a corollary Blake whom we may associate with Jung, whose idea of the emanation – the feminine element within man – parallels Jung's concept of the



anima, and who depicts sexual life as a complex web of gender complementarities and interdependencies. Third, a Blake apparently inconsistent with Blake number one, who sees sexuality as a tender trap rather than a force of liberation. Fourth, [...] the Blake to whom it was necessary, as it was to his patriarchal precursor Milton, to see the female principle as subordinate to the male. (156)

To “the first Blake” Ostriker assigns among others *Visions, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.<sup>18</sup> This level is what my interest focuses on; the Blake number one who is characterized as “the vigorous, self-confident, exuberant advocate of gratified desire” (Ostriker 156).

I believe that *Thel* is a true example of such gratified desire; not only in its sexual aspect but in the widest sense of the word, with all the senses (not only the five limited organs of perception) wide open. It is a celebration of absorbing all existing experience, of overstepping the given limits, of freedom from positivist reasoning and moralistic expectations. This might seem to exceed my focus of a gendered reading of the two early prophecies but as gender is a category referring to both sexes, I believe that *Thel*, with her newly gained wisdom, can show the way to both men and women. After all, any gender reforms need a will of *both* men and women to have any prospects of success.

Bruder’s comment concerning the lack of suggested alternative women’s identities in *Thel* is only partly true. Blake *did* hint at ways out of the vicious circle of social oppression, but he was not able to bring it to a satisfactory and complete conclusion, as we saw in *Visions*. At this point my opinion diverges from Ostriker’s characterisation of the “first Blake” as the advocate of gratified desire. I think that it was at this very first stage that Blake began to deviate from the path set by the wise *Thel*.

Starting in *Visions*, Blake leads his heroines into a trap. It is hard to decide whether the trap is that of a rightful gender revolt not supported equally by both sexes and therefore failing, or whether it is a trap of the contemporary limits into which Blake himself got caught, together with the heroines. We saw Oothoon revolting and failing. The immediate cause of her failure were men, unwilling to listen to her enlightened prophecy. The principal woman’s error was weakness. Oothoon, like most women of (not only) her time, was too weak to give up her most personal ties for higher law. The question is what was Blake’s position in this woman’s (self-)enslavement.

In the context of contemporary society and its values, Blake’s early work is revolutionary in many ways: treating mutual sexual intentions seriously, subversion of authorities, inviting women’s thought and speech, and promoting human liberation and free choice to gratify one’s desire. He recognized the social injustice committed on women. Yet he could not, easily at least, free himself from his times and from his personal urges. I assume that Blake, as a creature of his time, could not grant women their freedom, despite his severe critique of the system that enslaved them.

Anne Mellor states that Blake failed to develop an image of human perfection that would be completely genderless and that his androgynous creatures are rather useless without simultaneous linguistic transformations (154). But did he at all create the hermaphrodites to do justice to both genders or was there a personal sexual taste? The idea of Blake having wild fantasies is not overstated, especially with regard to his unrestrained imagination and nature. It is hard, if not impossible, to judge to what extent Blake practised what he preached in his prophecies, and it is not necessary to know. But many critics try to look at him *through* his work, and see what kind of an artist appears.

Camille Paglia has Blake as the British Sade (270). She discovers Blake's sadism in his imagery, which inflames the reader's/viewer's senses by sharpening them. By this the reader/viewer becomes "a devouring presence, a Blakean tiger" (273–274). Blake's visual art really is strongly corporeal, depicting even a fragile eighteenth-century woman as a muscular model. His pictures and poems are full of more or less explicit sexual hints that can often be described as tender and perverse at the same time, which may bring about agitating thrills. Yet Angela Carter points to the fact that Sade was chiefly a carnographer while Blake sees the body as soulful (Bruder 83). Ackroyd's rather clumsy volume speaks openly about Blake's "apparent misogyny" (16) but lacks any substantial analyses of the works and thus any meaningful foundation for the statement.

There are many who see Blake as a misogynist (Ackroyd, Mellor) and many who see him as a sexual liberator (Bruder). And there are also many who refuse to assign to their great hero Blake any thoughts or deeds that they find inappropriate. Scholars are too often influenced by their *philiae* in that sense which prevents them from pointing to the worse sides of their field of interest. But such blindness and pedestal-placing can be counter-productive. The usual habit of the critics who see Blake as an enlightened prophet of the equality of men and women is the tendency to dive after all the examples of such an attitude, while ignoring the constant darker undertone of ambiguities towards women. If one wants to see a feminist in Blake, s/he will see him as such, regardless of many proofs against this notion. The same is of course true of the opposite side. We must fight our expectations.

To use Brenda Webster's words, "like many feminist critics, I expected to find a man in favor of a truly liberated sexuality and equality" (223), but nonetheless I remained lingering on the junction of what I have found and what I wanted to find. Blake's insight into Urizenic values and personality doesn't necessarily mean that he himself was free of similar anxiety-caused distortions (Webster 207). His visionary art was an attempt to overcome his own uneasiness. While trying to explain how the contraries arose (Kazin 47), he became trapped in them. If Blake did not manage to defeat the origins of universal oppression, he certainly did his best to reveal them.

To decide whether Blake was a feminist or a misogynist is to view him two-dimensionally. But certainly the early period of his work was the most promising for feminist readers. A fighter in *Thel*, he comes to stagnation in *Visions*. Oothoon's willingness to be reunited with Theotormon is the main motive of the

story. Blake makes Oothoon the model of a compliant female with a stable identity that reflects the light of the male and agrees to stay in the polygamous society. We meet Oothoon once more in Blake's work – her palace is in the Beulah of *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804–1820). Its system of Emanations sets women to a static position. Those that are active are depicted as monsters. Thel who “dared to defy the system by refusing to accept a (subordinate) role [...] disappears from [Blake's] myth” (Drake 167–168). Since it is gradually more and more *male* desire that is to be satisfied, while female desire is neglected and active women are seen negatively, Blake's early work must be studied very carefully to prevent any quick feminist/misogynist judgements.

Blake's revolt has its changing point in *Visions*. Therefore I would not label him feminist at all, as the main body of his prophecies follows a different direction. And I would not label him misogynist either, not in the early period that I am concerned with. By that time he was engaged in the eternal battle between sex and good intentions; a rebel against his own inclination.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article is a part of a final year dissertation supervised by PhDr. Věra Pálenská, CSc.
- <sup>2</sup> Abbreviations throughout the text: *VDA* (or *Visions*) – *Visions of the Daughters of Albion; Arg – Argument* (of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*).
- <sup>3</sup> Bruder speaks of W. J. T. Mitchell, Steven Cox, James King and A. G. den Otter. 39–40, 197–198.
- <sup>4</sup> All quotations of *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* are from *William Blake's Prophetic Writings* in two volumes, ed. D. J. Sloss and J. P. R. Wallis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
- <sup>5</sup> Bruder cites relevant works by Gleckner and Ferber on p. 200. Mary Hays's *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of the Women* (1798) is also cited by Bruder, 45.
- <sup>6</sup> Drake uses James Hillman's study “Silver and the White Earth” that was published in two parts in *Spring* (1980): 21–48 and (1981): 21–66. 107–136 pass.
- <sup>7</sup> The quotation marks are used where Drake cites Hillman.
- <sup>8</sup> Bruder cites several critics who think that it is Thel herself who she questions; that the representatives are her own feelings. 202.
- <sup>9</sup> Luvah here represents a sun god. In later works ‘the Horses of Light’ belong to Urizen. An explanatory note in Blake (1926: 272).
- <sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis of Thel's descent as an imitation of ancient myths, see Drake 122–136.
- <sup>11</sup> For close studies of rites of the passage and liminality see e.g. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Cornell UP, 1969.
- <sup>12</sup> Bruder quotes Lady Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to Her Absent Daughters*, reprinted in *The Young Lady's Pocket Library, or Parental Monitor* (Dublin: Printed by Graisberry and Campbell, for John Archer, 1790), p. 64.
- <sup>13</sup> Drake paraphrases Marie-Louise von Franz's *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980), p. 174.
- <sup>14</sup> Linkin quotes Peterson's article as the first to place blame on Oothoon's incompetencies. Jane E. Peterson, “*The Visions of the Daughters of Albion: A Problem in Perception*”. *Philological Quarterly* 52 (1973). 252–64.
- <sup>15</sup> Bruder comments on rape as entertainment and consequent trials with the affected women. Extracts of these rape trials were reproduced for the amusement of readers in *The Bon Ton Magazine*. Bruder mentions the April/May issue of 1793 in her notes on p. 224. The enduring practice of blaming women for being raped is illustrated among others in Thomas Hardy's

- Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). I find an inspiring resemblance in the stories of Tess and Oothoon, regardless of the century of publishing.
- <sup>16</sup> Webster incorporates the theme of incest and Oedipal complex into the whole work of Blake, suggesting that he might have experienced such feelings towards his own parents (216).
- <sup>17</sup> Moi cites from Irigaray's *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), p. 165.
- <sup>18</sup> As many other critics, Ostriker completely leaves out *TheL*.

### Illustrations

- 1–3. *The Book of TheL*, 1789. Plate 4, the final plate and the title page (successively as they appear in the article). Handouts for British Romantics seminar, Masaryk University, 1998.
4. "Argument." *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1794. Plate iii. A handout for British Romantics seminar, Masaryk University, 1998.
5. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793. Plate 8. Reprinted from H. K. Linkin's "Revisioning Blake's Oothoon". 184. See Works Cited.

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