

The Experience of Female Embodiment in William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

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Abstract

In the following paper my aim is to investigate the representation of female experience of embodiment in William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* through the lens of corporeal feminism and Foucauldian power/knowledge theory. This theoretical vantage point results from the fact that although the theories of embodiment have received much attention from feminist scholars in the last decades and Blake's texts have frequently been the subject of feminist readings, the key theme of the female body as a site of power struggle is absent from the criticism of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. My article shows that in his poem Blake rejects Cartesian dualism of body and mind, pronounces it virtually impossible and psychologically detrimental, and that, in so doing, he addresses a number of important feminist concerns: the rights and position of women, gender (in)equality, the shaping of female subjectivity and its relation to bodily experience. Secondly, the present article demonstrates how, in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, text and design enter a mutual semantic relationship of contradiction rather than complementarity. Sometimes working through the technique of syncopation (displacement), but frequently clashing with the text they seemingly illustrate, Blake's designs run a parallel story to the one which is verbally expressed in the poem. My examination of this dynamic relationship facilitates and strengthens a feminist and a psychological reading of *Visions*.

Keywords: William Blake; *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; female embodiment; subjectivity; word and image

When, in the opening verses of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake's heroine Oothoon confesses: "I pluck'd Leutha's flower/And I rose up from the vale/But the terrible thunders tore/My virgin mantle in twain" (iii: 5-8 E45)¹ it immediately transpires that the underlying concern of the poem is a traumatic experience of female embodiment, the theme which has received much attention from feminist scholars in the

¹ All references to Blake's poems, unless otherwise indicated, are to *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1988). References are given by plate and verse number(s), followed by page in Erdman's edition (E).

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last decades. Kathy Davies, the author of *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, states that “[f]rom the sexualisation of the female body in advertising, to the mass rape of women in wartime, women’s bodies have been subjected to the processes of exploitation, inferiorization, exclusion, control and violence. The female body is symbolically deployed in discourses of power—discourses which justify social inequality and power hierarchies based on gender and other forms of bodily difference” (Davies 1997:10). According to Susan Bordo, Western philosophical thought has been permeated by the mind-body dualism, which divides human experience into a bodily and spiritual realm (Bordo 2003:2-5). As various feminist thinkers have shown, this dualism is gendered and hierarchical, that is, it encodes male/female binary, with woman being identified with the bodily, passive, sensual, emotional and thus more “natural” pole, while man is represented as a rational, spiritual, active and cultural being. It is also strongly evaluative: nature in relation to culture is usually seen as representing “a lower order of existence” (Ortner 1974:72). Such a mode of thinking has frequently led to violence: if the (female) body is considered the “lower” realm of existence, then it can easily be possessed, controlled, used, abused and subordinated to the (masculine) “higher” rational faculty. In the following paper my aim is to investigate the representation of the female experience of embodiment in William Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* through the lens of corporeal feminism and Foucauldian power/knowledge theory, in order to show how Blake rejects Cartesian dualism of body and mind; this, in Blake’s opinion, appears both virtually impossible and psychologically detrimental. This theoretical vantage point is prompted by the fact that despite the popularity of the theories of embodiment and irrespective of the interest which feminist critics have given to Blake’s poems in the last decades,² the key theme of

² As neatly shown by Dennis M. Welch, Blake scholarship relating to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* can roughly be grouped into distinct categories. These include historical and Marxist readings, rhetorical and figurative criticism, the psycho-sexual, the philosophical and the feminist interpretations (2010:105-106, note). The most representative recent feminist analyses and psychological readings are Harriet Kramer Linkin, “Revisioning Blake’s Oothoon,” *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 23.4 (1990): 184-94; Helen P. Bruder, “Blake and Gender Studies,” *Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies*, ed. Nicholas M. Williams (New York: Palgrave, 2006) 132-66 and a chapter in her book *William*

the female body as a site of power struggle is absent from the criticism of his important early poetic text, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. The present paper is an attempt to fill this gap.³ I hope to demonstrate that through his criticism of thinking that perceives the body as inferior in the gendered binary Blake not only rehabilitates the body as equally important as the mind, but also succeeds in delivering the psychologically viable and progressive message that the divorce between

Blake and the Daughters of Albion (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997), Dennis M. Welch, "Essence, Gender, Race: Visions of the Daughters of Albion," Nancy Moore Goslee, "'Soul' in Blake's Writing: Redeeming the Word," *Wordsworth Circle* 33.1 (2002): 18-23, Christopher Z. Hobson *Blake and Homosexuality*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2000. Also, Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly bring into focus Blake's treatment of sexuality in their co-edited series on Blake: *Queer Blake* (2010) and *Sexy Blake* (2013), while a book by Tristanne Connolly *William Blake and the Body* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2002) concentrates on many aspects of Blake's portrayal of the body, with gender as its most important concern, but does not discuss *Visions* in detail.

³ The text which comes closest to the discussion of female embodiment in *Visions* is David Welsch "Essence, Race, Gender: Visions of the Daughters of Albion." Welch recognizes Oothoon as "embodied identity" (121), but does not at length dwell on the actual—material—experience of embodiment, instead framing his discussion against Locke's concepts of essence and substance. Also, he suggests that the key to Oothoon's identity is the interaction between her body and her self: "Oothoon possesses both an enduring identity (a personal "essence"), inherent and manifest in her imaginative body and its significant valuations, and—consistent with her essence—a self oppressed by, yet capable of resisting and even developing in response to, such constraints as slavery, rape, cultural ideology and social judgment" (109). My reading, in turn, avoids polarisation of Oothoon into body and self, but concentrates instead on showing how her sense of identity is conditioned by her experience of embodiment. Another important discussion of the relation of soul to body in *Visions* is by Nancy Moore Goslee, who analyses Blake's stance on embodiment in the context of both Enlightenment materialism and Saint Paul's idea about the duality of terrestrial and celestial bodies, voiced in Corinthians I, 15:39-44, but her essay is synthetic in nature, and she gives *Visions* only a cursory examination ("Soul' in Blake's Writing: Redeeming the Word," *Wordsworth Circle* 33.1 (2002): 18-23). In turn, in her *Blake and the Body* Tristanne Connolly writes about embodiment mostly in relation to Blake's male characters, Urizen and Reuben.

the mind and the body can only create a virtually torn, unhappy subject. Moreover, in relation to the theme of *female* embodiment Blake's poem specifically addresses a number of important feminist concerns: the rights and position of women, gender (in)equality, the shaping of female subjectivity and its relation to bodily experience.

Secondly, it may be stated that the material form of the poem—illustrated colour plates with text and images—is itself an embodiment of Blake's vision. In my article I am interested in examining the relationship between the visual and the written, the interaction which in Blake's art is frequently riven with considerable tension. Thus, I intend to demonstrate how in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* text and design enter a mutual semantic relationship of contradiction rather than complementarity.⁴ Sometimes working through the technique of syncopation (displacement), but frequently clashing with the text they seemingly illustrate, Blake's designs run a parallel story to the one which is verbally expressed in the poem. My examination of this dynamic relationship facilitates and strengthens a feminist and psychological reading of *Visions*.

Visions of the Daughters of Albion is essentially a text about oppression, enslavement and impassioned pleas for women's liberation. The first word, "ENSLAVED," is printed by Blake in exceptionally large letters and sets the tone and subject for the whole poem. It refers to the titular daughters of Albion—Englishwomen—whom Blake imagines as bound in chains and lamenting their oppression. The narrative that forms the body of the poem—the plight of a young woman named Oothoon—is a vision the daughters of Albion are granted and with which they sympathise. *Visions* is also, or maybe primarily, a text about the body, as Oothoon's experience is deeply rooted in the way her own body is perceived, both by herself and by others.

Oothoon is often understood as a successor of the heroine from Blake's earlier text, *The Book of Thel*. A young adolescent on the verge of maturity, Thel does not accept the essentially submissive and servile role expected of her, and ends up refusing to enter the material world altogether. Thel's decision also implies her giving up on love and partnership (which she doubted was possible to achieve in the patriarchal

⁴ For the various types of the image-text relations see A. Kibédi Varga "Criteria for Describing Word-Image Relations", *Poetics Today* 10 (1989) 31-53.

society she was supposed to become a part of).⁵ Oothoon, however, is prepared to make the choice which Thel evaded, and as we meet her at the beginning of Blake's poem, she professes her readiness for the relationship with the man she loves, Theotormon: "I loved Theotormon/And I was not ashamed" (iii: 1 E 35). At this point in the text, she is in contact with her body: acknowledges its urges and desires, decides to act upon them. The terms Blake uses leave little doubt as to the fact that she proclaims her readiness for an essentially sexual encounter: Oothoon's willingness to give herself to Theotormon is expressed in a metaphor of plucking the marigold flower which she puts to glow between her breasts; thus equipped, Oothoon sets out "in wing'd exulting swift delight" (1:15 E 46) to look for her beloved. Furthermore, as Caroline Jackson-Houlston notes, the picking of a flower is a culturally archetypal metaphor for sexual initiation, but typically it connotes "boastful male violence". However, when "the woman initiates the action (plucking rather than being passively plucked) the sense is much more positive (even if the results of her sexual exploration are unhappy) because she moves from object to subject, and asserts her right to initiate sexual encounters" (Jackson-Houlston 2010:153). Even if it is for a fleeting moment only, Blake grants Oothoon agency and the right to articulate her needs.

Interestingly, the visual-verbal interaction in *Visions* follows a complex pattern of syncopation (displacing) and contradiction. The plate illustrating "The Argument" relates more closely to the scene described in Plate 1 from the text, than it does to the lines with which it is spacially connected. In the design we see Oothoon's encounter with the Marigold, which echoes the conversation from Plate 1:

'Art thou a flower? Art thou a nymph? I see thee now a flower,
Now a nymph! I dare not pluck thee from thy dewy bed!
The Golden nymph replied: 'Pluck thou my flower, Oothoon the mild!
Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet delight
Can never pass away.' She ceas'd, and clos'd her golden shrine.
Then Oothoon pluck'd the flower, saying: 'I pluck thee from thy bed,
Sweet flower, and put thee here to glow between my breasts;' (1:7-13 E 46)

⁵ For a detailed interpretation of *The Book of Thel* from such perspective see Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołodys "Life Exhal'd in Milky Fondness: Becoming a Mother in *The Book of Thel*". *Blake/Illustrated Quarterly* 46.4 (Spring 2013).

The design shows a kneeling, naked Oothoon who presses her palms to her breasts and kisses the personified flower, in a gesture of affirmation. The positioning of her hands visually represents the act of putting the flower “to glow between [her] breasts,” thus signalling her readiness for sexual encounter as well as an untroubled, happy relation with her body.⁶ The fact that Oothoon sees the Marigold “now as a flower, now as a nymph” testifies to her imaginative faculty being alive and well; in his later poetry Blake affirms the ability to perceive imaginatively in similar terms: his imaginative universe is always seen as humanized. Although violent events are prefigured in the text of “The Argument” in the form of “terrible thunders” which are to tear Oothoon’s “virgin mantle in twain” (7-8 E 45), nothing in the plate illustrating it indicates the violence to follow. Instead, the design is radiant, its light emanating and spreading from a tiny flower of marigold placed in the bottom right. Such an artistic manoeuvre is an example of what W.J.T. Mitchell calls “the technique of syncopation” and defines as placing designs “at a physical and metaphoric distance from their best textual reference” (Mitchell 1978:193). However, despite the fact that in formal terms we can see this move as merely displacing the image, in terms of meanings thus produced the interaction between text and design is straightforwardly contradictory, and alerts the readers to further contradictions and their significance at the later stages of the poem.

However, Oothoon does not get to enjoy her relationship with Theotormon; soon after she sets out, she is assaulted and raped by another man, Bromion, who violates and impregnates her. Violence is recorded in the language which Blake uses in his description: Bromion “rends” Oothoon with thunders, having deposited her on his “stormy bed” (1:17 E 46). Crucially, Bromion does not do it because he desires Oothoon sexually or because he wants to start a relationship with her: his only motivation is to reinstate his supreme position in relation to other men, in this case Theotormon. Oothoon’s body, objectified by rape, is still further objectified as a field on which Bromion imprints his

⁶ A number of critical readings of Blake’s design also point to the possibility of a lesbian encounter between Oothoon and the female figure of the Marigold, “a consensual and co-sensual enjoyment of sexuality between two female figures” (Jackson-Houlston 154) or see it as an implication of autoeroticism (Bruder *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion*, 75-76). See also Christopher Z. Hobson, *Blake and Homosexuality*, pp. 29-31.

masculinist control and triumph. Bromion, claiming his possession and domination of Oothoon, uses language of imperialistic rapacity, which testifies to his essentially materialist outlook:

Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north & south:
Stampt with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun [...] (1:21-22 E 46)

As many critics have suggested, *Visions* is a text that fuses feminist themes with criticism of slavery and racial oppression, as well as is pliant to ecocritical readings.⁷ The quoted lines voice, in Bethan Stevens's words, the "tired trope of (erotic) foreign woman as (exotic) landscape" (Stevens 2010:141). Oothoon's body is seen as a land upon which Bromion exerts his possessive politics, similar to a black slave, whose status is marked by a stamp, a sign of ownership. Blake sustains this correlation by visual means as well: the scene illustrated in Plate 2 (again the image is placed at some distance from its textual referent) features a black African, toiling on the land, his collapsed posture echoed by a fallen and withered tree on the right. As Elizabeth Grosz notes:

[f]ar from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles. (Grosz 1994:19)

Likewise, Oothoon's body becomes the site of power struggle, and evolves from a purely corporeal and sexual entity to become a sign whose signifier is Woman, but whose signified is male possession, power, control and domination.

Thus, Oothoon's experience of embodiment at this point is a condition of complete objectification. Her body becomes a thing, a commodity, in the world of men. She herself has no influence on what

⁷ See Nancy Moore Goslee (1990) "Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*." *ELH* 57. 1, 101-128, Barbara F. Lefcowitz (1974) "Blake and the Natural World," *PMLA* 89. 1, 121-131, Kevin Hutchings (2002) "Pastoral, Ideology, and Nature in William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*." *Interdisciplinary Studies In Literature and Environment* 9.1, 1-24, Kevin Hutchings, (2001) "Gender, Environment, and Imperialism in William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*." *Romanticism and Ecology* ed. J. McKusick. *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*.

has become of her. Her initial autonomy and agency—the fact that she consciously chose to enter a relationship with Theotormon—is promptly unmasked as illusion, and her belief that she is a subject rather than an object is immediately set right by the regulatory practices of correction and coercion. Not only does Bromion take her body by force, but also he hastily informs Theotormon of his new “possession” in order to assert his supremacy. This move confirms the analysis, put forward by Luce Irigaray and Gayle Rubin, among others, of the exchange of women as a foundation of Western patriarchy.⁸ In a yet more shocking move, the moment he has stamped Oothoon with his signet/penis, Bromion brands her as a whore and rejects her as an impaired, broken vessel:

Bromion spoke: behold this harlot here on Bromion's bed [...]
 Now thou maist marry Bromion's harlot, and protect the child
 Of Bromion's rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine months' time. (1:19, 2:1-2
 E 46)

After losing her virginity, Oothoon loses her value in the world of men, because, as James Swearingen suggests, “she, like all victims, is property” (1992:205). When Bromion appropriates her body to assert his virility and power, Oothoon is left to deal with both the immediate consequences of his act (unwanted pregnancy) and the stigma that the victim of the rape is to blame for what happened, because she must have been “asking for it”: according to Nicole-Claude Mathieu, the rape is always the woman’s fault, because she should not have spoken to that man, behaved the way she did, been in that area, allowed herself to be raped (Mathieu 1985:182).

For Oothoon, however, the most devastating thing is that her beloved Theotormon rejects her. His behaviour marks his identification with the way of thinking advocated by her rapist. It is Bromion who brands Oothoon a whore, but it is Theotormon’s reaction that validates and confirms this judgement. Because Oothoon loves him, and because she is traumatized by rape, at this point in the narrative she seems to accept the men’s hierarchical normalizing judgement which defines her as guilty and polluted, and sets forth to correct herself.

⁸ I am referring here to Luce Irigaray’s excerpt from *This Sex Which Is Not One*, “Women on the Market” (1985), particularly page 184, and Gayle Rubin’s essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex” (1975).

In his striking critique of the modern society, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the emergence of unprecedented discipline directed against the body, the discipline which, as Sandra Bartky notes, “invades the body and seeks to regulate its very forces and operations, the economy and efficiency of its movements” (Foucault 1998:25). This discipline is to a large extent self-inflicted, and Foucault turns to the concept of the Panopticon (the prison whose authority and power rests upon the sense of being constantly watched from a tall tower in its centre, the locus of power), to elaborate upon the ways in which the self-regulatory practices operate. In the words of Bartky, “knowing that he may be observed from the tower at any time, the inmate takes over the job of policing himself” (Bartky 1998: 41).

Interestingly, in his engraved plates of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* Blake includes a moveable page, which in most copies is the frontispiece, but in one copy (copy A, the British Museum) a tailpiece. It presents a striking scene: two figures, male and female (commonly interpreted as Bromion and Oothoon), are sitting back to back, chained to each other at the mouth of a cave, while a third figure (Theotormon) is crouching on the right, hiding his face in his arms. It has been noted by Roland A. Duerksen that another, more metaphorical reading of this plate is possible, and that it seems congruous with narrative continuity of Blake's story. In his interpretation, the two bound figures allegorically represent the principles of terror and meekness—terrified masculinity and meekly submissive femininity—rather than Oothoon and Bromion; symbolically, the figures personify the oppression of mind and spirit that Blake's text talks about (72). The most astounding feature of this picture, however, is the perspective: the viewer assumes a position from within the cave, and this position enables him/her to see the sun in the sky, partly enveloped in a cloud shaped as an eye socket, with an eyeball inside. This sun/eye that observes everything is a focal point in the illustration, and a commentary on the whole text. Regarding this image, David Erdman in his *The Illuminated Blake* comments that “we feel constantly stared at” (Erdman 1975:126-7). This constant visibility/observation from an as yet unidentified perceiver who is exterior to the main scene but always there recalls Foucault's concept of the Panopticon. A sense of permanent visibility ensures the functioning of power and results in the implementing of discipline. This idea is relevant for the understanding of Blake's poetical text: the three

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characters of the narrative are under constant surveillance, their behaviour being watched at all times, while they remain prisoners in the cave; the scrutiny of the external eye results in the incorporation of the “eye-deology”⁹ which, as we learn later, comes from Urizen, the god of reason and the creator of social and religious norms and standards. His ideology will be the focus of impassionate criticism coming from Oothoon in the later part of the text; at this point, however, Oothoon subscribes to the ideology of the eye. She starts perceiving herself as constituted through others. Paraphrasing the words of Sartre, she exists for herself as a body known by the Other (1969:351). Her body is a battlefield of contending gazes, each of them defining her according to their external standards: Bromion’s gaze objectifies her as a thing on which he may exert his sense of ownership, while Theotormon’s gaze is a source of hierarchical normalizing standards, telling her what she is not: pure, innocent, modest, virgin.

In her response to these gazes, Oothoon considers herself defiled and looks for available measures to undo her guilt.¹⁰ Consumed by her physical and mental agony, she is too traumatized to “work through” her experience; she even cannot cry:

Oothoon weeps not: she cannot weep! Her tears are locked up;
But she can howl incessant writhing her soft snowy limbs.
And calling Theotormon’s eagles to prey upon her flesh.
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. (2:11-16 E 46)

In an image redolent with mythological overtones of Promethean punishment, Blake renders Oothoon’s traumatized subjectivity: she sets out to “purify” herself of the crime she has not committed. At this moment she fully complies with the standards imposed on her by the “eye-deology” in order to be seen as properly feminine, i.e. lovable, by Theotormon. She does so using violent and bloody means: the eagles are

⁹ I am using the term “eye-deology” after Frank Hoerner (1996) “Prolific Reflections: Blake’s Contortion of Surveillance in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.” *Studies in Romanticism* 35. 1, 119-150.

¹⁰ Similar interpretation has been proposed by Robert Essick: Oothoon “has accepted at least a portion of the masculinist ideology of rape—namely, that the woman is corrupted by her victimization” (46).

to tear her flesh out, so that the “stain” of her defilement will disappear. Dennis M. Welch writes that “Oothoon’s sense of physical defilement is not at all unusual for a victim of rape. In fact, stories abound concerning such victims and their impulse to cleanse and purge themselves as soon and as thoroughly as possible after violation—even sometimes to the neglect of important physical evidence against the violator” (Welch 2010:121). The question arises, however, how one may purify oneself of rape and its consequences? Given that Bromion impregnates her, it seems plausible to suggest that the act of rending away the flesh may metonymically refer to abortion. Though purposeful abortion was not made a statutory offence until 1803, in the late eighteenth century it was increasingly treated as a sin (Connolly 116); thus it was a morally charged decision, difficult to make. However, Oothoon’s impregnation is a result of rape, an extraordinary violation of her identity, and thus the desire to purify herself—to get rid of the unwanted life within her—is a psychologically plausible reaction. Nevertheless, this perspective does not make the very choice or the procedure of the termination of pregnancy any less radical, and Oothoon, already abused and violated, is in for another violation, this time by her own decision although not because of her own fault. The violent language of this passage supports this view: the eagles “descend & rend their bleeding prey” (2:17 E 46). Oothoon’s body, first lovingly adorned with the marigold flower; then violated by rape, branded as sluttish and sinful and rejected altogether gets finally mutilated in a desperate attempt to live up to the norm, to erase the stigma of being polluted by an unwanted sexual contact. Oothoon disciplines herself to become a self-corrected, “pliant,” docile body (Foucault 1993:135). At the same time she marks her status as inferior in relation to the men she depends on: both Bromion and Theotormon. At this stage in Blake’s text patriarchy wins.

Visions is, however, a text both about oppression and about resistance. The moment Oothoon calls on the eagles is the turning point; Blake’s remarkable design (plate 3) enters into a relation of contradiction with the written text: while the text describes the bloody horror of violence and mutilation of the body, the image communicates bodily ecstasy, with Oothoon sensually outstretched on a cloud, her legs parted, receiving Theotormon’s eagle whose descent on her body is like a caress rather than a torture. As David Erdman notes, instead of being sharp and ravenous, the beak of the eagle is rather like the bill of a swan (Erdman

1975:131). This alternation is both striking and unusual; it walks a tightrope between visual representations of female victimisation and erotic rapture, on the one hand suggesting Oothoon's self-inflicted punishment, on the other indicating the pleasure she derived from it. The line separating pleasure and pain is a thin one, and Oothoon's rapture in the design may be explained in a double way. First, her traumatized consciousness may register the pain of her further mutilation as a masochistic satisfaction, derived from the need for purification and punishment for physical pleasure she might have experienced during her forced intercourse with Bromion; secondly, we may understand the call for Theotormon's eagle to repeat violence to her body as a phenomenon akin to what trauma experts have called the "double wounding"—the repetitiveness of the experience of trauma in the life of the survivor. According to Cathy Caruth, a traumatic wound "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (1996: 4). It has to be relived unconsciously until it is available to consciousness. In her theory, it is the second wound in the life of a trauma victim which is significant, as it brings the acknowledgement of the original traumatic experience (1996:2). In this interpretation, the painful rending of Oothoon's flesh by the eagle turns out to be liberating, as it marks the beginning of the change in her perspective on the world and on herself; better equipped to see the violence against women and the constraints imposed upon them resulting from the workings of patriarchy, Oothoon finally starts to question the ideology that labelled her a whore, recovers from being a docile, pliant body to become a voice and agent of resistance. Blake's design, seemingly at odds with the sense of his words, registers the gain arising out of pain, the paradox of what Tristanne Connolly has called the "kill-or-cure-method" (2002: 33). Michelle Leigh Gompf proposes an analogous interpretation, writing that: "[t]he corrosive experience of the rending by Theotormon's eagles allows or perhaps forces Oothoon to literally see differently, understand oppression and tyranny, and denounce this oppression" (Gompf 2013: 68).

In what follows, Oothoon turns to Theotormon expecting him to share her new awareness that "the soul of sweet delight can never be defiled" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 9:52 E 37) and that, as the nymph-marigold told Oothoon in Plate 1, even if a flower symbolising virginity is plucked, another one will grow in its place (*Visions* 1:9-10 E46)—that, in short, innocence and purity are not a material thing, a

hymen; they are a condition of being in the world, which depends on one's subjective consciousness. Oothoon exclaims:

[...] Arise my Theotormon I am pure.
Because the night is gone that clos'd me in its deadly black.
They told me that the night & day were all that I could see;
They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up.
And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle,
And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe hot burning
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased. (2:28-34 E 47)

The terms Oothoon uses in her speech leave no doubt to the fact that the change she records is an evolution of perception, allowing her to celebrate her renewed sense of being in the world. In a passionate attack upon empiricist philosophy, she denounces the epistemological position according to which all one knows and is depends on five senses, the only objective and really existing channels of perception. Such a view results in imprisonment and finally obliteration of the self. In *A Vision of the Last Judgment* Blake commented upon the importance of perception and point of view when he passionately claimed:

I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation, & that to me it is hindrance and not Action; it is as the Dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. "What," it will be Questiond, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" Oh, no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty!" I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight: I look thro it & not with it.¹¹

Empiricists like Bromion and Theotormon—looking with and not through the eye—enclose their brains into narrow circles; for them the sun is a round disk of fire and a man is a tabula rasa, blank slate or white paper without built-in mental content. From this viewpoint, identity derives from data processed solely through sensory experience, and Oothoon, defiled, will remain impure and scarred forever. It is pertinent to recall that the motto for the whole poem, engraved on the title page, reads: "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows" (Epigraph, E 45)—an

¹¹ For the sake of clarity of this quote and its punctuation, I am using here Johnson and Grant's edition of *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 416. Cf. Erdman, 565-566.

ironic statement about the primacy of visual perception over subjective, emotional experience—a philosophy adhered to both by Bromion and Theotormon, Oothoon’s first argument “seeks to formulate her sense that she is not a mere accumulation of sensory experience without capacity for renewal” (Swearingen 208). Her argument serves not to trivialize her experience of abuse by suggesting that it can be denied or wiped out by a sheer change of perspective, but to stress the idea of the complex relation between sensory experience and identity. Being embodied, Oothoon is not only her body—embodiment suggests receptivity and attention to the different sensations and needs that our embodied consciousness communicates; these needs are physical as well as emotional, intellectual or spiritual. Her rape is a fact, but how she will deal with it psychologically depends on her innate sense of self. This reading is congruent with Blake’s other well-known statements on perception which emphasise the importance of subjective processing of sensory experience over objective recording of existing, empirical phenomena: “The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way” (*A Letter to Trusler* E 702) “A fool sees not the same tree as a wise man sees” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 7:8 E 35) “Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ’d” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 10:69 E 38).

However, Oothoon’s speech does not reach Theotormon, who, concentrated on his own misery, cannot hear her words. For him “the night and morn/Are both alike: a night of sighs, a morn of fresh tears” (2:37-8 E 47). Seeing the failure of her rhetoric, Oothoon moves on to different arguments. She considers the question of what constitutes individual identity, asking:

With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk?
 With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out the expanse?
 With what sense does the bee form cells? have not the mouse & frog
 Eyes and ears and sense of touch? yet are their habitations.
 And their pursuits, as different as their forms and as their joys. (3:2-6 E 47)

In this important passage, Oothoon puns on the word “sense” in its double meaning of sensory experience that the senses transmit and the way in which we “make sense” of the world and of ourselves. When she asks “With what sense does the bee form cells”? her question does not concern whether the bee uses her sight, hearing or touch to perform her

task, but she enquires what pushes the bee to do it—in short, what constitutes its identity, making a bee a bee. Despite the fact that the mouse and the frog share some general physical characteristics, having the same senses and recording similar sensory stimuli, each of these creatures is unique in its essence. Thus, it is not the experience we record through our senses that constitutes who we are, although it is equally true that consciousness cannot extract itself from the entanglement with the body. Oothoon is trying to suggest that regardless of what has happened to her, she remains herself. Equally importantly, she asserts that although all creatures share some universal characteristics, each of them is unique in its essence. The same should apply to humans: not everyone has the same needs, abilities or desires, therefore it is necessarily unjust and hurtful to label people according to one normalizing perspective. Oothoon asks Theotormon to forsake “eye-deology,” to look at her afresh, to see her as she is, without preconceived notions of purity and sin. Simultaneously asserting her own innocence (“I bathe my wings./ And I am white and pure to hover round Theotormon’s breast,” 3:19-20 E 47), she evokes images that praise experience rather than impeccability: “Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on. & the soul prey’d on by woe” (3:17 E 47). While refusing to see herself as defiled, she at the same time claims that lived experience rules out unreflexive idealism.

No positive response, however, comes from Theotormon. He seems dissociated from his body, whose urges he successfully blocks, but, strikingly, he does not claim agency as far as his thoughts are concerned either: in his speech he perceives his mental processes as virtually living their own life, appearing and disappearing irrespective of himself. Thoughts come and go, just as emotions do; in his monologue he repeatedly dwells on thought processes that bring joys or sorrows, but perceives them as completely independent from him. At the same time he confesses that this status quo brings him nothing but misery:

Tell me where dwell the thoughts, forgotten till thou call them forth?
Tell me where dwell the joys of old, and where the ancient loves,
And when will they renew again, and the night of oblivion past,
That I might traverse times and spaces far remote, and bring
Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain?
Where goest thou, O thought? to what remote land is thy flight?

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If thou returnest to the present moment of affliction,
Wilt thou bring comforts on thy wings, and dews and honey and balm,
Or poison from the desert wilds, from the eyes of the envier? (4: 3-11 E 48)

Theotormon, then, is a man in torment, and the source of his torment is his system of beliefs as well as his compulsion to deny the unity between his mind and his body. Virtually a passive victim of “eye-deology”, he is trapped in this worldview, but unable to discern that the possibility for change would have to come from the inside. The design for plate 4 visually renders this standstill: Theotormon’s body is shown as solidified, graphically resembling a rectangular object, possibly a stone, like the rock of the cave against which he is positioned; his irresponsiveness and a lack of interest in the outside world is communicated by his bent head. Interestingly, the delineation of his elongated crossed knees forms the iconic shape of the heart, also solidified and irresponsive towards Oothoon’s pleas. His attitude directly influences hers: Blake presents her as oppressed and imprisoned, hovering “by his side, persuading him in vain” (2:22 E 47), visually locked in the shape of the wave that hovers over Theotormon and additionally chained to the rock by the shackles around her ankle. Unable to forsake her hopes for his reformation, Oothoon remains enslaved by her own feelings for her lover. David Erdman suggests that the budding hope for possible progress is indicated by the large cracks in the rock behind her (Erdman 1975:132).

Seeing that her pleas bring no effect, Oothoon vents her frustration in a direct attack upon the creator of norms and standards which oppress and castigate people—Urizen, who will, as the editors of Blake’s text, Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant explain in their note to *Visions*, be “revealed as the fallen faculty of Reason in later works, mistakenly set up as deity over fallen humanity” (Johnson and Grant 1979:76 n.1). Oothoon’s third speech is an attack on religion and oppressive laws which arise out of religious norms. In particular, Oothoon condemns the marriage system that makes women prisoners, objectifies their bodies, teaches them to punish themselves for their desires and compels them to give birth to subsequent children conceived against their will:

Till she who burns with youth. and knows no fixed lot; is bound
In spells of law to one she loaths: and must she drag the chain
Of life, in weary lust! must chilling murderous thoughts. obscure
The clear heaven of her eternal spring? to bear the wintry rage

Of a harsh terror driv'n to madness, bound to hold a rod
Over her shrinking shoulders all the day; & all the night
To turn the wheel of false desire: and longings that wake her womb
To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form
That live a pestilence & die a meteor & are no more. (5:21-29 E 49)

In the lines that follow, Oothoon protests against moral hypocrisy perpetrated by Urizenic religion. She lashes out at the concept of “subtil” false modesty, which teaches that physical pleasure is sinful but “sell[s] it in the night” (6:7, 6:12 E 49); this hypocritical thinking further leads to the complete perversion of the contact with one’s body: on the one hand it castigates natural impulses and needs as corrupt, on the other it promotes what Oothoon calls “the rewards of continence/the self enjoyings of self denial” (7:8-9 E 50), experiencing gratification from suppression and perversion of one’s bodily needs.

Being the voice of resistance, from this impassioned criticism Blake’s heroine turns to the celebration of female sexuality. She declares:

But Oothoon is not so, a virgin fill'd with virgin fancies
Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears
If in the morning sun I find it: there my eyes are fix'd
In happy copulation; if in evening mild, wearied with work;
Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free born joy. (6: 21-23, 7: 1-2 E 50)

In harsh contrast with the teachings of “self-enjoyings of self denial” Oothoon sees that sensual pleasure is to be experienced everywhere, not only as a result of sex. It is ever-existent and all-pervasive, whenever beauty and joy appear. This perspective brings to mind modern theories of female sexuality, particularly those propagated by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who stress the multiplicity of feminine sensual pleasure. In the words of James Heffernan:

[Oothoon’s] startling formulation anticipates what contemporary French feminists have said about *jouissance* -a distinctively female kind of pleasure that is sensual, fluid, and almost endlessly diffused. “Woman,” says Luce Irigaray, “has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere.” (Heffernan 1991:10).

To offer a reading of Blake’s *Visions* as an unequivocal story of liberation of female consciousness and imaginative insight, however,

would mean ignoring some crucial problematic issues present in the text. First, as Nancy Goslee perceptively notes, Oothoon's professed imaginative and perceptual awakening is a result of rape, and, under such circumstances it is hard to believe that it "leads to a liberating imaginative experience. Such a consolation appears more a dangerous after-the-fact rationalization" (Goslee 1990:114). From a feminist point of view, moreover, such thinking may distract one's attention from the problem of sexual assault and violence, and even offer a partial justification of Bromion's behaviour by pointing out the liberation of Oothoon's consciousness as a positive outcome of a necessarily negative experience. The second problematic issue, partially connected with the former one, is mentioned by James Swearingen, who pays due attention to the fact that Oothoon seems to entirely disregard her past, rejecting the possibility that it might have left a mark on her. Since human identity is partially constructed by accumulation of past events, Oothoon's rejection of the past is problematic, not on a par with her affirmation of intense joy she senses in the present:

To say "I am pure. / Because the night is gone that clos'd me in its deadly black" acknowledges an evil event while claiming that it has no enduring significance, that the past leaves no more residuum on her than night does on eagle, lark, or nightingale. (Swearingen 1992:207-208)

Also, the engraved scene which Blake visually joins to Oothoon's liberated and joyful speech in plate 6 clashes with the verbal message she tries to convey. While the text celebrates her awakened senses and imaginative openness to various stimuli, at the same time stressing her liberation from the oppressive tyranny of religious norms propagated by Urizen and adhered to by Theotormon, the design presents a vision of despair, self-punishment and abjection. We observe a visibly unhappy Oothoon, who covers her face in her hands, while Theotormon wields a whip over his back. The positioning of his hand, however, is ambiguous: apart from flagellating himself, he may also be lashing at Oothoon. Metaphorically, his own torment becomes hers. As noted by Erdman, the knots on the whip "look uncannily like the heads of the Marigold flowers" (Erdman 1975:134). Neither looks at their partner. What, in Oothoon's wishful thinking, might have been a triumphant proclamation of freedom and the affirmation of bodily joys, in the poem's grim reality turns into punishment and self-torture. Yet, when compared with the

engraving for Plate 4, this scene still hints at the possibility of progress: while in the former illustration Oothoon remains physically chained to the rock, in the latter picture she is at least granted physical freedom. The lack of shackles may metaphorically indicate that her process of liberation is under way.

Another element that puzzles the readers and critics alike and is not consistent with the view of Oothoon as an autonomous, internally integral, liberated female character is the proposal she makes to Theotormon, which she wants to see as a proof that true love is not possessive:

But 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. (7:23-26 E 50)

Oothoon's proposal has caused critics considerable consternation. While it is possible to consider Oothoon's proposal as "[t]he extraordinary mixture, of spirituality, sensuality, eroticism, and selfless delight in the joy of another" (Heffernan 1991:16) the passage is redolent of darker tones as well. Its language and imagery of traps and nets brings to mind oppression; the fact that Oothoon is ready to watch Theotormon's sexual pleasure with other women suggests both a voyeuristic "harem fantasy" (Bruder 1997:82) and a possible compensation for what Bromion did to her—the "wanton play" which Oothoon envisages can actually be another scene of sexual subjection, and she, in offering to procure other women as objects of Theotormon's enjoyment becomes an accomplice and an active agent of female oppression.¹² Such a reading is sustained by the design accompanying Oothoon's words on the page—Blake engraves a visibly unhappy, huddled and cramped group of five women, the titular Daughters of Albion, who "are crouching in attitudes of despair" (Erdman 1975:135). Liberated erotic love, while generally heartily applauded, at this point is presented as essentially problematic.

¹² A different perspective on this passage is offered by Christopher Z. Hobson, who claims that "Oothoon means to watch Theotormon and the 'girls' have sex, and to take sexual pleasure herself in doing so (perhaps while masturbating)—as implied by her recumbent posture and the phrase 'bliss on bliss,' which applies to herself as well as to Theotormon and the 'girls'" (2000:35).

Also, we have to remember that the crucial issue in the text—the enslavement of women—does not change in the course of the poem. In the words of Helen P. Bruder:

the most basic fact that the eye sees (even if the heart won't admit it) about *Visions* is that in this poem men, however sadistic, inept or tormented possess—just because of their sex—real power. (Bruder 1997:77)

The poem ends with a standstill: Oothoon hovers around Theotormon, “perswading him in vain” (2:22 E 47), while other English women, the Daughters of Albion, “hear her woes, & eccho back her sighs” (2: 20 E 46, 5:2 E 48, 8: 13 E 51). This is a picture of stagnation and powerlessness, with little hope for substantial change in the foreseeable future. Therefore to champion Oothoon as the figure of female sexual liberation would be an overstatement, although, naturally, she remains one of the most carefully delineated heroines in Blake’s poetry.

Yet, in a manner consistent throughout the book, the visual content of the last engraved plate does not complement the verbal message. The image which accompanies the final passage of the poem again enters into a relationship of contradiction with the written text. There is a definite discrepancy between the text and the design, as the illustration undermines an unequivocally pessimistic ending which the text seems to advocate. While the end of the poem envisages Oothoon as virtually powerless and with no apparent influence on her situation, in the design we see her free and empowered. She has apparently changed places with the Urizenic figure in the design for the title page and hovers in the air, prophetic, not clutching herself, but with her arms extended, transformed into wings.¹³ Out of the three figures of the Daughters of Albion, two

¹³ Dennis M. Welch reads the design as a parody of the title page; he suggests that “[a]s an astute parody, the final plate includes elements of comparison and contrast with the title-page. Like Urizen, Oothoon has flames flowing from her bosom. These flames, along with surrounding storm clouds, imply on her part justifiable ire and conflict against the very powers and perspectives that oppress her and all who represent Otherness.” However, in what follows he sees Oothoon first of all as tormented and victimized, and only additionally as expressing her subjectivity: “Unlike Urizen’s self-clutching arms, however, Oothoon’s reach out in a cruciform, signifying not only her victimization, which includes others (in particular, Albion’s daughters, who huddle beneath her), but also her expansiveness, which extends to others in “generous love” (7.29)

look up at her, attentive, ready to listen and accept her message. There is no sign of either Theotormon, Bromion or Urizen—an indication of the fact that Oothoon has freed herself from their influence, and become fully inner-directed, guided by norms and ideas determined by herself rather than by others. Her liberation will hopefully start spreading far and wide, empowering other women to free themselves from patriarchal and religious tyranny and oppression, urging them to acknowledge, embrace and act on their desires—those communicated by their bodies as well as those coming from their hearts and minds.

The question to be asked at the end of this essay concerns the nature and the effect of the relationship between the text and the design. If the designs for *Visions* seem to run a parallel story—suggesting hope and delight instead of violation (Argument), sexual ecstasy not mutilation (Plate 3), oppression and despair not happiness and liberation (Plate 6), female enslavement and usury in contrast to the happy sharing indicated in the text (Plate 7), and finally female empowerment instead of powerlessness and stagnation (Plate 8), then there must be a purpose in Blake's method. The explanation for these discrepancies appears to be twofold. First, the clash between what we learn from the text and what Blake portrays in the designs for "The Argument" and for the last plate of his poem seems to indicate shifts and changes in the point of view, corresponding with the question of who speaks in particular passages of the text. As Harriet Linkin has demonstrated, the narrative voice in *Visions* is an important factor for the understanding of Blake's poem—the narrator is influenced by the "eye-deology" adhered to by male characters. According to Linkin, the concluding lines of the text

replace conventional narrative past tense with a continuing present and move from exultation to resignation. Just as Oothoon reaches the apex of her awakening, the narrative reduces her culminating vision to daily activity; her resounding proclamations of liberty turn into the narrator's "wails," "sighs," and "woes." Given the narrator's disconcerting summary view of Oothoon's orations, many readers believe her prophetic insights conclude with failure, since she does not appear to free Theotormon or her sisters. (Linkin 1990:185)

(Welch 2010:130). In contrast, I see this plate as an expression of female empowerment and a sign of Oothoon's victory. I read the flame beneath her figure as a symbol of transformation, not torture; unlike the Urizenic figure on the title page, Oothoon is not consumed by it.

Linkin goes on to conclude that “[w]hile her progress towards prophecy is not constant or direct, she undergoes [...] a developmental process that results in her acquiring prophetic stature by the conclusion of the poem” (Linkin 1990:188). The narrator, in turn, interprets the last scene as testifying to the futility of Oothoon’s trial, passing judgement on her efforts and pronouncing that her plight was all in vain. He judges her endeavours by their objective, immediately visible results, and since Theotormon is not persuaded and still sits “conversing with shadows dire” (8:12 E51) the narrator promptly heralds Oothoon’s failure. He totally disregards the fact that the most important, empowering change has already happened in the heroine’s consciousness, and that failure or success of one’s process of maturation cannot be measured by other people’s reactions to it. Blake contradicts the narrator’s message by offering us the image instead, inviting his readers to see beyond his narrator’s narrowing perceptions and also extending the text’s narrative till a later point than covered by the words of the poem.

The discrepancy between the sombre text of “The Argument” and the radiant image that accompanies it can also be explained by the change of the narrating voice. Crucially, “The Argument” is told not by an impersonal narrator, but we hear Oothoon’s voice without any mediation. However, while Blake visually represents Oothoon at the beginning of her road to maturity but still mentally residing in the realm of Innocence, thus cheerful and optimistic, the voice resounding in the eight lines of “The Argument” belongs to Blake’s heroine from a later stage of the poem, after she has entered the world of Experience. Oothoon offers us, in a concise form, her perspective: from the unabashed confession of her desires, through the acknowledgement of the fears connected with the perspective of losing her virginity to how she overcame them and assumed her agency only to be violated by her rapist. The account, though poetic, is psychologically realistic: both her reservations about deflowering and the “terrible thunders” (iii:8 E45) of rape add credibility to Oothoon’s story. In contrast, the design shows her as hopeful and idealistic, presenting her mental state from before the rape. This manoeuvre even more emphasises the horror waiting ahead: while the reader’s eye cannot yet detect it in the plate, Oothoon’s voice previews the violence to happen, tinging the idealism and radiance of Innocence with the taste of Experience looming ahead. Equally crucially, in this way Blake alerts us to shifts in voice and perspective which will

appear crucial at later stages of the poem, emphasising the relativity and subjective judgement audible in the voices of the narrator and three main characters.

As far as the remaining three cases of the contradiction between the verbal and the visual are concerned, Blake's message is primarily psychological. The scene with the eagles, gory and violent in the text yet delicate and ecstatic in the design indicates the problematic line dividing pleasure from pain and the moment of transformation in Oothoon's viewpoint, the point when she, for the first time so clearly, rendered Urizenic religion inoperative. In Plates 6 and 7, in turn, we encounter an opposite move: now the text abounds in positive imagery, as Oothoon exults in her newly acquired freedom and a capacity for selfless love, but the verbal message is immediately undermined by the grave and gloomy vision rendered in the illustrations. We may understand this clash as Blake's reminder that progress and maturation are not linear processes, and that lapses can happen even on a generally positive track. In Plate 6 Oothoon, directed by wishful thinking, feels eager to celebrate the renewal of her imaginative faculties and her victory over the oppressive ideology of the patriarchal world, failing to see that this world has not changed at all, that the transformation in Theotormon's outlook must come from inside, and that her words and wishes are not performative as far as he is concerned. Her eagerness and triumph also blinds her to the fact that by her vain but persistent attempts to reach her lover she victimizes herself, constantly allowing him to hurt her. The visual/verbal clash in Plate 7 operates similarly: while Oothoon proclaims selfless love and happy sexual sharing, she may either delude herself in her wish to compensate for the harm that befell her, or disregard the fact that, offering to procure other girls for Theotormon, she becomes an accomplice in treating women as objects. The complex, frequently contradictory relation between the word and image discourages the reader from settling for one "correct," unchanging version of the story, problematizes and complicates the conclusions to which one may otherwise eagerly jump and alerts us to the fact that "as a man is, So he Sees" (E 702)– that vision is essentially subjective and our opinions, hopes, fears, political and ideological convictions frequently prevent us from assuming a wider perspective. Most of all, Blake urges his readers to be constantly vigilant, to critically examine and revise their assumptions about themselves and the world, in order not to become the

standing water that “breeds the reptiles of the mind” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 19 E 42).

To conclude, in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*—in the poem and its designs, the materially embodied vision on the plates—Blake is concerned with the question of what it is to be a woman in a world ruled by men and governed by male-instigated norms. Crucially, it is Oothoon’s body that is the site of contestation throughout the poem—her experience of “body-as lived” is the starting point for the evolution of her consciousness. In this way, Blake undermines the Western metaphysics which has postulated the “idea of an autonomous individual subject, a self-enclosed ego that inhabits but is distinct from a body” (Battersby in Young 5). Blake’s poems suggest that the shaping of female subjectivity is inextricably, intimately intertwined with embodiment: the way a woman experiences her body, the way her body is treated and perceived conditions her self-awareness and the relationships she forms with the world and with others. Blake’s text confirms what the feminist thinkers have asserted, namely that the mind/body dualism is ultimately invalid and inoperative. Assuming this perspective and granting his female protagonist the voice and the space to speak her body as well as her mind, Blake ultimately positions himself as a modern and progressive poet, sensitive to women’s issues and considering women’s choices with unprecedented realism. He transcends the boundaries of his age and speaks directly to contemporary female and male readers about the themes and problems which are still relevant today.

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