

telling. He quickly moves from a stance of open-armed homoerotic admiration to one of simultaneous threat and self-clutching fear. This transformed image is the title page of *Visions (Illuminated)*, E.127).

After this necessarily brief survey of Blake's early innovations in the representation of male and female bodies, what we have seen is the presentation of a more linear female form (beauty, as Morris Eaves rightly notes, is redefined in unorthodox linear terms)<sup>91</sup> alongside a more pliant, slight almost de-materialized male. In contrast to the rapidly solidifying contemporary polarization of male and female bodies – well summed up by French physician Pierre Roussel 'the essence of sex is not confined to a single organ but extends, through more or less perceivable nuances, into every part'<sup>92</sup> – Blake is moving towards, if not actually attaining, an androgynous figure style. This is something which Blake scholars have been reluctant to elaborate the significance of, but feminist art historians have been quick to suggest what it might mean. According to Margaret Walters, Blake 'takes the classical nude and makes male and female approximate to his own vision of a perfected and bisexual humanity. Never denying sexual difference, he sees clearly how the exaggeration of that difference by society imprisons men and women in mutual and destructive misery'; and Linda Nochlin concurs on Blake's development of innovatory androgynous figures.<sup>93</sup>

In terms of Blake's development as an engraving-artist,<sup>94</sup> with a desire to reach the public direct, it is important to realize that this thematic innovation was intimately related to a technical one: Blake's development of illuminated printing. Commercially expedient standardization of engraving techniques, and hence of forms engraved, had produced a restricted vocabulary for the depiction of the female form – a visual lexicon which displeased Blake, as his private art of the 1780s shows. Furthermore specialization within the reproductive engraving process, brought on by the division of labour, had forced him into becoming a specialist in just this kind of material: light erotic 'fancy' pieces.<sup>95</sup> But with the development of illuminated printing Blake was able to break away from all this. As Robert Essick, who has written extensively on Blake's work as a printmaker, has pointed out the, 'bold and rugged forms of Blake's illuminated books are the result of conscious choice' and are, 'even to the eye of a casual observer, completely outside the fashionable tastes of their time'.<sup>96</sup>

Essick is not concerned with the difference in representation of the female form between Blake's reproductive work and his illuminated books, but if we do analyze *Visions* in this way a heated dialogue emerges between the kinds of 'shapely' creatures Blake had spent much of the 1780s engraving and many of the female forms which appear here. The distinction John Berger makes between the naked and the nude<sup>97</sup> helps us to clarify what Blake is doing: 'To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude [. . .] Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.'<sup>98</sup> Nude images orientated to a male viewer's gaze (for example Plate 3, *Illuminated*; E.131) appear in these illuminations, only to have their validity disputed, and motivations questioned, by the more preponderant representation of naked women (esp. Plates ii, 6 and 8, *Illuminated*; 127; 134; 138). Amongst these the most offensive to the kind of onlooker Berger details must be those who appear on Plate iii (*Illuminated*; E.128). Not only does the larger kneeling woman cover her breasts but the smaller flying figure whom she kisses actually turns her naked back on the viewer.<sup>99</sup> It must be appropriate now to look in some detail at the text which this leaping woman precedes us into: *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

#### VISIONS OF THE DAUGHTERS OF ALBION

The title page of *Visions* offers clear evidence that Blake was concerned about, and adopted a critical attitude towards, the sexual ideology outlined earlier, for what the plate contains is a succinct visual statement of each element of that mind-set. We have already examined the central pair of self-clutching patriarch and his terrorized female victim. Accompanying them is a serpentine proper who reaches down towards a reclining woman in the top left hand corner, a malevolent conjurer in the top right and an oppositional group of female figures engaged in a decidedly un-Fuselian scarf-dance (*Illuminated*; E.127). As well as being heralds of Oothoon's emergent passions they are perfect examples of the new type of female form which I have argued Blake worked through the 1780s to construct. The muscles on their extravagantly stretched legs and torsos are as emphasized and

curvaceous as either their breasts or buttocks. Furthermore they in no way offer themselves to the gaze of an appetitive viewer: one turns her back on us and the other two devote their attentions towards demonstrating to themselves and each other that (female) 'Energy is Eternal Delight' (*MHH*, 4; E.34). It is for these figures, and their potential, that one very strong voice in the poem attempts to 'argue'.

At the poem's abrupt beginning Oothoon occupies the portentous biographical moment favoured by the majority of pornographic/bawdy writers in their depictions of women: she is on the brink of sexual experience. In the vast majority of these fictions young women appear filled with trepidation, weak in desire and will, and in need of brusque, if not brutal, male stimulation. And it takes little effort to demonstrate that through Oothoon Blake strongly refutes such conceptualizations of 'woman's love'.

First, Oothoon rejects the idea that she should be the passive object of male desire and instead claims the right to be the subject of her own libidinous inclination: 'I loved Theotormon/ And I was not ashamed' (*VDA*, iii:1-2; E.45). It is easy to neglect how radical the poem's first two lines are, and we should therefore remember that the late-eighteenth-century's obsession with distinctions between virtuous and non-virtuous females left women, as Patricia Meyer Spacks notes, with 'virtually no freedom of emotional expression'.<sup>100</sup> It was only on the rare occasions when events like popular masquerades legitimated momentary carnivalesque subversions that women were allowed freely to seek sexual partners,<sup>101</sup> and this was – anyway – a liberty bought at the cost of often fetishistic disguise. Blake's Oothoon can have little to do with that kind of deception, she must leap naked (as she does, Pl. iii, *Illuminated*; E.128) if she is to attain a joy equal to that of the title-page's dancers. And it is concern over how this violently immodest gesture will be received that provokes her 'virgin fears'<sup>102</sup> (*VDA*, iii:3; E.45) – for as the following uncharacteristically disgruntled contemporaneous verse makes clear, this is hardly a fit way for a 'virgin' to behave,

Virgins, you know, by custom 'tis decreed,  
 Must ne'er the bounds of modesty exceed;  
 Must shut their eyes and ears at nature's call,  
 And cold-form'd prudence still must govern all;

Nor dare indulge the sweetly-pleasing flame,  
For loss of chastity is loss of fame!<sup>103</sup>

Second, and perhaps even more offensively, Oothoon offers a direct affront to the idea that a woman's sexuality is only activated by the presence of a man and his, to use one of Cleland's abundantly self-flattering metaphors, 'wonderful machine'.<sup>104</sup> Integral to this phallogentric fantasy was the depiction of female virginity as a visceral hindrance begging to be conquered, and to defuse the bloody climax attendant on this deflowering mania Oothoon literally deflowers herself: 'I pluck thee from thy bed/Sweet flower' (*VDA*, 1:11–12; E.46); thus giving lyrical expression to the blunt statement made by a young woman in a contemporary ballad: 'My thing is my own'.<sup>105</sup>

Oothoon's activities in Leutha's vale have drawn a good deal of critical comment, with some writers arguing that it is a realm of sexual evasiveness and denial in which Oothoon literally 'hides',<sup>106</sup> whilst others, though prepared to admit that she finds her sexuality here, argue that all Oothoon wants to do is give it away, as a gift to give pleasure to a man. Michael Ferber's 'She is about to offer her virgin flower to her lover, of course' is depressingly typical.<sup>107</sup> It is also a serious misreading which distorts the challenging nature of Blake's message, for what she sought were 'flowers to comfort *her*' (*VDA*, 1:4; E.45 – my emphasis) and what she finds in the plucking of this duplicitous symbol is her own potential for multiple and recurrent orgasm. This is the 'soul of sweet delight' that 'Can never pass away' (*VDA*, 1:9–10; E.46), although it can – as she too soon discovers – be 'defil'd' (*MHH*, 9:53; E.37). *Nympha* was the classical name for the, as we saw, much reviled clitoris, used throughout the eighteenth century by numerous medical writers, and what Blake does by lyrically celebrating Oothoon's handling of this monstrous organ is to deny the late-eighteenth-century's favourite sexual edict: 'A woman's chiefest bliss must flow from man!'.<sup>108</sup> If Blake isn't quite concurring with Kate Millett in her unequivocal statement, 'The root and ultimate source of human understanding about sexual stimulation is autoeroticism',<sup>109</sup> he is certainly in dissent from his age's paranoia over the countless evils of the solitary vice. And it is here that Blake's sexual radicalism lies: in his validation of a woman's right to pleasure herself. Many, and most recently Stephen Cox, have claimed that Blake enlisted

'in the great eighteenth-century crusade against masturbation'<sup>110</sup> but such a bold statement misses the gendered nature of the poem's later complaint, for it is the male youth's absorption in 'The self enjoyings of self denial' (VDA, 7:9; E.50) that is objected to, *not* this activity which signals a woman's possession of her sexual selfhood. And it must also be remembered that Oothoon herself is the one who utters this later complaint. She, unlike the majority of Blake scholars, can see that the significance of any action changes depending on who is enacting it, and in a culture which reviled women's physicality this is a vital gesture of self-love, not self-denial. After all, what is the masturbating Oothoon denying herself? The embraces of the rapist Bromion and the sadist Theotormon. But this is to jump ahead.

The 'Golden nymph' (VDA, 1:8; E.46), however rich the pleasures she gives, is nonetheless, a duplicitous symbol because she inhabited other discourses too.<sup>111</sup> Most importantly brothel catalogues displayed their youthful wares under this sign, as the following extract describing Miss B-rn from *Harris's List of Covent-Garden Ladies* for 1788 demonstrates, 'This accomplished nymph has just attained her eighteenth year, and fraught with every perfection, enters a volunteer in the field of Venus [. . .] In bed she is all the heart can wish, or the eye admire, every limb is symmetry, every action under cover truly amorous.'<sup>112</sup> And what I think Blake does with this loaded sign is to signify both the assessment Oothoon has of herself and the assessments others have of her: to patriarchal observers any sexually active woman inscribes herself in *Harris's* pages. As Bromion says 'behold this harlot' (VDA, 1:18; E.46). There were, in fact, many words capable of describing a woman 'like' Oothoon, of which the most apposite is 'Dell'. According to Francis Grose these were 'Young buxom wenches, ripe and prone to venery, but who have not lost their virginity, which the *upright* man claims by virtue of his prerogative; after which they become free for any of the fraternity. Also a common strumpet'.<sup>113</sup> A definition that gives a clue to how Oothoon's story will proceed – as the flowery bright Marygold of Leutha's vale visually transmutes into the whipheads of Theotormon's cat-o'-nine-tails (Pl. 6, *Illuminated*; E.134).<sup>114</sup>

So, from the moment of Oothoon's immodest flight, her behaviour must be, and is, described by a narrator sensitive to the multiple, and starkly oppositional, significances of her actions. This slippery speaker makes his/her/its first multivocal state-

ment(s) with this conflictual assessment of that flight, 'Over the waves she went in wing'd exulting swift delight/ And over Theotormons reign, took her impetuous course' (VDA, 1:14-15; E.46). To Oothoon her journey is one of ecstatic joy, to the men who witness her it is one of impudent sexual usurpation. Not that the rulers of the realm she is entering have any time for a playful plurality of meanings. For what she rapidly discovers is that Thel's suspicions were correct, 'fighting men' do 'in ambush lie' (*Thel*, 6:14; E.6), ready to punish those who fly too violently in the face of patriarchy's 'grave plots'. And if we are to appreciate Blake's insights into the way sexual violence is used for social control when subtler coercions have failed, Bromion's rape has to be viewed as a punishment for Oothoon's usurpation of male sexual prerogatives.<sup>115</sup> For he is not, as some have argued, 'a servant of lust [. . .] devotee of the senses' nor is he one of the 'heroic' rapists who enjoyed a burst of public popularity in the crim-con renaissance of the late- eighteenth century.<sup>116</sup> Rather Bromion is a frightened policeman of a paranoid patriarchy, insisting (in by now predictable terms) that women, like slaves, are naturally masochistic (VDA, 1:22-3; E.46) and, more significantly, wanting as quickly as possible to remove from his presence the appalling (VDA, 1:17; E.46) thought of a sexually active woman. Bromion might insistently declare the reified and tradable article Oothoon 'mine' (VDA, 1:20; E.46) (women's genitals, incidentally, were known as 'the commodity' at this time)<sup>117</sup> but he is also desperate to pass responsibility (*gratis* it seems)<sup>118</sup> for her containment over to Theotormon. Theotormon however, is in no way able to deal with Oothoon's sexual gesture (let alone the punitive response it provoked). Capable only of evincing a rather flimsy jealousy he prefers to weep into a sea of misery at the enormity of the problem caused by Oothoon's 'innocent' statement of desire – though not before imprisoning her and Bromion in a union of hateful bondage.

The fundamental issue here, however, is not only the nature but also the 'potency' of Theotormon's response. Stephen Behrendt's claim that he is an 'impotent man of words and nothing more'<sup>119</sup> is especially inaccurate, for 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. The Daughters of Albion's and Oothoon's 'enslavement' is *literal*, not purely mental as so

many Blake critics have argued. They cannot simply 'think' themselves free, and this gives us a clue as to how we should solve the first real interpretative problem of the poem: Oothoon's response to the rape.

What it is most important to note is that Blake appears to have taken this form of assault seriously. Unlike his contemporaries, who turned 'ravishment' into entertainment and put the abused woman on trial,<sup>120</sup> Blake suggests here that this kind of violence has profound effects. It certainly does on Oothoon, for no amount of critical apology can erase the fact that she entirely loses her sexual vision as a result of Bromion's rape, and consequently capitulates to the value system of her oppressors.<sup>121</sup> This is where she begins to slip and slide, as her language – in Stephen Vine's words – 'explodes under the pressure of the contradictions that inhabit it'.<sup>122</sup> And Oothoon's assimilation not only perverts her consciousness, and underlines her powerlessness, but it also turns her into the material for voyeuristic sexual fantasies. The very physical agony of her 'purification' transforms Oothoon into a vehicle of sadistic stimulation – as the 'writhing [of] her soft snowy limbs' (*VDA* 2:12 E.46, and see Pl. 3, *Illuminated*; E.131) under the eagles' talons produces the only response to her bodily existence which Theotormon makes (*VDA*, 2:18; E.46). A 'sick mans dream' (*VDA*, 6:19; E.50) indeed, though as we've seen not an uncommon one. The masculine sexual imagination current at this time was ailing, and Blake himself can hardly have been beyond infection – in fact it is worth noting that (male) critics still claim that the ravening birds 'represent Oothoon's ideal of her lover'.<sup>123</sup>

In some senses the poem ought to end here, with the three in a deadlock caused by their utterly incompatible beliefs and by the sex-determined powerlessness of the one visionary character. Yet Blake, evidently, could not leave the issue here – with women's sexuality cast out to/away upon the moralist and the pornographer (revealingly one and the same figure here). He goes on, therefore, to *try* and enumerate more of its unsettling potential, a process which demonstrates ever more clearly that the putting into discourse of women's libidinousness was, especially for a male writer, a treacherous practice. Vine again captures the contradiction well: 'From the instant of Oothoon's rape onward [. . .] the significance of the body in *Visions* is profoundly divided: it is at once the abject site where patriarchal domination enforces itself most powerfully, and the place from which

Oothoon declares her desire most fiercely'.<sup>124</sup> Her position is, quite simply, impossible and as the poem continues we see Oothoon's rhetoric slip slide away to the point of complete apostasy. Certainly Oithona, the heroine of Blake's Ossianic source poem, who secretly arms herself to do battle with her rapist before dying, exhibits a punitive and outraged aspect which the ever sexy Oothoon wholly lacks.

### 'SLIP-SLIDING AWAY'

As pointing out every ambiguity in Oothoon's incongruous 'rhapsody on liberty'<sup>125</sup> would be rather repetitive I do not intend to offer a comprehensive reading of the remainder of the poem. Rather I shall devote some time to picking out representative examples of Oothoon's discursive self-betrayal. In the interest of brevity I will also forgo any lengthy discussion of Theotormon and Bromion's speeches (the most significant aspect of which, anyway, is that they do not orientate themselves to any part of Oothoon's sexual rhetoric). It would, however, be illogical to pass without comment over the bursts of *uncompromised* lyrical feminist polemic which the poem does contain. For without doubt Blake enables Oothoon to protest in majestic tones which rival the oratorical goadings of Milton, and indeed of any of his later male prophets.

Nancy K. Miller has suggested that we need to be sensitive to the motivations behind any male author's act of becoming an "'I" in drag', and it is very important that we note how strenuously Blake resists the self-flattery that Miller shows is habitually attendant on this practice.<sup>126</sup> He inveighs against the oppression of women and children in the patriarchal family with a fervour equal to that of the angriest Mary Wollstonecraft and this tonal rage has been an instance of honest indignation that most Blake critics have chosen to ignore – destroying as it does their fantasy of 'poor, lovely Oothoon'.<sup>127</sup> Yet it is she who enjoys the honour of being the first to name Urizen, and that this first accusative labelling brands him the 'Creator of men' (VDA, 5:3; E.48 – my emphasis) ought not to go unnoticed. The primacy of his patriarchal and sexual oppressiveness is a subject worthy of more study than it has to date received. The other inspiring, though of course problematic, aspect of Oothoon is



that she continues exuberantly to stress that women must be subjects, not just objects, of desire. Not only does Blake give her an enviable erotic eloquence but he also takes the additional step of saying that women look with desire too. Women, of course, have rarely been encouraged to express their sexuality by looking<sup>128</sup> and being the possessor of a libidinous gaze was a very dangerous business in the eighteenth century. Cleland's Fanny Hill, for instance, usurps the right of erotic gazing directly after her violent deflowering, and Charles' defensive gesture against this visual possession of his (as ever) impressive body is swift and direct. As Fanny's account makes clear: 'as if he had proudly meant revenge for the survey I had smuggled of his naked beauties, he spurns off the bedclothes, and trussing up my shift as high as it would go, took his turn to feast his eyes with all the gifts nature had bestowed on my person; his busy hands too ranged intemperantly . . .' and so on.<sup>129</sup> Another prostitute in the same text, Harriet, with whom Fanny works at Mrs Cole's academy, also suffered the same kind of experience after spying upon a lithe and frolicsome youth as he bathed naked in the river – which perhaps helps explain why Oothoon's energetic looking for copulatory beauty (*VDA*, 6–7:22–1; E.50) is likely to burn her eyes out.<sup>130</sup>

These elements, though, cannot be our main focus. Rather, we must examine the irony of the Oothoon who offers herself as an expert in vision<sup>131</sup> but who, at crucial moments, is markedly myopic. The overarching reason for Oothoon's apostasy is that Blake will not allow her to relinquish her unexplained, perhaps inexplicable, 'love' for Theotormon (a weakness of much heterosexual romance writing) and also that he is the implied addressee of most of her speeches. Moreover she does not/cannot confront Bromion with her feelings about the assault, and indeed moves rapidly towards denying its importance: reducing it to a thing safely contained in a past which is just that and which therefore should be forgotten,

... 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 . . .

... the night is gone that clos'd me in its deadly black.

(*VDA*, 2:24–7; 29; E.47)

The invocation of the eagle (lately returned from preying on *her*) alerts us to Oothoon's assimilation and its ability to ironize and compromise even her most beautiful oratory. It also introduces one of Oothoon's most suspicious rhetorical strategies: arguing from nature, a practice which punctuates the text. Though Oothoon mocks the idea that human beings ought to learn from animals (*VDA*, 5:8–9; E.48), she nonetheless, and in direct opposition to Thel's wisdom, continually invokes assorted creatures as behavioural guides. Not only do these appeals to a natural cycle ('Does not the worm erect a pillar in the mouldering church yard?/ And a palace of eternity in the jaws of the hungry grave/ Over his porch these words are written. Take thy bliss O Man!' *VDA*, 5–6:41–2; E.49) veer towards the kind of crass sexual politics we see in John Wilke's *Essay on Woman* (c. 1764/1883): 'Let us since life can little more supply/ Than just a few good fucks and then we die',<sup>132</sup> but they also seem to implicate sex in the kind of contemporary pronatalist ideology<sup>133</sup> that Blake, with all his doubts about 'generation', would hardly have endorsed. Even more importantly, given that one of the poem's central problems is the prevalence of sexual violence and violation, they enable the celebration of masochism: 'Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on & the soul prey'd on by woe/ The new wash'd lamb ting'd with the village smoke' (*VDA*, 3:17–18; E.47) and as the reasoning slides, taints, defilement and suffering take on positive connotations. Oothoon begins to side with the devourer. That her sexual commitments are hopelessly compromised becomes even more transparent in the section where she attempts most overtly to 'cry love' (*VDA*, 6–7:4–29; E.49–50), for here parodic opposition slides into endorsement with dizzying speed and perplexing intricacy.

Again, I do not want to deny the power of her attacks on modesty, religious repression and the denial of infantile sexuality, rather what I want to do is to demonstrate that they occupy a place within a disintegrating discursive field. Asking a number of questions about this section of the poem helps to focus this instability. Who, for instance, is Oothoon addressing in her tirade against modesty? When was Theotormon ever the sexually incandescent figure Oothoon describes? More significantly, isn't she trapped by the classic patriarchal binary opposition of virgin/whore when she tries to describe her unabashed desires? There are even problems with that orgasmic 'moment of desire!

[. . .] moment of desire!' (VDA, 7:3; E.50): the virgin who 'pines' for a man (just as Oothoon pines for Theotormon) will only achieve 'enormous joys/ In the secret shadows of her chamber' (VDA, 7:4-5; E.50), which are a shady region far away from the 'sunny beams' that Blake usually lets fall upon scenes of 'Naked [. . .] delight' (for example, see *A Little GIRL Lost*, 9; E.29). Indeed Oothoon becomes cumulatively more desperate as the oration goes on: worrying in distinctly conventional terms about the fading of her beauty and eventually (just as she begins to 'Cry Love', (VDA, 7:16-20; E.50) converting herself into the tempting sexual object and emblem of sin that the moralistic Theotormon always worried she was: 'the fruit that hangs before his sight' (VDA, 7:20; E.50).<sup>134</sup> So, given that Oothoon's vision has been corrupted, and that her overriding desire has been to liberate Theotormon, the ultimate conclusion of her speech is no surprise,

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. . . .  
     nor e'er with jealous cloud  
 Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish blightings  
     bring.

(VDA, 7:23-5; 28-9; E.50)

This harem fantasy<sup>135</sup> marks the moment of Oothoon's most acute apostasy, as she offers to become an energetically ensnaring procuress – an occupation that points to what must be the key historical subtext of this scene: the endemic prostitution of the late-eighteenth century.<sup>136</sup> Now assimilated to the point of being an active accomplice of Urizen<sup>137</sup> in his heterosexual entrapments, Oothoon prepares to subject other women (some of them as 'furious' as she must once have been at such bondage) to sex against their will. In this way she becomes the absolute voyeur of their humiliating suffering, as we have become voyeurs of hers. Moreover, she seems to relish it. Critics have vacillated over the significance of the scene, and it is by no means uncommon to find the suggestion being made that this is a sexual fantasy that Blake himself enjoyed. Thomas Vogler most recently made this accusation, 'If we read it for its "message" how is it any different from the pornosophical message we can find in *Fanny Hill*, or in Sade's transformations of Oothoon into Juliette and Thel into

Justine? Oothoon takes the course of Moll Flanders and Fanny Hill rather than Pamela or Clarissa, but there is a sameness beneath the differences of these works that links them parodically.<sup>138</sup> The suggestion of sadistic tendencies has lingered around Blake ever since Mario Praz defined his sexual proclivities in these terms in the 1930s,<sup>139</sup> and the longevity of such claims demands that we challenge them, for they seem based on a number of significant errors. Not only do we never see unproblematic relish expressed in Blake's work for sexual humiliation, cannibalism and murder (the staples of Sade's fiction) but the format of much of the Sadean corpus (the programmatic tales of atrocity retold in *120 Days of Sodom* for example and the rigidly ritualistic nature of his orgies)<sup>140</sup> are expressions of desire veritably Urizenic in their regulation. Sade was, as Angela Carter notes, above all a carnographer.<sup>141</sup> The human body interested him at precisely the moment when live flesh became dead meat and though this kind of idea had a currency in Britain in the 1790s<sup>142</sup> it is highly at odds with Blake's contemporaneous commitment to the sensuous body as a road into eternity. The revelation that the body is as soulful and potentially infinite as the spirit is, at this moment at least, quite central to Blake's philosophy.<sup>143</sup>

Oothoon, then, is not primarily organizing a Sadean orgy suited to the tastes of her creator (tastes which, of course, we know very little about). She is, rather, sliding into the final snare, set for any woman who tries to 'cry love' at this particular historical moment. And that her story ends with the most oft-quoted Blakean aphorism 'every thing that lives is holy!' (VDA, 8:10; E.50) is a most tragic irony, as the narrator's chilling final words make clear: 'Thus every morning wails Oothoon, but Theotormon sits/ Upon the margin' d ocean conversing with shadows dire./ The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back her sighs.' (VDA, 8:11-13; E.50). After reading *Visions* we might well ask, is there *no* hope in store? Certainly the illuminations on Plates 6 and 8 (*Illuminated*; E.134; 136) suggest an Oothoon wrenching herself from Theotormon and beginning to awaken the miserably huddled daughters<sup>144</sup> but these really do very little to lighten the generally gloomy conclusion. Given this, a more apt way to end the discussion, than conjuring false signs of optimism, is to look in a little detail at precisely why Oothoon fails and at what that failure means historically.

We have already seen the range of reasons offered by past Blake scholars for Oothoon's 'failure', few of whom even hint that there might be specific historical explanations for the poem's deadlock. As I noted, there has been a preference for introspective solutions which treat the poem as a closed system, the most significant intertexts of which are other works in the Blakean corpus. In contrast to these readings I would like to offer two precise historical reasons why I think Oothoon remains so depressingly bound. To do this sensitively we must recall that historical determinants take many forms, that the limits of an author's possible vision and expression are circumscribed by diffuse social forces and structures. And it is here that the ideas of the Bakhtin school are particularly useful, for Volosinov's stress on the materiality of the sign has helped to clarify the fact that of all the pressures bearing down upon and confining (as well, paradoxically, as liberating) the writer the greatest is the state of language. As language is an amorphous system, ever on the move, it is very difficult to ascertain exactly what possibilities it offers to an author at any specific moment. But with this said, what has become clear during this discussion of *Visions* is that the poem is, as David Punter insightfully notes, 'beached against a discursive limit'.<sup>145</sup> There was simply no way of writing about (or for that matter visually representing) women's sexuality, in the 1790s, which was not implicated in the pornographic linguistic field we looked at earlier. No discourse comes into an author's hands innocent, of course, it always – as a social entity – bears traces of previous usage and because of this some of the signs Blake was compelled to employ (for example virgin, whore, nymph) compromise the progressive aspects of the text and perhaps even reveal the limited potential of his sexualized feminism. Though Blake may not have aimed to cater for male fantasies the material medium of his art betrayed him: forced to use language pervaded with lecherous suggestion Oothoon slides into the open arms of an exploitative sign system only too happy to consume 'figures' like her (the heated pornography debates within contemporary feminism suggest that this is still a huge problem).

The other, and no less important, aspect of this linguistic issue, is that whilst various discourses (of which those of conduct, medicine and pornography have been the most relevant in this discussion) constructed women's sexuality in various reductive and exploitative ways, women were themselves (as we have seen)

simultaneously prohibited from writing or speaking explicitly about their physical desires. Some feminists today still complain that eroticism is, virtually, a male preserve but in the 1790s an even more absolute exclusivity was imperiously guarded.<sup>146</sup> Exaggerated ideas and ideals of female delicacy, and the ever operative double standard, acted as complete prohibitions against women articulating libidinous intent.<sup>147</sup> Apart from Mary Hays's depiction of the lacerated Emma Courtney it is virtually impossible to find a woman writer in the late-eighteenth century who deals explicitly with the subject of sexual desire and pleasure. Earlier in the century female novelists had offered extremely frank discussions and treatments of sexuality, but by the 1790s the novel had become an essentially didactic form,<sup>148</sup> and female desire was pushed into sublimated gothic subtexts or dissipated by the sentimentality of 'romance'. In such works sexual pleasure becomes, as it is for Charlotte Smith's heroine Monimia, 'a sensation of joy that was undescribable'.<sup>149</sup> A few women writers, like Catherine Macaulay Graham, did have the courage to point out that, 'the strength which Nature has given to the passion of love [. . .] has made it the most ungovernable propensity of any which attends us' but even she refused to centre either the social or the more narrowly personal implications of this sexual volatility.<sup>150</sup>

At this time, then, respectable women (cf. Poovey's 'Proper Lady') were not allowed to speak about their desires, let alone 'cry love', for as one female character in a ballad from Ritson's collection of love songs remarked to her lover (in section IV of the work, devoted to detailing the dangers of women entertaining the passion of love), 'yours is the province of speaking'.<sup>151</sup> The shame of verbalizing desire was too great for the prohibition to be transgressed: 'Eyes can speak and tell the lover,/ What the tongue must not impart/ Blushing shame forbids revealing,/ Thoughts your breast may disapprove.'<sup>152</sup> For a woman to speak sexually was to become a whore, and indeed the most erotically verbose females to appear in eighteenth-century literature are fantastical prostitutes, gifted with total recall, like Cleland's Fanny Hill. Some of these problems are interestingly focused in Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1797), a novel which, incidentally, seems to imply that a woman will be perceived as on the brink of madness if she attempts to discuss her passions. Wollstonecraft took a daring step in this text by insisting on the importance to women of sexual satisfaction ('we cannot, without

depraving our minds, endeavour to please a lover or husband, but in proportion as he pleases us').<sup>153</sup> Yet even here there is no sustained discussion of physical love – not least because men are viewed with the kind of suspicion that Oothoon's (and Maria's and Jemima's) ordeal suggests is justified (the relevant topic of lesbian desire and its suppression in the 1790s needs a book to itself, but sadly that is yet to be written).

Wollstonecraft gives her heroine a free hand<sup>154</sup> to construct an ideal sexual partner, but the author's sense of the explicitly oppressive in contemporary sexual practice and discourse disfigures this suggestive opportunity. Darnford is a character who looks, variously: absurd (repeating parrot-fashion Maria's feminist polemic and kissing her like a saint); sentimental (he had never known love until he saw her, their love makes the prison into a fairyland); compromised (speaking of his enjoyment of the favours of prostitutes and his amorous dalliance with other women) and who, most importantly, is only sexually attractive because he seduces himself: 'A man of feeling thinks not of seducing, he is himself seduced by the noblest emotions of his soul'.<sup>155</sup> There are, of course, no scenes of sexual encounter in this novel of the passions rather than of manners,<sup>156</sup> and Wollstonecraft's absolute inability to bring physical love into discourse was shared by virtually all the Jacobin novelists. It is striking, and especially relevant in this discussion of the problematic nature of *Visions*, to note that amongst a group of writers who broadly shared Blake's political sympathies there is little if any support for his belief in the liberating potential of sexuality. Indeed amongst the Jacobin novelists it is the aristocracy who are the repository of the sensual and this is an indulgence for which they are heavily criticized.<sup>157</sup> As Marilyn Butler concludes, 'In sexual matters the jacobins thought and as a group behaved (whatever their opponents claimed) like forerunners of the Evangelicals. Their advocacy of reason and restraint often makes them read like their opponents, the conservative moralists', even as they tried to liberate love from parental tyranny and introduce an ideal of candour between the sexes these writers are sexually tepid, if not completely evasive.<sup>158</sup>

Allied to this absence of female, let alone feminist, eroticism was the great difficulty women had in finding a language with which to protest against sexual attack – a difficulty which, perhaps, ultimately determines Oothoon's fate. Anna Clark has dis-

cussed this subject at some length, detailing the way in which women who wrote out an account of their ordeal invariably presented the event as an incident from a melodramatic romance.<sup>159</sup> This style, of course, was not an option for a poet like Blake and neither were any of the other available discourses. For example, Oothoon cannot challenge Theotormon and Bromion's sexualized, if tormented, view of her by invoking ideas of reputation or injured modesty because such protests rest upon a religious set of beliefs about decency and morality which the poet had long suspected were based upon hypocrisy and sexist double standards.<sup>160</sup> This is a major problem as women's ability to defend their bodily integrity is central to any feminist sexual politics, and it remains the case that suggestions about how to compel men to respect this integrity are still few and far between. Fundamentally, then, the first historical reason that Oothoon remains bound is that the proliferation of sexual discourses described by Foucault disseminated myriad contradictory yet reductive sexualized constructions of the female, whilst women themselves were prohibited from speaking with any explicitness or freedom about either the problems or the pleasures of their own sexuality.

The second, and intimately related, historical reason for Oothoon's continued bondage has to do with the diffuse and marginal nature of late-eighteenth-century British feminism – a subject which I shall discuss in some detail in the next chapter. For now, it is sufficient to note that although there were many disparate writers concerned with the rights of women in the 1790s, what was lacking at this particular moment was an organized and publicly active women's movement. As Steven Vine so importantly notes, 'Oothoon and the Daughters lack a political constituency that can voice their demands'.<sup>161</sup> *Visions* ultimately, and simply, spins on an axis rather than progressing<sup>162</sup> because the Daughters of Albion were not in any way on the move at the time when Blake wrote it, and his libidinal exhortations seem of only dubious value in such a context. Furthermore there was little reason for political optimism as radical groups and societies which were active at this time – from the LCS to the Lunar Society – were apathetic about women's liberation if not explicitly hostile to it (again, this is something I return to in my next chapter). Blake, then, should probably not be condemned for exploiting women's victimization but should rather be understood to be taking the strength of patriarchy seriously, and realistically evaluating



the countless obstacles that stood in the Daughters' way. That Blake realized a gulf existed between the wild and bounding rhetoric of Oothoon and the comprehensive immiseration of the English women whom she needs, though hardly aims, to rouse is made clear on Plate 7 (*Illuminated*; E.135) – where she breaks into her most impassioned oration whilst they huddle distressed by the ocean.<sup>163</sup> The point is that her 'cries' simply do not signify for them – all they can hear are her 'woes' and all they can do is 'echo back her sighs' (*VDA*, 8:13; E.51). As a result of all this Blake cannot, as Mary Wollstonecraft could not, articulate any effective method of feminist revolution.<sup>164</sup>

These are precisely the kind of particular historical considerations that most Blake critics have disregarded. They argue instead that Oothoon could be free if only she were a little more attentive<sup>165</sup> or – more seriously – suggest that even if she is bound because eighteenth-century feminists could not elaborate a method, Blake himself was able to do so and the poem is therefore a critique of their inability.<sup>166</sup> And, as we have seen, it has been a favourite critical strategy to see Blake transcending the 'contemporary limitations' that handicapped the lesser intellect of Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>167</sup> In particular Blake is valued for surpassing what is taken to be Wollstonecraft's regrettably conservative attitude towards sexuality and the liberation of desire. This is a line of argument which corresponds with one influential strain in contemporary Wollstonecraft criticism, a strain which is often rather unfair in its assertions, as for example in Cora Kaplan's somewhat ahistorical claim that, 'It is Mary Wollstonecraft who first offered women this fateful choice between the opposed and moralized bastions of reason and feeling', 'Wollstonecraft sets up heartbreaking conditions for women's liberation – a little death, the death of desire, the death of female pleasure'.<sup>168</sup> Arguments of this kind present an unacceptably bloodless Wollstonecraft and lead to the drawing of crude oppositions between her and writers like Blake, in the course of which many important parallels are obscured. For as we've seen, in the earlier discussion of *The Book of Thel* (1789), Blake's unmasking of sentimental constructions of youthful femininity indicates that he had sympathy with Wollstonecraft's doubts about the romantic trivialization of young women, and the way that these social norms rendered them the slaves of heterosexual love (again, see Vine's excellent discussion of this). Also, though more problematically, Blake seems to com-

prehend Wollstonecraft's complaint that the excessive sexualization of women involves a reductive refusal to see and value them as human creatures. Both were also concerned with how patriarchal society forced women to gain power through the manipulation and exploitation of their sexuality, an issue I shall discuss at length in my final chapter on *Europe – A Prophecy* (1794).

With these important points noted, though, it is of course the case that an essential difference does exist between the two writers, and that is the difference central to this discussion of *Visions*. As we have seen Blake believed that sexual energy and passion would be instrumental in the process of social change, as well as being some of the most important benefits of its achievement. Mary Wollstonecraft had, with good reason, severe doubts about this. Her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is, as we shall see in the next chapter, a remarkably ambiguous text but it is nonetheless possible to chart a strong distrust of the sensual. Her desire was to make everyone's passion rational, and subordinate it where irrational to the rule of (a probably sexless though clearly gendered) reason. As the place of sexuality, and especially heterosex, in the liberation of women is still a hotly debated issue this is probably not the place to offer an adjudication, but what does need to be said is that Oothoon's fate and the history of the feminist movement in the twentieth century (especially in the 1960s) suggest that giving wholehearted support to Blake's libidinal gospel may not be particularly wise. And this is the note upon which my discussion of *Visions* must conclude. Oothoon remains an inspiring and attractive figure, but one who is also compromised and defeated, and it has been the aim of this chapter to offer a number of historical reasons why she is such a radically ambiguous sexual creation. In the next chapter, I will examine the significant contemporary political debates which provide a key context for this sexual ambiguity.